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## Summary in English<sup>1</sup>

### **Background**

This thesis presents a qualitative empirical study of teachers' and student coaches' participation in retention practices. In the thesis I focus on persons who daily act, in a vocational educational training system that has been given the task to ensure that more young people complete their education at an upper secondary level (grade 12-13). In recent years, politicians, researchers and the media have directed much of their attention towards vocational training colleges. The common question has been: What can be done in this educational setting in order to reach the political goal that 95% of a youth cohort should complete an education at an upper secondary level. The emphasis has often been placed on the young people, who do not succeed in completing their education at an upper secondary level. These students have been labeled in many ways, such as being at-risk, weak, vulnerable, marginalized. Both among researchers and politicians there has been a tendency to explain drop-out as an individual problem and most solutions have been directed towards the individual student. This thesis explores what goes on in the actual educational setting, before students effectively drop out of school. With this focus in mind, the thesis starts from the premise that the school context and the professionals within it can facilitate a learning environment that helps students to experience commitment towards education and complete their degrees, despite notable difficulties.

The research setting of the thesis has been a technical vocational training college, which has launched a number of retention initiatives in order to ensure that more students complete their degrees. One of these initiatives was the establishment of an expanded basic program for young people with personal, social, or academic problems, as well as the establishment of a student coach function. By using the extended basic course and student coach arrangement as an opportunity to study interactions between professionals and students, I explore in this thesis the function of the professional participants. More precisely, what are the teachers and student coaches "invited" to participate in and what do they "encourage" themselves and each other to participate in, in order to retain more students.

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<sup>1</sup> I am deeply thankful to Vlad Glaveanu for his commentaries on the English summary of the thesis.

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Throughout the thesis, the guiding research question has been:

*Which professional forms of participation are developed and consolidated among teachers and student coaches at a technical vocational training college in order to facilitate the implementation of the educational policy objective of having 95% of all young people complete upper secondary education?*

In the thesis, I use the concept and metaphor of tension field to frame an analysis that distinguishes between opposing energies that can be linked to professional forms of participation. This forms the basis for different analyses that identify progression, dynamics, energy and drive in the professionals' participation but also passivity, destructivity and conflictuality.

### **Fieldwork and everyday life as empirical background**

The empirical material consists of a field study conducted at four different departments at a technical vocational training college in Denmark. Over a period of seven months, I conducted, in total, nine weeks of participant observation. Parallel with these observations, I carried out 18 interviews with teachers and student coaches participating in an expanded basic course. In addition to participant observation at the technical vocational educational training college, I made other observations at five different courses and conferences focusing on retention and educational strategies.

The thesis is inspired by situated practice theory; as such, methodologically, it has been a priority to situate myself in different contexts of practice, in which my participants move and conduct their everyday lives, contexts of practices which I have been introduced to by observing participants' movements.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of the thesis is inspired by theoretical approaches that seek to understand people's participation in social practices and communities of practice (Dreier, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This framework focuses on the dynamic aspects implied by the dialectic relation between the individual and the social structures. In relation to this, I qualify the concept of tension field based on five concepts that, together, constitute the theoretical background: institutional arrangements, participation - non-participation, identity - community of practice. Furthermore, I argue that changes and possible conflictual participation in a practice inevitably stir emotional experiences and expressions among participants, such as joy, despair, frustration and

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pride. In relation to this, I argue that theories of participation in social practices should include perspectives that open up the analysis towards understanding the emotional demands associated with social practices.

## **Results**

The thesis is based on four articles, from which the following thematic conclusions are drawn:

### **Participation in-between vocational skills and social worker activities**

The political target that 95% of young people should complete an upper secondary education has had an impact on technical vocational training colleges. A new group of students has entered these colleges and challenged teachers' daily practices. Some teachers experience that their participation is being stretched out between, on the one hand, their desire to use their technical vocational skills and teach students who are motivated to learn from the first moment they walk into the college and, on the other hand, the actual meeting with a group of students who require social worker activities in order to show up and stay in the educational setting. Using the extended basic course as a context to analyze vocational teachers' participation in retention initiatives, this thesis shows how an institutional arrangement can support a professional form of participation that integrates the vocational discipline with social worker practices in a way that does not necessarily diminish the request for professional vocational qualification in the educational practice.

### **Cross-functional forms of participation**

The professional participants engaged in the extended basic course emphasize that their practice is not just about helping the student to acquire the technical rational aspects of their discipline. Teachers feel they have the freedom to shape their role as well as the frame and the content of the learning context, focusing on personalizing the educational context. In this way they consolidate what for them is a pedagogic "desired trajectory". To achieve this, teachers build up new cross-functional alliances with the group of student coaches in order to let both the personal and the social dimension of educational unfold and allow for a social pedagogical and psychological thinking and frame of reference. These cross-functional forms of participation solidify the ways in which an institution's educational function is supplemented by a social support function.

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### **Conflicting forms of participation**

A predominant theme in the thesis describes how the 95% target and the facilitation of new forms of participation create conflicts within the community of practice, particularly among teachers at the technical vocational training college. There is a tension-field emerging within the continuum established between participation and non-participation in relation to the retention of students. New communities of practice are constituted as activities, values and goals become very well differentiated among the participants. I outline two professional forms of participation that reflect different degrees of engagement related to retention as a social practice. Some professionals consider themselves as guardians of the professional vocational qualification and therefore look at dropout among students as a necessary form of selection. Another position among the professionals is related to a principle of inclusion and social responsibility, giving all young people a chance to experience the joy and pleasure of learning. The two types I highlight here can be considered as outcomes of the political demands of retaining more students while at the same time raising the quality of student's vocational performance to a world-class level.

### **Emotionally charged forms of participation**

The theme of emotional forms of participation shows how student retention is an emotionally charged type of interaction, and how an institutional arrangement such as the extended basic course mediates the experience and expression of emotions. The teachers have a strong orientation towards care and try to handle emotions and relationships in a way that facilitates trust, confidence and the development of positive identities. By trying to be a stable support for their students, teachers engage in the lives of students as co-actors, helping them to handle the personal and social difficulties that may limit or marginalize students' participation in education. I argue that emotional practices can be characterized as productive resources in the sense that they mediate a relation focused on retention and also represent a positive force building pride and positive coping identities among both students and teachers. However, I also show how positive charged emotions are connected to a more destructive counterweight of powerlessness, frustration and disillusionment. Several of the teachers experience possible difficulties supporting students cope with personal and social problems and engage in professional vocational development at the same time. I therefore problematize whether a dynamic based on emotional exclusion is embedded in the institutional setting, whereby letting someone down becomes an inevitable part of the teaching experience, something teachers have to perform and endure.

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### **List of papers included in the thesis**

1. Lippke, L. (2011). Udfordringer til faglærernes professionelle identitet - "det her handler jo om det sociale og hvad ved jeg om det?" I: Jørgensen, C.H. (red.). *Frafald i erhvervsuddannelserne*. Frederiksberg: Roskilde Universitets Forlag, s. 99-117
2. Lippke, L. (2012). Fra erhvervsuddannelse til semi-terapeutisk samtalerum? Emotionelle handlinger som fastholdelsesgreb indenfor erhvervsuddannelserne. *Psyke & Logos*, Årg. 33, Nr. 1, p. 135-160.
3. Lippke, L. (2013, in press). Forhandling af ønskede deltagelsesformer og pædagogiske præferencer I relation til fastholdelse. *Nordiske Udkast*
4. Lippke, L. & Tanggaard, L. (2013, in press). Leaning in to muddy interviews. Special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry*.