Journal of Workplace Learning

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Received 16 December 2014
Revised 18 November 2015
Accepted 9 December 2015

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the negotiation of learner and worker identities in a group of high-skilled newcomers who participate in an introductory and mentoring programme.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper takes the interdependence of learning, work and identity and a constructivist approach to identity as a point of departure. The design is qualitative with semi-structured interviews as the main source of data.

Findings – For the learning potential in introductory programmes to be fulfilled, all parties involved must recognise a need for learning. This is especially important in organisations that are knowledge intensive and that demand highly skilled and competent workers, as negotiations of learner identity might be more demanding for this group of employees.

Research limitations/implications – The current paper is situated in a specific organisational and national context, and only pays attention to some of the negotiations between expert and learner identities that are relevant if induction programmes and initiatives should be experienced as positive. Connections between identity work, learning and job performance for this group of workers should consequently be empirically investigated by a variety of methods and within several organisational and national contexts.

Practical implications – The paper shows that it is vital for organisers and leaders to be sensitive to the significance that the identity work has for learning, when they plan, execute and evaluate induction programmes and initiatives for high-skilled and competent workers.

Originality/value – The facilitation of job transitions and induction for high-skilled and experienced workers is underresearched, and the paper shows how identity and learning is closely connected for this group of employees.

Keywords Workplace learning, Identity, High-skilled workers, Introductory programs, Job-transition, Subject-position

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This article reports from a project that investigates how high-skilled newcomers in a knowledge-intensive department of an international company in extremely competitive surroundings experience an introductory and mentoring programme that aim to support their transition into their new job. As current work patterns change and employees more frequently transit to new employers or new roles in the organisation, a

The author would like to thank the "Knowledge, Education and Democracy" research group at the Department of Education, University of Bergen for valuable discussions of material and early drafts of the article. The author is especially grateful for the detailed comments from Associate professor Gry Heggli. The author would also like to acknowledge the three anonymous referees for their valuable and detailed comments and suggestions for improvement. The research is funded by The Research Council of Norway (Småforsk) project number 101936.

Journal of Workplace Learning
Vol. 28 No. 1, 2016
pp. 2-16

1366-5626
DOI 10.1108/JWL-12-2014-0088

significant number of newcomers will be experienced and high-skilled. Job transitions will demand learning and identity work from the newcomer "[…] as she makes sense of her new environment and develops the skills and competences required for her new role" (Milligan *et al.*, 2013, p. 217), regardless of prior experience. The body of research investigating learning and identity work in the job transition of high-skilled and experienced workers is relatively small, but recent studies and reviews of research within this field has showed that this group of employees tend to depend more on their own resources and be less influenced by organisational socialisation tactics in their transition to new jobs, compared to newly educated newcomers (Cooper-Thomas *et al.*, 2012; Milligan *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, if we are to better understand how learning and knowledge-development initiatives and programmes in workplaces could be supportive, also for experienced workers, there is a need to focus more explicitly on this group of employees (Cooper-Thomas *et al.*, 2012; Milligan *et al.*, 2013). Due to the complex interdependence between work, learning and identity, there exists a need for the research to pay more attention to elements, such as agency, identity and subjectivity, to better understand the many facets of learning and development in workplaces (Adams and Crafford, 2012; Ainsworth and Grant, 2012; Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Billett *et al.*, 2006; Billett, 2010, 2013; Cairns and Malloch, 2013; Collin, 2009; Coupland and Brown, 2012; du Gay, 1996; Hager, 2013; Mallett and Wapshott, 2012; Thomlinson, 2013).

To attend to the above-mentioned identified needs, this article takes a closer look at the identity work of experienced and high-skilled workers in job transition. The aim of the research is not to measure how effective the introductory programme the newcomers have attended has been, but to investigate in what ways the high-skilled newcomers' identity work is relevant for how they experience the introductory programme, their learning opportunities and job performance. The research design is qualitative with semi-structured interviews as the main source of data collection.

Identity, work and learning

This article takes a constructivist and discursive approach to identity. This approach is founded on the understanding that identity is not something ready-made that we can find or develop, but something we create, negotiate and construct through our relationship to the world and other people, the language we use, the stories we tell, the choices we make and the practices we participate in (Ainsworth and Grant, 2012; Alvesson, 2001; Calhoun, 1994; Carr, 2005; Elliott, 2005; Hall and du Gay, 1996; Kvale, 1992; LaPointe, 2010; McInnes and Corlett, 2012; Søreide, 2006, 2007; Weedon, 1997). People continually negotiate their identity to balance the actions, values and meanings they consider normal and reasonable with what they do and what they wish to do (Calhoun, 1994).

A significant element in this negotiation process is the subject positions that are available to us. S*ubject positions* refer to identity categories that are culturally, historically and socially constructed and situated (Weedon, 1997). Each subject position contains a set of expected behaviours, values, knowledge and competencies. The subject positions are not clear-cut categories, but more or less explicitly defined and described social positions in a society, a culture, organisation or a community. Their status and content will, however, change as people and societies change, and the subject positions that were highly relevant 30 years ago might not even exist today. In our professional

lives, we are confronted with different subject positions, through which we will construct and reconstruct identity through a constant negotiation. According to Billett (2010), "[…] individuals' conscious awareness, unconscious desires and personally derived attachments shape their adoption of a particular subject position" (Billet, 2010, p. 2). In other words, we identify ourselves with – or reject – the subject positions available to us, and this process is a vital part of the construction of identity (Søreide, 2006, 2007; Weedon, 1997). Subject positions are also a point of departure for peoples' positioning of each other. This article aligns with the work of LaPointe (2010) and her understanding of such identity positioning "[…]. as the key conceptual link between the person and wider social context" (LaPointe, 2010, p. 7). Whether we reject certain positions, are opposed to them, find them pleasing and comforting is within this understanding somewhat beside the point, as these subject positions and the negotiation between them all play a part in the construction of identity (Calhoun, 1994; Søreide, 2006), and all subjects will "[…]. confront the task of finding an acceptable position" (Fenwick and Sommerville, 2006, p. 250).

In workplaces and organisations, there are a range of accessible subject positions that employees must negotiate their relationships to. To what extend this negotiation of identity is experienced as conflicting or difficult will vary individually. Subject positions that are in conflict for one person might not be experienced as conflicting by others. But employees who are able to balance and negotiate the range of subject positions they are faced with will most probably experience a more integrated identity across the various contexts and relationships they are involved with throughout their careers (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012). Within the context of working life, attention to this kind of positioning can "increase our understanding of how career identities emerge in discourse and what practices and resources are available for identity work in particular contexts" (LaPointe, 2010, p. 7). Knowing how people do their identity work will again provide even more nuanced insight and knowledge about how people understand and relate to their working context when it comes to elements, such as work satisfaction, engagement and how people manage and understand change and transitions (Adams and Crafford, 2012; Ainsworth and Grant, 2012; Collin, 2009; Coupland and Brown, 2012; Kirpal, 2004).

This article will argue that when the newcomers talk about their job performance, the introductory and mentoring programme they participate in, the department and their colleagues, they describe, negotiate and draw on a set of subject positions. The article first pays attention to how these subject positions are used as identity resources when the newcomers position themselves, their mentors and colleagues. Second, the article will discuss how this positioning can explain why the introduction programme was experienced as fruitful for some of the interviewees and not for others.

Research context

The company where the study was conducted is a well-established company with departments throughout Scandinavia[1]. The department that participated in the research is located in a major city in Norway. The services performed at the department are high in cost and complexity, and demand employees with a broad selection of knowledge and competencies. To perform adequately and to ensure that services offered meet necessary quality standards, the employees must have subject knowledge about the task at hand in addition to relational, procedural and organisational knowledge. The complexity of the work requires a high degree of cooperation, ability to find and use

relevant knowledge and to establish relational trust with current and future customers. There is, however, no education that qualifies directly to employment in the department, and the employees consequently have a broad variety of backgrounds, such as law, sales, education and engineering. Some department employees have worked in the company for 15 years, while others are newly employed. Some have been in this line of business for almost 20 years, but are new to *this* department, while others are experienced within their profession, but new to the kind of services the company performs.

As the department experienced a relatively high turn-over, due to retirement and a competitive and flexible job mark, they wanted to ensure transfer and building of important knowledge in the department. An introductory and mentoring programme with the intention to transfer knowledge to newcomers and simultaneously support their job transition in an effective way was, therefore, launched. A programme group was responsible for the development, facilitation and evaluation of the programme. The programme group consisted of the department leader, one mentor, one mentee, one sub-department leader, one person from HR and one person from the training and development department in the company. The latter was assigned as the project coordinator.

The programme lasted for approximately 1.5 years, and consisted of the following four main activities (Table I).

Participants in the programme were selected by the programme group, which also paired mentors and mentees. Mentors were formally assigned 1-3 mentees. The mentors did not receive any training, but were informed about their duties in seminars before and in the early stages of the programme. The project coordinator also had follow-up meetings with the mentors and their assigned mentees throughout the programme period.

Activity	Description
On the job training (OTJT)	Newcomers observe, work with and discuss authentic cases and tasks with more experienced staff. Throughout the programme, newcomers gradually take on more individual responsibility
Mentorship	Each newcomer is assigned a formal mentor. Weekly meetings to discuss mentees' concrete tasks, learning process and plans for further development
Courses	A course schedule was developed by the programme group and the corporate development/learning department. Courses were focused on three themes: introduction to the company and the business, personal development and subject-specific courses
Documentation of learning and progress	The mentees were expected to produce written documentation of competence level, learning activities, reflection over learning and progress throughout the introductory course period

Table I.
Activities in the introductory – and mentoring programme

Method

The main data were collected by semi-structured research interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014) during a three-week period one year in to the introductory and mentoring programme. All mentors and mentees in the programme were contacted and invited to participate as informants by the programme coordinator, and those who accepted were given written and oral information about the research, confidentiality and their possibility to withdraw from the research project by me. One of the mentees decided not to participate. I interviewed 5 mentors and 12 mentees, asking them about their experiences with all elements of the introductory and mentoring programme. The interviews lasted for 60-90 minutes. The interview guide was developed in dialogue with colleagues at the university, the programme coordinator and other members of the programme group in the company.

To get contextual knowledge and a better understanding of the working methods, tasks and social climate, I observed seminars and workshops with all the participants in the programme, in addition to day-to-day activities in the department. My attendance as observing researcher was explained explicitly to the participants by the department leader at one of the programme seminars. I also had several meetings with the programme coordinator, where we discussed activities and progress in the programme. These observations and meetings were carried out throughout the first year of the programme.

The analysis of the interviews was inductively oriented and organised in two readings. The first reading identified subject positions that were implicitly or explicitly described by the informants. I searched for and extracted phrases, sentences and narrative accounts where mentors and mentees gave their descriptions of how they understood and experienced the programme and their role in it. The extracts were then thematically organised to illuminate the various subject positions. A second reading of the material took the subject positions as a point of departure and identified how the mentors and the mentees positioned themselves and their colleagues in accordance with these subject positions, and what consequences this positioning appeared to have for the interviewees.

After one year into the introductory programme, the department leader asked if I could do a thorough evaluation of the programme. As my presence in the company was in the form of researcher and not consultant, I declined this request. But to give something back to the company, I wrote a brief rapport based on general findings from the interviews and my observations, which I presented at a seminar for the programme group, where the group commented on and discussed my presentation. This session validated my impression and the interpretation of the department and the introductory programme.

The two main subject positions in the introductory programme

From the analyses, field conversations and observations, it became obvious that the introductory programme is constructed around two subject positions that are made available for the participants: namely “mentee” and “mentor”. In the following, I will briefly show how the informants described these positions, before I elaborate on how the newcomers positioned themselves and negotiated their identity in relation to these two positions.

In the interviews, the majority of the informants underscored that a mentor must have some kind of knowledge, experience and/or position in the company that are superior to the mentees' knowledge, experience and/or position. Jon, one of the mentees, puts it this way:

> When you use the titles [mentor and mentee] I think it is implicit that one mainly gives and the other mainly receives. The distance in competence can of course have theme-specific variations, but yes, I do mean that it should be like that.

This excerpt indicates that the most significant feature of the mentee's subject position is having something to learn, while the mentor's subject position has something to offer as its dominant trait. If not, the relationship is considered more as a cooperation between colleagues than a mentoring relationship, as underscored by Hans (mentee); "If one creates a formal mentor – mentee relationship, it does not work well if you are on the same level", and he continues "If the parties involved are almost equal, you might rather organise discussion-groups". In other words, mentors must experience that they have something to give, while mentees must experience they have something to learn.

During the interviews, it became evident that the mentees to a varying degree accepted being positioned as newcomers in need of learning. The majority of the mentees accepted their status willingly, and explicitly said that they had a lot to learn about their new job. Consequently, they were grateful that they could participate in the introductory programme. These mentees were consistent in their responses regarding what activities and conditions best facilitated the development of new competencies, working with authentic cases, access to colleagues' experience and competence, discussions about solutions and cases and access to a mentor. These findings are consistent with previous research (Smith, 2003; Billett, 2003; Billett *et al.*, 2006; Malloch *et al.*, 2013).

There was, however, a small group of newcomers to the department that identified themselves as neither newcomers nor as learners. These mentees clearly said that they did not understand why they were included in the programme and expressed frustration with being assigned as mentees. With reference to their age, previous jobs and/or experience, they signalled a stronger identification with the position as mentors. This group of informants was also recognised by their colleagues and sub-department leaders as highly competent, and the fact that they were positioned as mentees by the project group was also questioned in the interviews by some of the other mentees, mentors and leaders in the department. Finn (mentee), a man in his late fifties with 30 years of experience within the sector, said the following about his understanding of the situation and the reactions he got from his colleagues:

> […].. for my mentor the situation became a bit unpleasant, so to speak. Having me as a mentee, you know. I really think so […] yes […] and I got a lot of comments like; 'Wow, aren't you a mentor?' Nobody understood it.

Finn and his like-minded mentees acknowledged their mentors as formal mentors, but they were not comfortable being positioned as mentees.

Although the group of mentees expressing similar experiences as Finn was small; their perception of the introductory and mentoring programme, nevertheless, proved to be important in the analyses of the material. The combination of the majority group's (Group 1) positive identification with the mentee's subject position and the minority

group's (Group 2) narratives of frustration with their position in the programme resulted in an identification of subject positions with relevance to the newcomers that nuanced the original positions available in the programme.

"Cooperation and sharing with equally competent colleagues" as a significant subject position in the department

All the informants described their colleagues and the working environment in very positive terms, and colleagues are generally described as "easy to ask" and "very helpful". The company has an "open landscape" policy, and the physical working environment consists of open spaces with people working on similar topics/tasks grouped together. When observing, I noticed how all employees often asked each other questions on specific themes and where to find information. There seemed to be a supportive and collaborative environment in the department, and this was also confirmed by the informants. To be a person that cooperates and share information, knowledge and experiences with colleagues is a dominant subject position in the department that is repeatedly identified by all informants in the interviews as well as in the field conversations and observations. Marie, one of the Group 1 mentees, put it this way, "This place is just as I hoped it would be. It is such a good atmosphere. People are more in to sharing knowledge than competing […]", and Ted, another Group 1 mentee, told me:

> Well, you sit at your desk, and are surrounded by experienced people. So you just have to look at them and you'll get an immediate answer. So that works really well.

The Group 2 mentees that did not identify themselves as newcomers in need of support were the ones that most clearly identified this subject position in the interviews as they characterised their relationship to their assigned mentor as collegial cooperation between equal partners, here exemplified by Carl:

> *Researcher*: "What will you identify as the difference in competence between you and your mentor?"

> *Carl*: Except the fact that I'm better than him? (laughs) No, I'm just kidding, but I think it was kind of special for us in the sense that we sort of had to decide who will be mentor and mentee […]. So I don't really know how to answer your question. I feel like my mentor has asked me questions just as much as I have asked him. In that sense I would describe our everyday work more like teamwork than a training situation

For these mentees, the "cooperation and sharing" subject position was relevant, as they experienced the competence gap between themselves and their mentor as to narrow. Jon, one of the Group 2 mentees, expressed it like this:

> […]. So I think the competence-gap, or what one might call it, has not been clear in my situation. And that is also why I ask: 'why I am a mentee, really?'.

What constituted a significant competence gap was not necessarily related to formalities, such as age, exact experience, competence or education, but to the evaluation of the mentor and mentees' relative positions by the parties included in the relationship. The competence gap also had to be experienced as significant for the task at hand. The Group 2 mentees stated that they just did their everyday work, cooperating and asking advice from colleagues, completely independent if these

colleagues were their assigned mentors or not, hence silently "boycotting" the introductory programme. As this group of mentees did not consider the programme as decisive for the quality of their work performance and experienced their competence as sufficient to do their job well, they identified themselves with the "cooperation and sharing" subject position, although it was situated outside the introductory programme.

However, also the Group 1 mentees as well as the mentors drew on and identified themselves with the departmental "cooperation and sharing" subject position. In the interviews, the Group 1 mentees emphasised the cooperation they had with their colleagues, including their assigned mentor. Several of the mentees also said that it was important for them to contribute with new ideas and knowledge in the department and help develop new structures and routines, although they were newcomers. One of the Group 1 mentees had, for example, voluntarily offered to give colleagues mini-seminars and support to improve their use of specific software. Also, the mentors underscored the need for sharing, cooperation, discussion and reflection with colleagues to perform in accordance with the demands of the customers and described how most cases and solutions were discussed by groups of people. The "On the job training" (OTJT) element of the introductory programme was consequently considered as "business as usual" and not an "add on" to the daily activities. In the interviews, the mentors also acknowledged the newcomers' competence and fresh perspectives on things, and clearly appreciated discussing cases, learning new things and getting new ideas from their mentees. Looking closer in to the interviews, it became clear that the "cooperation and sharing" subject position also included another significant element: the described cooperation and sharing was considered to be happening between colleagues with different, but *equally* valued competence.

Adding more nuances to the available subject positions in the introductory programme

Even if the newcomers were new to the specific tasks in the department, all of them were well educated and/or experienced with already successful careers. Being recruited to the department was considered an evidence of competence in itself, as the tasks performed in the department are complex and challenging. Consequently, although the majority of the mentees easily identified themselves with a subject position that identified them as newcomers and learners, they considered themselves as neither unskilled nor as passive recipients of knowledge and competencies. Although the Group 2 mentees were more explicitly searching for alternative subject positions, the Group 1 mentees' description of their work, learning activities and relationship to their mentors and colleagues illuminated that there was a need to expand the number of accessible subject positions in the programme beyond the two original positions.

As they became more competent in their new job and more easily could see where their knowledge and experience complimented the existing knowledge in the department, the whole group of mentees had to negotiate their experiences, their competence and their position in the department with themselves, their mentor and other colleagues. As they described their positive and negative experiences and learning trajectories, the mentees moved on a continuum of several subject positions as illustrated in Figure 1.

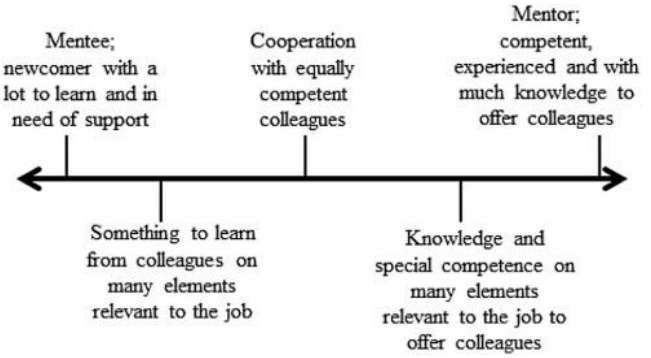

Figure 1.
Subject positions

In the interviews, the mentees moved and negotiated between these positions in various ways. The newcomers that resisted being positioned as mentees (Group 2) explicitly positioned themselves at the centre and right part of the continuum in Figure 1. Throughout the programme period, the group of mentees accepting their position as newcomers (Group 1) clearly had moved away from a "learner and in need of support" position on the left part of the continuum towards the subject position more in the centre. This group of mentees generally described themselves as more competent one year into the programme than when they first started. The responses from the mentors and the programme group indicated that they also positioned all the mentees as competent full members and important contributors to the department and the tasks at hand at the time of the interviews. After one year into the programme, the "cooperation and sharing with equally competent colleagues" subject position was, in other words, increasingly relevant to identify with, also for the Group 1 mentees.

Working and learning as identity work

The two main identity categories of "mentee" and "mentor" in the introductory programme have been the point of departure for the informants' identity work. However, throughout the interviews, the tension between being new to the job and simultaneously experienced, well-educated and/or skilled ultimately pushed for a more nuanced and broader range of accessible subject positions for the whole group of mentees. In the following, I will discuss how the limited range of subject positions on offer within the programme framed the identity work of the participants positioned as mentees by the project group, and how this identity work again made the introduction programme less fruitful for some of the interviewees.

Expert and novice – mutually excluding positions?

Introductory and mentoring programmes in knowledge-intensive organisations position highly skilled new employees simultaneously within two subject positions; the position of someone with special education, knowledge, skills and experiences and the position as a newcomer in need of learning and extra support. Currently, the ideal of the high-skilled knowledge worker encompasses a person who is not only knowledgeable, but also infinitely flexible, mobile, capable, willing and able to change (Fenwick and Sommerville, 2006; Thomlinson, 2013). Although learning of new

competencies, knowledge, technologies and forms of work are essential for this currently dominant working identity (Billett and Choy, 2013; Fenwick and Sommerville, 2006; Thomlinson, 2013; Zemblyas, 2006), the ambiguity in the relationship between the novice/learner and expert subject positions should not be underestimated, as also underscored by Boud and Solomon (2003):

> […] being a learner can be understood as a strength for the organisation and for the individual, when it is seen as adding value to one's work, However, the process of [[…].] being identified as a "learner" creates professional and institutional tensions and associations of being a novice or a person who has yet to be accepted as a fully functioning worker (Boud and Solomon, 2003, p. 330).

Both in our everyday conception of highly competent workers and also in several influential theories of professional and skills development, the two subject positions of novice and expert are positioned as contradictory or in opposite ends of development trajectories. To identify oneself with the position of somebody in need of learning or support might, therefore, be risky as "[…] having an identity as a learner may not be compatible with being regarded as a competent worker" (Boud and Solomon, 2003, p. 326) for some people or in some contexts. There might, in other words, be a significant distance between the subject position of a high-skilled expert and a "learning and in need of support" subject position. This distance can make identity negotiations challenging or impossible to overcome for employees that are situated within both of these positions.

For some of the informants in my study, the identity work was challenging, as it obviously was difficult for them to find an acceptable position within the introductory programme when they were denied the mentor position. Carl, for instance, was throughout the interviews explicitly recognised by himself and others with the skills, knowledge and experience associated with the mentor subject position, but he was formally positioned as a mentee. This clearly made negotiating identity challenging for him, as he did not recognise himself as someone in need of learning or support to do the job in a competent way. Such lack of recognition will, according to Mallett and Wapshott (2012), complicate identity work, because:

> If we cannot recognise ourselves in the actions carried out as part of a job role, nor within the stories of our colleagues, our sense of character begins to lack plausibility and claims to a particular identity become threatened (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012, p. 22).

As a result, Carl rejected the position of a mentee. However, given the limited range of accessible subject positions in the introductory programme, this rejection left Carl in what we might call an identity vacuum, as he formally also was denied the position of the mentor. As everybody is in need of secure and meaningful identities, this identity vacuum obviously made the transition into the new job difficult for Carl and the other Group 2 mentees.

As the introductory programme itself has no accessible subject positions for the newcomers where learning, development and collegial cooperation is narrated as *a part of being an expert*, the only option left for the Group 2 mentees was to boycott the mentoring and introductory programme and its subject positions and negotiate their identities drawing on alternative subject positions originally situated outside the programme. In the interviews, the Group 2 mentees narrated themselves as competent experts who were misplaced in the programme by the programme group.

Due to their expert competence, they should not have been in the programme at all. To explicitly identify with an expert identity situated outside the programme was a way to introduce alternative positions that allowed the Group 2 mentees to uphold their identity as experts. Implicit in this claim to an expert identity, there is also an obligation for others to value and treat them as experts (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012).

Accessible subject positions – an obstacle or a possibility for change?

The intention of the department leader when the introduction programme was launched was to ease the job transition and strengthen the competence for all new employees in the department. For the Group 2 mentees, the programme has had an opposite effect, because of the narrow selection of accessible subject positions in the programme and the way the two accessible subject positions ("mentee" and "mentor") are positioned as mutually excluding.

The resistance and boycotting the Group 2 mentees expressed should not be dismissed as a fear of change or loss of pride. When subject positions are perceived to be mutually excluding, rejection of one will strengthen the others (Søreide, 2007). Such expressions of dis-identification (Mallett and Wapshott, 2012) or anti-identity (Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003) is an important part of identity work (Svenningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Søreide, 2007) and should be taken seriously, especially in times of change and transition. During changes in the organisation, work tasks or employment "[…] new and sometimes frightening possible subject positions are opened" (Fenwick and Sommerville, 2006, p. 255) and the need to actively position and secure identity becomes pertinent (Scheeres and Solomon, 2006).

When persons have little room and opportunity to negotiate the relationship between self and other, they feel that they have to speak from a specific position or feel "[…] under obligation to enact a particular identity because of prevailing personal, social or institutional pressures" (McInnes and Corlett, 2012, p. 32) that they do performative and controlling identity work. This kind of identity work can potentially constrain employees, as the social control is stronger than the individual's possibility to "[…] establish, maintain, challenge or deny the identity positions of self and other" (McInnes and Corlett, 2012, p. 35). The Group 2 mentees described above clearly resisted the way the only available subject position in the programme challenged them to do this kind of performative and controlling identity work. To be able to more freely negotiate and develop their identities as *both* experts *and* newcomers, they had to resist and boycott the introductory programme. Also, the Group 1 mentees expressed a need for a more diversified and nuanced range of accessible subject positions in the programme when their competence evolved. Instead of opening up the possibility for the attending employees' to develop or strengthen their identities as competent workers, the programme has in many ways reduced the possibility for constructive identity negotiations, and the mentees, therefore, had to draw on alternative identities situated outside the programme.

Although the introductory programme were designed with the best intentions and the needs of the newcomers to the department in mind, the complexity of the interconnection between work, learning and identity did not ease the transition for all mentees. This underscores how "[…] identity work is not just a bi-product of organizational life; it is woven into the very fabric of organizing" (McInnes and

Corlett, 2012, p. 36). Shall we take the interconnection between work, learning and identity seriously, there must be room for different identities and identity negotiations in the way work and learning is organised in the workplace. Being a competent worker is not only about what people know and what they can do, but also about how people think and feel about what they know and what they can do and, hence, their identity.

Concluding comments

As we can presuppose the majority of newcomers and workers in transition to be experienced people (Cooper-Thomas *et al.*, 2012), it is vital to understand exactly how experience, identity, learning and change are intertwined for this group of workers. In a recent study, Milligan *et al.* (2013) claim that newly employed, *experienced* workers have a more complex learning and transition journey than less experienced newly employees have. The experienced ones also need some more time to negotiate their new role (Milligan *et al.*, 2013). The findings and discussion I have presented above supports this research, but it also nuances it, as it shows how it is the complex *identity work* of this group of workers' that makes their learning and transition a complex matter.

The identity focus in this article has in addition identified small, but significant differences between what can be characterised as productive workplace *cooperation* and what might be characterised as workplace *learning*. These differences are significant because they underscore why it is not necessarily sufficient to establish a working environment where people share knowledge and to assign mentors to ensure learning for all groups of newly employed workers. To better understand more aspects of the transition and learning for all groups of employees, there is a need for more research combining perspectives and knowledge from the research domains of workplace learning, organisational socialisation and identity.

The findings in this article show how a too narrow range of available subject positions in the introductory programme makes the programme counterproductive for some of the people it was designed to support. If organisers and leaders want high-skilled newcomers to adjust to the organisation and simultaneously use all their knowledge and experience in their new job, transition programmes and initiatives must be flexible and able to adjust to the people involved. If workers are to be flexible and adjustable, so must their support systems (Cooper-Thomas *et al.*, 2012; Kirpal, 2004). For the learning potential in introductory programmes to be fulfilled, all parties, that is newcomers, mentors and leaders, must recognise in what areas there is a need for learning and knowledge development. This recognition is especially important in the fields of work and businesses that are knowledge intensive and demand highly skilled and competent workers, as the identity negotiations involved in being a newcomer and a learner potentially are more demanding for this group of employees. The attention to positioning in this article has showed how the identity struggles employees can experience "[…] as a result of constraining hegemonic career discourses or the plurality of competing identity positions" (LaPointe, 2010, p. 8) in the introductory programme makes job transitions for the most experienced employees unnecessarily difficult. Organisers and leaders should consequently be sensitive to the significance identity work has for learning in their planning, execution and evaluation of transition and learning

programmes and initiatives. This sensitivity includes openness for several subject positions in these programmes that make it possible for the high-skilled newcomers to negotiate, develop and change and not just perform their working and learning identities.

Note

1. The company has requested full anonymity, also when it comes to the sector they operate in. Descriptions of the company and the services they provide are consequently relatively general.

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