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Teacher subjectivation in the quality dispositive: the example of VET in Austria

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Current reforms in vocational education and training (VET) are characterised by a constant striving for quality assurance and improvement. To this end, a powerful reform network has emerged that shapes the subjectivation processes of teachers. Drawing on Foucault (1980), we term this complex formation a ‘dispositive’. The paper introduces \textit{dispositive analytics} as an innovative approach for educational research. Taking Austria as an example of a ‘broader understanding’ of VET (Avis 2014) we address the question of how VET teachers’ subjectivity is shaped by the quality dispositive. The study investigates subject positions that refer to the ways teachers should be and act. Furthermore, qualitative interviews with VET teachers were conducted to examine which dispositional quality logics they tend to internalise and which forms and strategies they express to subvert the quality dispositive. The analysis reveals that the current reform network creates tensions in the subjectivation processes leading to experiences of de-professionalisation.

\textbf{Introduction}

In vocational education and training (VET) systems around the world, neoliberal educational reforms have led to the implementation of ‘a new model of governance’ (Steer et al. 2007, 176), including a shift toward standardisation, measurable outcomes, test-based accountability, effectiveness, and constant striving for assuring and improving quality (e.g., Ümarik and Goodson 2020; Pasura 2014; Avis et al. 2011). Taking the Austrian quality reform network as an example of current changes in VET, this paper attempts to add to the literature on educational reforms and their impact on teachers’ professional self-conceptions. VET teachers, in particular, have become ‘the target of reform’ (Coffield et al. 2007, 738) because they are ascribed a decisive role in the success of educational processes (e.g., Schmidt 2021; Hodkinson 1998). Since it is widely thought that the ‘quality of the VET system is only as good as its teachers and trainers’ (Harris 2015, 16), ongoing VET reforms aim to influence educational practice and thus the position of the teacher.
In many countries, there is a lack of information about VET teachers and their perspectives on current reforms (Hanley and Orr 2019; Locke and Maton 2019). For the Anglo-Saxon VET area, however, several studies have examined the impact of reform measures on the practices of VET professionals (e.g., Avis et al. 2011; Coffield et al. 2007; Gleeson and James 2007; Steer et al. 2007). Accordingly, VET teachers’ pedagogical activities appear to be increasingly characterised by a tension between teachers’ and externals’ expectations and perceptions of the profession (e.g., Schmidt 2021; Avis 2009; Gleeson and Husbands 2003). Also, findings show that VET teachers are confronted with a growing bureaucratic burden (e.g., Hanley and Orr 2019; Lloyd and Payne 2016; Coffield et al. 2007; Edward et al. 2007) and are facing increased monitoring and control mechanisms (e.g., Bathmaker and Avis 2013; Steer et al. 2007; Shain and Gleeson 1999; Hodkinson 1998). Furthermore, research indicates that VET professionals perceive restrictions of pedagogical freedom through current reform measures, which Avis et al. (2011, 125) summarise as ‘anti-educational consequences’ and Gleeson et al. (2015, 91) describe as an expression of ‘de-professionalisation’ in the VET field.

These studies’ findings must be interpreted in light of the specific structure and orientation of VET in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In each national context, the ideas and understandings of what claims, aims and modes of realisation are associated with the VET label and what it means to be a VET teacher differ considerably. According to Avis (2014, 49), in principle, a distinction between ‘broader and narrower understandings of VET’ can be made:

In the Anglo-Saxon world, vocational education is considered as a narrow preparation for working life […]. Whereas in other social formations the academic and vocational are brought together with VET embracing civic education, which is as much about personal development as it is about addressing the needs of employers.

The number of empirical studies investigating teachers’ perspectives on reform measures in the context of VET systems with a ‘broader understanding’ is relatively thin. Ertl and Kremer (2009) show that teachers at vocational schools in Germany consider innovation as a very important topic, which ‘is actively taken on by lecturers mainly in the areas of subject knowledge and improving teaching practice’ (10). Central aspects of VET reforms, such as organisational issues, seem to be rather insignificant for the teachers. Another example is a study by Lloyd and Payne (2016), which presents a comparative analysis for the countries of France, Norway, England and Wales. Teachers in all four countries report a reform-induced growth in paperwork, monitoring, and evaluation, however, in England and Wales this increase is much more extensive than in Norway and France.

Our paper addresses two key objectives. First, it aims to contribute to this hitherto relatively sparse academic debate through examining the powerful effects of current VET reforms on teachers’ modes of subjectivation in Austria. The VET system in Austria can be taken as an example of a ‘broader understanding’ and thus – following a distinction made by Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch (2008, 549) – can be assigned to the ‘knowledge-based model’ of vocational education in contrast to a ‘skills-based model’ which is dominant for example in England.

In Austrian VET, a nationwide quality initiative for all vocational schools has been introduced over the last two decades, framing recent reforms such as performance standards, competence-based curricula, self-evaluation, and a quality management system. VET
teachers’ working environment in Austria is currently embedded in a quality arrangement that aims at a continuous and comprehensive quality orientation in all school-relevant contexts. The permanent improvement of quality implies new expectations of teachers. Thus, educational policy not only provides a specific understanding of school and teaching quality but also seeks to change teachers’ professional behaviour and attitudes.

Previous studies show that VET teachers may have different ideas about quality than those demanded by policy (e.g., Schmidt 2017; Dennis 2012; Avis 2009). Their quality aspirations are not primarily oriented towards a managerial notion of quality, which is mainly related to the organisational school level, but are based on their pedagogical values and focus on the needs of learners. As '[t]he demands of quality and its textualisations potentially subordinate the professional judgement of practitioners' (Dennis 2012, 513), it can be assumed that not all teachers enact the quality imperatives and may reject them. Moreover, educational policies influence educational practice but do not necessarily dominate it (Ball et al. 2011). Teachers translate policies and thereby modify them to some extent, while at the same time teachers’ beliefs are affected by these policies. Hence, the question arises as to what demands are placed on VET teachers by the Austrian ‘quality reform regime’ and how it shapes teachers’ subjectivities.

The second objective of the paper is to theoretically enhance the previous perspectives on VET teacher professionalism and current educational reforms by using Foucault’s (1980) dispositive approach as a ‘new way of conceptualising education policy’ (Bailey 2013, 807). Understanding the quality reform network as a dispositive helps systematically investigate heterogeneous elements of this arrangement through the analytical trajectories of discourse, power, and subjectivation within a coherent research programme. This ‘potent analytical approach’ (Raffnsøe, Gudmand-Høyer, and Thaning 2016, 274) enables a relational power/knowledge analysis to reconstruct currently established knowledge about the quality of VET and associated power relations through which teachers’ modes of subjectivation are shaped.

Unique features of this perspective are that established and largely unquestioned concepts such as ‘quality’ in VET are not viewed with a preconceived understanding. The analysis is directed precisely at how the knowledge circulating in corresponding discourses is constituted, and how teacher subjects relate this knowledge to themselves and thus make it ‘real’. Hence, this paper seeks to explore what is negotiated within the discourse of quality and which logics have currently become established as truths. Moreover, dispositive analytics facilitates the examination of how teachers are entangled in a power/knowledge network which, due to its complexity, ambiguity and contradictoriness, does not allow for traditional dichotomous conclusions, such as subjugation versus freedom of teachers within current pedagogical reform frameworks. This approach aims at developing a deeper understanding of the potentially multi-layered subjectivation processes occurring within complex power/knowledge regimes (see also Bailey 2013).

In the following, Foucault’s dispositive concept is exemplified for the Austrian VET system to examine the powerful relations between the discursive knowledge on quality in VET, materialised quality practices and specific forms of subjectivation of VET teachers. We ask which normative-programmatic requirements for teachers are formulated by the dispositive? How do teachers respond to the requirements generated by the quality dispositive? Which forms and strategies are expressed by teachers in order to subvert the quality dispositive?
**Dispositive as an analytical framework**

Foucault's analytical tools, such as discourse or governmentality are repeatedly used in VET research to analyse power/knowledge, freedom and subjectivity (e.g., Niemi and Jahnukainen 2020; Zoellner 2015; Crossouard and Aynsley 2010; Zepke, Isaacs, and Leach 2009). However, the Foucauldian perspective has so far received little recognition to investigate VET teachers’ professional self-understanding and practices. In one of the first studies using a Foucauldian approach in this field, Robinson (1993) applies Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to examine VET teachers’ experiences in the context of a neoliberal competence-based training reform in Australia. She illustrates that VET teachers feel thoroughly surveilled by the externally prescribed competence standards, which leads to anxiety in their work and a reduction in the exercise of their professional judgement. Hodge (2016, 151) describes this phenomenon as ‘alienation’ from their identity as educators. Based on Robinson’s research, Hodge and Harris (2012) broaden the understanding of current reform mechanisms in VET through the governmentality perspective. This study shows that neoliberal reforms not only contain disciplinary mechanisms affecting individual teachers through monitoring and normative sanctions, but that VET reforms also operate ‘at a distance’ to mobilise active, flexible teaching subjects and to guide the conduct of educators in a more hidden way. Page (2011) uses a Foucault-inspired approach to explore first-tier managers’ resistant behaviour within further education in England. The teacher-managers’ resistant acts range from cynicism and humour to rejection and ignoring, and are directed primarily against managerialism, performativity, and surveillance to create autonomy and a ‘subjective space for reflection’ (9).

Foucault’s dispositive concept has hardly been applied in this field of research so far. In the following, we want to show that this very concept provides a stringent analytical framework for linking the educational policy level with the micro-level of pedagogical practice. Foucault used the term ‘dispositive’ in his studies on governmentality and employed dispositional analyses to investigate processes of subjectivation. He describes a dispositive as:

> a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, law, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic proportions – in short: the said as much as the unsaid. (Foucault 1980, 194)

A dispositive is ‘the system of relations that can be established between these elements’ (Foucault 1980, 194). It is to be interpreted as a dynamic arrangement that is ‘always inscribed in a play of power’ (196) and is subject to a continuous transformation process. It opens up and closes the potential for true knowledge, structures and organises societal reality, and guides behaviours.

Foucault (1978) does not consider power from a dualistic and hierarchical perspective – in the sense of someone having power and exercising it in a repressive and limiting way on someone else. Rather, he understands power as an omnipresent relationship of forces exercised through a ‘net-like organisation’ (Foucault 1980, 98) operating into the tiniest aspects of individuals’ behaviour. Power also has a generative, enabling character by discursively producing knowledge and truth (Foucault 1991).

**Dispositive analytics** is motivated by the attempt to systematically analyse the powerful interrelationship between discursively produced knowledge, institutionalised objectivations
and the ways in which they affect individual self-interpretations and self-concepts and thereby become ‘real’ (Bührmann and Schneider 2008). Discourses are conceptualised as empirical objects with determinable characteristics and super situational in scope. As a specific discursive formation, they possess a particular form of ‘regularity and consistency’ (Foucault 1972, 179) and display a reconstructable logic (see also Thoma 2017). Objectivations are conceived as materialised discursive processes such as laws, regulations, formal procedures, institutions, artefacts and policy documents (Bührmann and Schneider 2008). These institutionalised elements of a dispositive ‘may contribute to the (re)production of a discourse’ (Keller 2013, 71) and through them, discourses possess the potential to realise subjectivation effects.

Following Foucault (1982, 781), we understand subjectivity as a set of powerful, dual processes that can be interpreted as subjection ‘to someone else by control and dependence’ and self-formation ‘by a conscience or self-knowledge’. This duality requires a distinction between subject positions and the level of subjectivation (Bührmann and Schneider 2008). The former refers to the dispositionally generated normative-programmatic expectations regarding the ways teachers should be and act. Subject positions are produced and imparted by the interplay of the heterogeneous elements of a dispositive. They are prior to the processes of subjectivation, which relates to the modes of practically dealing with these expectations. Instead of inferring a simple correlation between these levels, this distinction allows a differentiated investigation about how the subject positions are adopted, reproduced, transformed, or rejected in everyday dealings. Thus, a comprehensive description of the powerful processes of subjectivation becomes possible, which does justice to the duality of becoming a subject.

Description of the study context: a brief outline of Austrian initial VET

VET plays a crucial role in the Austrian education system. Around 74% of all students in secondary level 2 attend a full-time VET school or an apprenticeship (Statistik Austria 2019). The Austrian VET system is structurally similar to the German one. In both countries, VET follows ‘a holistic concept of education’ (Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch 2008, 561) with the regulative idea of Bildung in the medium of the occupation (Kutscha 2011). Since the mid-1990s, the guiding principle of VET has been described by the construct of Handlungskompetenz (the professional competence of action-taking). Handlungskompetenz is a multi-layered aim that includes developing professional expertise, social and personal competence and aims at the competent handling and shaping of professional, private and socially relevant situations (Bader and Müller 2002). It thus reflects a ‘broader understanding’ of VET, which is constitutive for the Austrian system.

There are basically two paths of qualification in Austrian initial VET: forms of dual apprenticeship (interweaving the two learning settings of part-time vocational schools and workplace learning at companies) and full-time school-based VET. Our study’s subject is the field of full-time VET schooling, which serves as the ‘main path towards upward mobility’ (Lassnigg 2011, 423) to higher education and makes VET less of a ‘second choice’ alternative compared to skill-based VET systems. The state-provided VET schools show a balance between general and vocational education and enable ‘hybrid qualifications’ (Aff, Paschinger, and Rechberger 2013). The school-based VET sector is classified in two main types. Firstly, schools for intermediate vocational education last in general 3–4 years and
provide initial vocational qualification according to ISCED level 3. Secondly, VET colleges offer a five-year course, leading to general access to universities and to higher-level vocational qualification (ISCED level 5) enabling graduates to take autonomous and responsible action within the workplace.

The social partners have a great deal of influence on educational policy formation and decision-making in VET in Austria. The associations are involved formally and informally in policy-making at the relevant ministry level. Evidence of this is the participation in a large number of committees, advisory boards and commissions. The social partners are entitled to comment on drafts of school laws, curricula, and the development of new educational programmes (Archan and Mayr 2006). Moreover, teachers’ unions have traditionally been central to the context of educational policy.

Teachers at full-time VET schools must fulfil an explicit defined educational mandate, which goes significantly beyond a narrow qualification for the labour market. The development of competencies in the broad sense described above is considered the primary guiding objective of educational processes. The framework curriculum of the corresponding teaching subject serves as a binding orientation for lesson design. The curricula contain general objectives and a list of the content to be covered. Teachers are responsible and autonomous about the choice of methods and the didactic sequencing of the lesson content. They are required to have a professional qualification and work experience in the respective subject area; they must also complete a university teaching degree. In addition to ‘content knowledge’, university teacher education programmes emphasise the acquisition of ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ (Shulman 1986) and theories in educational science. In terms of their professional status, the vast majority of VET teachers are so-called ‘public sector employees with contractual status’ with tenured contracts. Following a classification by Grollmann and Rauner (2007, 20), teachers’ position in the Austrian VET system can be overall assigned to the ‘professionalised model’.

Quality dispositive: elements of a quality reform network in Austrian VET

In response to a proclaimed Europe-wide quality crisis in VET (European Commission 2002), a quality reform network consisting of heterogeneous elements was formed in Austria. Quality in VET became established as a guiding concept in debates on both educational research and educational policy. Along with this development, certain schemes of interpretation, specific modes of perception and a typable core of statements characterising the present understanding of quality in the field of Austrian VET – in short: a ‘quality discourse’ – emerged. As one element of a dispositive, the discourse produces a specific knowledge about quality that delineates the interpretative frame currently considered true.

Further elements of the Austrian quality dispositive are objectivations of discursive processes such as laws, policy documents and newly founded institutions. Since 2005, pursuant to Article 14 § 5a of the Federal Constitutional Law, all schools are obliged to uphold the ‘constant assurance and further development of the best possible quality’. Moreover, in 2011, an addition to § 18 of the Federal School Supervising Law stipulated the establishment of comprehensive quality management for all schools and the implementation of a national quality framework. The same year, § 56 of the School Teaching Law established quality management as a school administration responsibility. Along with the amended laws, QIBB – the Austrian VET Quality Initiative – formed by the Ministry of Education in 2004,
can be subsumed under this dispositional arrangement. At the heart of QIBB is the realisation of educational reform plans, such as national education standards, learning outcome-oriented curricula, and establishing a quality-management system in vocational schools. Aiming to systematically promote ‘the assurance and further development of school and teaching quality’ (FMEWA 2015, 46), the QIBB steering committee developed various ‘sites of veridiction’ (Ball 2016, 1131) such as school mission statements, a quality target matrix including recommended measures, evaluation methods, surveys for individual feedback, peer review, and quality reports at school, federal state, and national level.

**Process of data generation: subject positions and teachers’ subjectivation**

Methodologically, our dispositional analysis was conducted in three steps. In order to reconstruct the subject positions of teachers generated by elements of the dispositive, we analysed fragments of discursive knowledge referring to the ways teachers should be and act. First, we investigated the specialist discourse on quality in VET (step 1), performing a parallel analysis of the discourse’s institutionalised objectivations (step 2). The results of these two steps were compressed and conceptualised as subject positions. In addition, qualitative interviews were conducted with teachers to reconstruct modes of subjectivation (step 3). To prevent subsumption, the three analytical steps were performed as independently of one another as possible.

To ascertain how the concept of quality is presently negotiated and constructed on a specialist level within the Austrian field of VET, we investigated the quality discourse oriented on Keller’s (2011) *Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse*. Due to the plethora of articles on quality in VET published in the last decade, it was necessary to limit the focus to a particular type of papers. We selected key texts from the three VET specialist journals that are quantitatively the most widely represented in Austria: *Wissenplus – Österreichische Zeitschrift für Berufsbildung, Berufsbildung – Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis in Betrieb und Schule* and *Zeitschrift für Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik*. According to the ‘dimensions of the phenomenal structure’ (Keller 2011, 58) of the discourse, the material under investigation (consisting of 39 articles) was examined using sequence analysis. Aggregation of the findings enabled the reconstruction of the typable core of the quality discourse.

Secondly, we selected policy documents, guidelines and support documents published from 2005 to 2019 on the website of QIBB addressing quality in VET in Austria to investigate the institutionalised objectivations of discursive processes. We assume that these documents have a high degree of relevance for vocational schools, as the Ministry of Education provides for their dissemination in principals’ conferences, teacher training courses, and information brochures. The compiled text corpus contains 25 documents consisting of handouts, mission statements, quality reports, feedback instruments, and documentation of procedures. For an overview of the documents, see Table 1. We chose an interpretive procedure to analyse the documents, oriented towards the generic approach of ‘thematic analysis’ (Braun and Clarke 2006). Passages indicating subject positions were marked, coded, assembled, and successively submitted to a detailed analysis to elaborate key themes and patterns. In this fashion, the contours of an ‘intended’ teacher-subject
could be compiled, and the normative-programmatic expectations contained within the dispositive could be reconstructed.

In a third step, we conducted semi-structured interviews to examine how teachers apply the knowledge generated by the dispositive to themselves. The interviews inquired about aspects such as career biography, job profile, professional self-image, school quality measures, and teachers’ understanding of quality. We interviewed 11 teachers aged 40 to 60 who have been teaching for at least 11 years in VET schools. Each interviewee has a professional biography typical for teaching at the school types under investigation: a university degree in business education and several years of subsequent work experience in the business sector. The interviewed teachers are authorised to teach economic subjects at upper-level secondary full-time vocational schools and colleges. To reduce school-specific influences, we interviewed teachers from six various school locations. Analysis of the interviews, each lasting 50 to 90 minutes, led to data-related saturation effects. Evaluation of the interview transcriptions is oriented towards the content-analytical approach of inductive category formation (Mayring 2014). In an interpretative analysis process, categories were developed within the framework of open coding. Concerning our research question, main categories were then selected, compared, and condensed into overarching themes, enabling the description of various facets of teachers’ subjectivation.

Table 1. Corpus of data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POLICY and SUPPORT DOCUMENTS (published by QiBB)</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D1 The quality management system of commercial schools in Austria</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2 QiBB Q-Matrix: matrix of the quality objectives of school-based VET in Austria</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3 Annex to QiBB Q-Matrix/Quality standards for the ‘healthy school’</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4 Matrix of the quality objectives of the commercial school system</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D5 Federal quality report of the VET sector for the reporting period 2008–2010</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D6 Competence-oriented teaching at vocational schools: position paper</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D8 Framework curriculum ‘QUALI-QiBB – Qualification in and for QiBB’</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D9 Brochure for teachers to work with the individual feedback questionnaire of the QiBB platform</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D10 Follow-up tool: working with evaluation results as a basis for school development projects</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D11 Educational standards in VET: project manual</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D12 The mission statement of the commercial schools</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D14 Check: individual feedback for teachers: a guide for the use of student feedback in QiBB</td>
<td>2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D15 VET quality initiative – QiBB. In: VET schools and colleges in Austria. Information brochure of the general directorate for vocational education and training, adult education and school sports, 46–47</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D16 Federal quality report of the VET sector for the reporting period 2014–2016 and the planning period 2019</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D17 Survey grid for schools: professional development and further education</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D18 Key processes of vocational schools</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D19 Questionnaire for teachers: facilitation, individualisation</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D20 Questionnaire for teachers: gender-sensitive teaching and gender-sensitive school management</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D21 Questionnaire for teachers: coordination with peers</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D22 Questionnaire for teachers: performance appraisal</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D23 Questionnaire for students: individual feedback to teachers</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D24 Governance of the school system in Austria: white paper</td>
<td>2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D25 QiBB mission statement: the mission statement of the general directorate for vocational education and training (GD VET)</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Subject positions of the quality dispositive: findings of discourse and objectivations analysis

In the following, we present key themes and the respective facets of the subject positions emerging from the data. We show how VET teachers are addressed by the quality dispositive as subjects, and which contours describe the ‘ideal design’ of a VET teacher. The analysis of the documents reveals two specific forms of normative-programmatic expectations addressing VET teachers.

Work on quality as an unquestioned task to be permanently managed by all teachers

Quality is discursively negotiated as something that is permanently at stake in light of social change and must be subjected to constant attempts to improve it. This gives rise to set the accent and focus on the implementation of internal quality management (QM) at schools, which tends to be considered an unquestioned, more or less ineluctable requirement for the production and assurance of quality (e.g., Gramlinger, Jonach, and Wilbers 2014). In this context, attention is drawn to the necessity for all actors in educational institutions to participate in efforts to increase quality and hence in the QM systems’ implementation and realisation processes. Accordingly, the ‘entire process of work on quality in schools […] necessarily presupposes the involvement of as many participants in school life as possible’ (Kennerknecht and Zöller 2010, 10). Conceptually, this appeal is negotiated in terms of ‘increased autonomy’ (Buichl, Wilbers, and Wittmann 2009, 50) and ‘greater independence’ (Van Buer, Köller, and Klinke 2008, 359) for educational institutions as a whole. On the part of the teachers – who feature as the central protagonists in this discourse – increasing ‘personal responsibilities’ and more ‘freedom of design’ (Kennerknecht and Zöller 2010, 10) is promised.

The institutionalised objectivations specify teachers’ tasks in this regard. Teachers are portrayed as key actors in the implementation of a continuous, school-wide quality process. In their role as organisation developers and quality managers, teachers are supposed to perceive themselves as a cooperative part of the organisation and ‘make their own contribution to the overall quality of the school’ (D2, 4). Responsibility, engagement, and a high degree of motivation on the entire staff appear to be necessary features and attitudes for realising and maintaining quality and school development processes. Teachers are expected to ‘participate actively in the introduction and maintenance of the QM system’ (D2, 4) as the ‘implementation and realisation of QIBB depends on professional competence and commitment of those involved in all vocational school areas’ (D7, 5). Consequently, teachers should understand QM ‘not as the application of different management methods, but as a management and organisational culture’ (D15, 48) which they share with conviction and integrate into their professional self. To apply a culture of quality, new ‘pedagogical, organisational and individual autonomy’ (D24, 11) and increased ‘personal responsibilities’ (D7, 10) for teachers are emphasised.

Visibility and transparency as central traits of work on quality

In the specialist journals, quality features as something that can and should be visible in terms of its intended results. A central logic of the discourse under analysis entails a focus
on the results and effects of VET, such as learning outcomes and vocational competences (e.g., Ebbinghaus 2009). With respect to teaching, quality is mainly linked to normative standards that tend to be regulatory in nature and are considered realised if they match these criteria (e.g., Wilbers 2014). In the ‘name of transparency’ as an essential characteristic of quality, the demand for permanent documentation and accountability, standardised, prescribed evaluation and assessment instruments and continuous internal and external evaluation take on particular significance (e.g., Paechter 2009).

In the objectivations investigated, teachers are described as transparently operating actors who should align their work with quality and educational standards. The orientation towards learning results is presented in the documents as an essential part of all VET teaching areas and forms ‘an important element of a modern and comprehensive overall concept for the development and assurance of quality in school work’ (D6, 6). The ‘realisation of the educational standards is primarily the responsibility of the teachers’ (D12, 20) who are thus able to present learning outcomes in a transparent form. They should ‘teach and examine in a competence-oriented manner’ (D6, 61) and continuously produce, collect and document information and share it with various recipients (D25). Therefore, a central facet of teaching consists of making competences visible using standardised, prescribed methods and evaluation instruments. Moreover, teachers must be prepared to constantly ‘reflect on and improve their own professional actions’ (D14, 2) and keep expanding their professional competences. This specific attitude towards optimisation can be recognised in teachers’ interest in ‘regularly and self-evidently obtaining individual feedback [from learners] and using the results to develop their professional activities’ (D13, 32). Furthermore, certification and participation in regional, national, and international competitions are seen as ‘a valuable supplementation to teaching’ (D1, 8) and as something to aspire to.

In summary, the data analysed showed the following key normative-programmatic expectations of the quality dispositive: work on quality is negotiated as a constant issue for teachers, to be performed collectively and unquestioningly accepted as necessary. It provides teachers with a central and responsible scope of duties that goes hand in hand with more freedom of action, opportunities for participation and greater autonomy. Work on quality requires teachers who are active, engaged, and whose actions are comprehensible at all times. They are called upon to be transparent information subjects constantly striving in adaptable fashion to improve and optimise themselves and the school as an organisation in its entirety.

**Modes of subjectivation of VET teachers**

In this section, we illustrate which dispositional quality logics teachers tend to internalise, at which points teachers’ understandings about quality differ from the given normative-programmatic expectations, and which forms and strategies they express to subvert the quality dispositive and thereby constitute themselves as critical subjects.

The interviewees consistently report that quality is experienced as an essential, dominant theme in their working environment. They report that their schools have QM groups and QM representatives, that evaluation and peer reviews are conducted regularly, and that student feedback plays a significant role. Furthermore, they repeatedly refer to
national education standards, the newly conceived competence-oriented curricula, and standardised school-leaving and diploma examinations. They appear to perceive quality as omnipresent:

Quality is a theme running throughout communication, from the school administration to the teachers and students. That is, the issue keeps coming up. [...] We keep looking at areas and check what their quality is like. That can be quality in terms of performance assessment or lessons, or how we act towards one another as colleagues. Quality has a high priority. (Martin)

The dispositional expectation of being the central protagonist responsible for work on quality reaches the level of subjectivation via integration into individual self-descriptions and, in this way, ‘comes to life’. The interviewees largely describe themselves as a key ingredient in the drive for ever improving quality (Hodkinson 1998, 197):

To be honest, quality plays a massive role at the school. [...] I see it as my task to try to achieve something here. If I am part of the education system, then I would like to contribute something to its improvement. (Kurt)

VET teachers become ‘executors of quality’ (Ball 2003, 218), articulating their will to participate in its production and assurance. Likewise, the dispositionally produced and conveyed need to recognise work on quality as an ongoing process of development becomes ‘real’. This realisation is reflected in the subjectivising references to perpetual flux and the associated need for interest in innovation and flexibility:

I never lose sight of what I could still improve. That is, I know my weaknesses that can be improved on. [...] I am interested in and willing to develop continually. (Martin)

The teachers put themselves in a state of permanent ‘self-alarming readiness’ (Gonon 2008, 104), a condition that goes hand in hand with self-assurances and striving for self-improvement. They constitute themselves as dynamic, adaptable quality subjects who are constantly motivated to invest in, work on, and improve themselves. Reference points for this permanent self-development are mainly feedback from their students or colleagues or competition results:

I think I am a successful teacher because I try to take on board criticism from students for my own further improvement. [...] It is always interesting how students perceive my lessons. I have them fill out feedback forms, and of course, I look at them to become aware of what I am doing right and where I can improve. It is very fascinating, indeed. (Sarah)

We are always prepared to put ourselves up for certification. That is, to allow external officers insights. You try to draw attention to yourself and take part in competitions. [...] I am also interested myself in innovations and changes, and I also try to implement them. (Maria)

These subjectivised dynamics of ‘permanent self-optimization’ (Bröckling 2016, xvii) and ‘self-control’ (Gleeson and Husbands 2003, 501) are primarily initiated and sustained by the production of responsibility. For most teachers interviewed, it is a matter of urgency to contribute actively and responsibly to an increase in quality. However, they are continually coming up against limits in this process, as their own understandings about quality do not always correspond to the specifications and the experienced possibilities of doing quality work. For many interviewees, educational quality depends mainly on teachers’ judgement
and expertise (see also Seddon 2009; Robinson 1993). A central feature for delivering quality is, therefore, freedom in the exercise of their professional practices. However, teachers experience their claim for freedom of action and active participation in quality work as very limited. The teachers’ reduction and limitation towards a technocratic implementation of given measures are often problematised (see also Ertl and Kremer 2009). In our interview data, this reluctance to merely implement predetermined external initiatives, and thus what Avis (2009, 658) calls ‘technical rationalism’, is reflected as follows:

We have no voice at all. The innovations have not been developed in teachers’ conference rooms or classrooms; they have always been developed somewhere else. (Audre)

Quality in school starts with open working environment conditions. It should be much more free. In recent years everything has been regulated here. (Yuki)

The reported changes in teachers’ daily work are characterised above all by an apparent increase in documentation and informational duties (see also Lloyd and Payne 2016; Edward et al. 2007) pervading almost all areas of their professional activities. These effects, in combination with the legitimate obligation to provide anyone with information about their work at all times, fuel teachers’ self-descriptions suggesting monitoring and the erosion of authority:

At the moment I feel a bit over-monitored. I feel a kind of mistrust of us teachers. We get the feeling that we are not trusted actually to do our duties properly. (Sarah)

Sometimes I have doubts because the work changes so much. It makes me afraid that as a teacher, you have to justify yourself so much in the meantime and that my person is always under observation. […] The control from the outside increases significantly. (Caroline)

The permanent observation, the constant requirement to justify themselves, leads to a perception of ‘distrust by design’ (Donovan 2019) and an erosion of teachers’ authority, affecting teachers’ pedagogical activities and thus the key area of their work.

The interviews repeatedly refer to the limiting impact of what is felt to be a current tendency towards standardisation (Avis et al. 2011). In this connection, the interviewees mainly mention the narrowing of curricula and newly implemented instruments for securing results. They describe the increase in ‘rigidity regarding standardisation’ as something prescribed by educational policy and administration and as a central component of efforts to assure quality in the name of comparability and transparency via systems transported and installed by QIBB. Many interviewees express a perceived restriction of their educational freedom, which they consistently describe as reducing quality:

I think that we are losing a lot of quality because of these standards. […] There are no peaks anymore, everything is made equal. It is almost a grey world, I would say. In educational policy and administration, they would like to have everything manageable, observable and transparent. (Maria)

You have to be able to deal with very narrow limits and still be able to find yourself. The noose is getting tighter and tighter when I compare things over the years. (Audre)

In this context, most of the teachers interviewed see an essential facet of their profession – and a quality category central to them – as being exposed to erosion by current reform measures: ‘taking time for students’, ‘reaching out to them’, ‘being there for them as individuals’, ‘responding to their needs’ or ‘being interested in their problems’. Hence, they
consider a crucial dimension of their pedagogical ethos — the possibility of a sensible orientation towards the needs of the individual students (Köpsén 2014) — endangered through the standardisation requirements and thus they express an erosion of their educational mandate. Following Avis et al. (2011, 135), this can be interpreted as 'anti-educational consequences' deriving from the 'neoliberal embrace' (Avis 2014, 49) of current VET reforms:

This tension between standardised curricula and the demand for individualisation has a very demotivating effect. Everything is forced into line; the individual student falls by the wayside. (Nicola)

The categories of monitoring, erosion of teachers' authority, and reduced pedagogic freedom are subjective interpretations of the experienced effects of a dispositive in which they presently find themselves as VET teachers and in which they currently become subjectivised. The basic tenor of all interviewees is that there is a tendency towards 'de-professionalisation' (Gleeson et al. 2015, 91), which is characterised by a managerialist notion of professionalism (Avis 2009) and the fact that the key area of the profession — teaching — is currently experiencing a 'loss of quality' due to more intensive additional administrative tasks. While the teachers describe themselves as 'transparent administrators' who try to fulfil their documentation duties to the best of their abilities, faced with a limited amount of time, they do this at the cost of their 'core pedagogic business' (Coffield et al. 2007, 736). They report 'cutting corners' concerning the content of lessons, the variety of methods, and preparation for class:

The content gets reduced a little. You have to perform more organisational activities. You become too much of an administrator. Because of these additional tasks, the educational aspect is reduced, because there simply is not time. (Sarah)

The experienced de-professionalisation reveals 'perverse' (Steer et al. 2007, 178) and 'adverse consequences for pedagogy and learning' (Pasura 2014, 580) and thus holds the potential to create re- and trans-formations. The teachers continually invest less time and effort in their core pedagogic tasks by devoting more time and effort to 'erecting monitoring systems, collecting performative data and attending to the management of institutional “impressions”' (Ball 2003, 221).

However, not all interviewees accept the drastic changes in their work within the quality dispositive framework without criticism or opposition. The teachers reveal various forms of resistance, which mainly take place on an individual level. Collective forms of resistance are hardly ever reported by the interviewees, and if so, the teachers complain that they are non-existent at school:

In the teachers’ conference, nobody says anything critical anymore. […] It becomes clear that many people are against these measures when you talk to them in the coffee room, but nobody says so in the teachers’ conference. Then, of course, the floodgates are opened, that many reform measures will be introduced which are not so great because they are not discussed honestly. (Tina)

Individual forms of resistance are expressed in many interviews; following Page (2011, 1), these can be divided into ‘covert acts’ and ‘overt acts’. The interviewees’ narrations are dominated by ‘covert strategies of resistance’ (6), which vary between teachers. Some teachers carry out the prescribed reform measures, but criticise them by distancing their own quality notions from policy objectives or by trying to approach the situation with cynicism:
The teacher just puts it into practice and may or may not be happy with the results, but quality in school really is something different. (Yuki)

The school system is very much characterised by order and control. And if these standardisations are added now, you can easily develop a ‘persecution mania’ (laughs out loud). (Audre)

Others report ‘cutting corners’, but as we have already shown, most of these shortcuts do not refer to the normative-programmatic requirements of quality work and transparency, but mainly to their teaching. In previous research (Page 2011; Steer et al. 2007; Shain and Gleeson 1999), the somewhat concealed acts of resistance are mainly directed against ‘tolerable’ constraints in professional practice. These studies also report more radical responses from teachers, such as rejection, ignoring or even leaving the profession, when changes in teachers’ work considerably limit their professional autonomy. In contrast, covert forms of resistance dominate in our interviews, even if teachers’ authority and pedagogical freedom undergo substantial erosion. The VET teachers explicitly articulate very few ‘overt acts’. Moreover, the rare examples in which the interviewees report ‘counter-conduct’ (Foucault 2007, 196) are not generally directed against quality reforms, but rather against specific quality measures such as certain documentation obligations or feedback and evaluation instruments.

**Teacher subjectivation between assumed responsibility and experienced distance**

This article introduces *dispositive analytics* as an innovative approach for educational research and develops a conceptual framework to examine the impact of educational reform on pedagogical actors’ processes of subjectivation. The dispositive concept broadens the research perspective on teachers’ professional self-understandings by examining the relationship between knowledge and social practice. The value of this approach becomes particularly apparent in the relational power/knowledge analysis. It enables a systematic connection of discursively produced expectations of how teachers should be and act, and the modes of practically dealing with these demands.

The findings reveal that VET teachers are entangled in a quality dispositive that shapes their actions and decisively influences their professional self-conceptions. Both technologies of disciplinary power (Foucault 1991) and governmental power mechanisms (Foucault 2007) operate within the dispositive, indicating that current educational reforms structure teachers’ field of action not only through strict regulations and restrictions but also through subtle, implicit influences by addressing teachers as responsible bearers of school quality. In comparison to previous research in this field, this paper shows that VET teachers are not only ‘the target of reform’ (Coffield et al. 2007, 738) or merely struggling to negotiate between policy objectives and their own pedagogical values (Schmidt 2021; Locke and Maton 2019; Edward et al. 2007), but that they become indispensable agents of reform by including policy objectives in their pedagogical self-understandings.

In the context of the quality dispositive, teachers are assigned a decisive ‘double role’, which leads to tensions in the subjectivation processes. On the one hand, they are considered to be driving forces for the improvement of quality. Through a governmental form of power (Foucault 2007), they are induced to develop themselves along with the central facets of an ‘intended’ teacher-subject by recognising themselves as responsible for the quality of VET, by working actively, engaged on quality, and by continuously optimising their professional
self in the name of quality. These subject positions are confirmed in the teachers’ narratives. Most teachers are committed to quality in terms of their practice, which is a central hallmark of their professional self-understanding. They articulate a form of ‘voluntary’ self-conduct, a governmental power mechanism that operates ‘through teachers’ freedom’ (see also Hautz 2020).

On the other hand, however, VET teachers face disciplinary power (Foucault 1991), which include reinforced monitoring and control mechanisms that limit their professional autonomy. They should function as transparent information subjects and align their actions with prescribed standards and documentation obligations. Contrary to the dispositional vocabulary of enabling, with its promise of greater autonomy and freedom of action, the interviewed teachers occasionally feel observed, surveyed, and monitored subjects whose scope for responsibility and initiative has been outlined and limited.

Criticisms and ‘covert acts’ of resistance are expressed regarding the perceived consequences of these ‘new forms of very immediate surveillance and self-monitoring’ (Ball 2003, 219). Nevertheless, as most of the reform measures are considered to be obligatory, little ‘overt acts’ of resistance are evident in the data. Following Biesta (2010, 59), a so-called ‘regime of accountability’ becomes apparent in the dispositive context, which the teachers can hardly escape. Despite the perceived constraints in their professional selves, teachers primarily attempt to comply with the increasing transparency demands and documentation obligations. However, due to limited time resources, they do this at the expense of the core pedagogic tasks. This tendency leads to de-professionalisation and causes ambivalent tensions in teachers’ subjectivation process. The assumed expectation to constitute oneself as a central bearer of work on quality – being dynamic and committed, actively participating – are in stark contrast to perceptions expressed in descriptions of a ‘newly created rigidity’, ‘increasingly restrictive limits’, ‘tightening nooses’ or ‘a grey (school) environment’. Being placed in a framework, the limits of which appear barely flexible, almost immovable, makes the emergence of undefined spaces all the more improbable in the context of work on quality. It also seems less likely to lead to the development of what can be termed proximity (in the sense of attentiveness, care, respect) (Biesta 2010). Proximity describes the possibility to bring to the fore on the relationship level what the interviewees consider to be essential aspects of a pedagogic ethos to which they feel committed. Proximity resists standardisation – it is not prescribable, it is not definable, and it cannot be made to take a particular shape.

Overall, the quality dispositive organises teacher subjectivity by the creation of distance. This distance is not only an effect of newly installed tensions, but also the effect of an experienced climate that renders transgressions more improbable, limits responsibilities, and channels creative potential in a certain way. Yet, the quality dispositive does not have an utterly totalising effect on teachers’ daily work and the processes of teachers’ subjectivation. There remain ‘spaces for alternative practice’ (Avis 2009, 660), but they tend to be restricted and pre-structured in a certain way.

The findings presented and discussed here are to be interpreted regarding the country-specific characteristics of the Austrian full-time VET school sector as an example of a ‘broader understanding’ of VET. Although similar governance mechanisms and pressures exist across countries, they may vary in intensity and may have different effects on the pedagogical actors in the respective VET system. Also, there are variations in teachers’ autonomy and, due to the strength and influence of their unions, teachers have specific collective ‘power resources’ to resist policy changes.
Although the categories used by the Austrian VET teachers to subjectivise themselves seem to converge to some extent with teachers’ self-descriptions within a skill-based system (see, e.g. Lloyd and Payne 2016), subsequent comparative research would be necessary, to investigate similarities and differences in the processes of teacher subjectivation in more detail. As demonstrated in this paper, Foucault’s concept of dispositive would be particularly useful for this purpose. As a sophisticated analytical framework for educational research, it is applicable in diverse national contexts and enables the empirical exploration of heterogeneous elements of power/knowledge networks and teachers’ various subjectivation processes. To gain further insights into teachers’ modes of subjectivation, dispositive analytics also enables an enhancement of the methodological repertoire, e.g., by conducting a dispositive ethnography or analysing visual data and technical artefacts (Bosančić and Keller 2019). Moreover, it contains a form of critique that does not aim at normative judgement and rejection, but at developing a differentiated and reflected understanding about the possibilities of action within current educational reforms.

Notes

1. For an overview of the Austrian education system, see: www.edusystem.at/en/
2. The numbers D1-D25 refer to the documents analysed. For the complete list, see Table 1.

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