Rituals of Vocational Socialisation: Faith-Building in Higher Vocational Education for Weak-Form Occupational Pathways

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of how higher vocational education and training programmes socialise participants for future work, where the occupational pathways they are to embark on are weakly defined. The analysis focuses on organisational rituals as a means to understand individual and collective transformative processes taking place at a particular intersection of education and labour markets. Building on organisational and sociological theories of rituals, as well as drawing empirically from a longitudinal qualitative interview study of a cohort of students in Swedish higher vocational education for work in digital data strategy, I explore how rituals are enacted in a vocational education and training setting and what these rituals mean to the aspirants who partake in them. The findings illustrate how rituals initiate, convert, and locate the participants in a team. These repeated encounters with rituals socialise, cultivate and build vocational faith amongst participants, despite the nascency and unstable nature of their education-to-work pathways. However, while rituals can serve as a catalyst to ignite processes of collective identification and vocational socialisation, they are not always successful. The paper discusses implications of faith-building in weak-form occupational pathways when the labour market is strong and conversely, when the economy is in recession. The text concludes by advocating the need for examining the power of educational institutions in shaping transitional experiences of participants in vocational education.

Keywords Transitions · Rituals · Vocational socialisation · Higher vocational education and training · Sweden

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Introduction

As individuals are pushed to re-skill themselves quickly to respond to evolving labour market demands and new work tasks, vocational programmes are getting shorter in duration and popularising in higher levels of education (Ulicna et al. 2016). Across Europe, there has been a surge in demand from employers and governments for individuals to acquire sought-after competences quickly and be rapidly integrated into the labour market (Cedefop 2019). Against this backdrop, this paper is concerned with exploring how educational organisations socialise participants into a vocation, when the occupational pathways they embark on are nascent and the training programmes they enrol in are short in duration.

Although transitioning is a process that has been investigated extensively within vocational education and training (VET), research emphasis has been accorded predominantly to traditional occupational pathways, consequently leaving out experiences of those who move into younger industries, or into emerging ‘weak-form occupations’ (Ye 2020). In this paper, I set out to connect and contribute to extant literature by examining organisational rituals in higher vocational education and training. Exploring rituals allows us to lift the focus on individuals transitioning, to evaluating the power of collectives in shaping social interactions and consequently an individual’s education-to-work journey.

Building on organisational and sociological theories of rituals, the analysis focuses on how ritual practices are enacted in a vocational education and training setting, and specifically, what these mean to aspirants who participate in them. Empirically, the analysis draws from a longitudinal qualitative study with a cohort of participants in Swedish higher vocational education for work in digital data strategy. The findings illustrate how rituals in a Swedish occupational school initiate, convert and locate the participants in a team. The encounters with, and partaking of, these rituals are consequential for participants because they build vocational faith for their education-to-work pathways that are weakly defined.

The text will begin by mapping out earlier research on rituals in work and school, detailing the theoretical tools and methodological considerations employed in this paper’s analysis, before the presentation of the findings. This will be followed by a discussion on the significance of rituals for weak-form occupational pathways and what happens when rituals fail to be successful in achieving vocational socialisation. The text concludes with offering implications for the need to continue research on the power of educational institutions in shaping the transitional experiences of participants in vocational education.

Examining Vocational Socialisation through Rituals: An Organisational and Sociological Perspective

Careers and transitions from school to work have long been viewed as status passages or rites of passage (Glaser and Strauss 2011; van Gennep 1960; Evans 2019). Borrowing from anthropology and specifically van Gennep’s influential work, the idea of careers as rites of passages was used by Chicago occupational sociologists and has become a common way to depict movement between one social status to another

(Barley 1989). Within vocational research, transitioning is a popular process that has been investigated and the rich literature has shown how participants transition from youth to adulthood or experience identity formation in a variety of contexts (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Dahlgren et al. 2006; Ferm et al. 2018; Evans 2019). However, the emphasis on more traditional, established occupational pathways is commonplace, consequently leaving out experiences of those who are moving into emerging industries (Clark et al. 2011; Ye 2020). Higher vocational education, the setting from which this study takes place, offers a site for examining school-to-work transitions that can occur at various stages of one's life course, as well as into emerging occupations.

In order to give sufficient attention to how processes at the meso-level affect individual experiences of moving between school and work, an organisational and sociological perspective for analysing rituals and transitions from school to work is employed in this paper. To understand individual and collective identity transformative processes via transitions, examining rituals in school and workplaces can be useful for interrogating how symbolic, routinised practices come together to shape social relations. Schools are powerful institutions for constructing and mediating certainty for their students, and school culture can provide a basis for organisational control as students learn to cope with uncertainty (Ahme 1994; Ouchi and Wilkins 1985; Schein 1983). Analysing organisational cultural forms, like rituals, ceremonies or storytelling, compels us to consider how certain behaviours, which may appear irrational to non-members, can be functional for the organisation's members (Quantz et al. 2011; Trice and Beyer 1984).

Organisation rituals have been shown to be key for establishing collective identity as well as for individual identity transformation (Hermanowicz and Morgan 1999). Kunda (2009, 93), in his work on engineering culture, offers a useful definition of rituals as collectively produced, structured occasions that create frames from which participants 'are expected to express and confirm sanctioned ways of experiencing social reality'. Trice and Beyer (1984, 654) also note in an earlier text on organisational cultures that when people perform ceremonial or ritual activities, they make use of particular gestures, ritualized behaviours and artefacts to intensify demonstrations of shared meanings. If social interaction rituals are successful, as Collins (2004) notes, participants are led to feeling strong and confident. Interaction rituals are essentially transformative, as these processes take some transient emotions as ingredients and turn them into other emotions as long-term outcomes (Collins 2004). Participants get pumped up with emotional strength from participating in a group's interaction and this cumulative emotional energy eventually produces important feelings of group solidarity (Collins 2004, 108ff).

Nevertheless, the meaning of a ritual is never fixed or uniform, but always context dependent and an empirical question of interpretation (Kunda 2009; Cohen 1985). As Turner (1969, 7) points out, it is 'one thing to observe people performing the stylized gestures and singing the cryptic songs of ritual performances and quite another to reach an adequate understanding of what the movements and words mean to them'. This paper sets out to examine organisational rituals of vocational socialisation through the way they are interpreted by its participants, as a way to gain insights into how collective vocational identity can be established through short-cycle higher vocational education and training. In this text, vocational socialisation is understood as the process of individuals being inducted into a new sector, the sector in this case being a vocational

area of work (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Furthermore, during such a process of secondary socialisation, individuals internalise institutions or ‘institution-based sub-worlds’ (Berger and Luckmann 1991). As vocational education becomes increasingly formalised in recent decades and training for work takes place more frequently in schools, how an individual experiences these transformative processes of transitions, framed within educational institutions, is necessary to examine. The following section details the methods employed in collecting and analysing data to address the research questions at hand.

Methodological Considerations: Analysing Rituals in Short-Cycle Higher Vocational Education Programmes

Adopting an interpretative and longitudinal research approach, this study followed a group of aspirants who were being trained to become specialists in extracting, analysing, and using digital data for the growth and profit of organisations. These individuals can be viewed as experiencing a double “not-yet” situation, since not only are they at the stage of aspiring to certain work roles, but the occupations to which they aspire are also in a nascent, not-yet fully defined stage. The cohort of individuals I accompanied were enrolled in a Swedish school called *Skolan X* (hereon SX), where higher vocational education (HVE) for programmes in the Data/IT field of training were offered.¹ From its conception, higher vocational education in Sweden had been positioned as a flexible policy tool that would support individuals in upgrading their competences. The Swedish HVE takes place at the post-upper secondary level, programmes are on average around two-years in duration and can be viewed as a type of short-cycle higher vocational education and training form. From a policy perspective, the aim of HVE has been to provide decentralised higher-level vocational education, delivered via municipalities and private companies, that is adjusted to local labour markets.

Training for Weak-Form Occupations

As an emergent educational form, HVE has been popular with applicants, politicians and employers, as demonstrated by increasing numbers of applications and government investment over the last decade. It is also a particularly sought-after training “solution” for emergent occupations, or what in this paper is termed *weak-form occupations*. Task areas in weak-form occupations tend to be in nascent stage and are not yet subjected to forms of institutionalisation or codification (Ye 2020). Because these occupations are emerging, with skill areas still being exactly defined, training for these work tasks have bypassed higher education institutions such as universities. Rather, training delivery has been taking place in occupational schools such as SX where the lack of a nationally-enforced curriculum allows programmes to, in principle, adapt or adjust quickly to local labour market needs. As earlier noted in Ye (2020), because of continued technological developments and societal changes, compelling new

¹ All names of organisations, programmes and people have been changed in this text for confidentiality.

types of work tasks which in turn create new occupations, weak-form occupations, arguably, will always exist.

SX is an occupational school that has been part of the Swedish HVE system since its experimental phase in the 1990s. At the time of research, I gained access to SX's newest training programme, 'Digi', which aimed to prepare participants to enter the labour market as digital data strategists. The programme goals were to train participants to make decisions based on 'measured user behaviour' and offer solutions to business organisations in order to lead to business growth. To achieve that, participants are expected to acquire skills in design, data visualisation, and programming, through working in projects and mandatory work placements. To illustrate the extent of (the lack of) clarity in their school to work pathways, one and a half years after the aspirants left the portals of SX, the cohort of 40 in this programme had more than 30 occupational labels amongst them that ranged from conversion specialist, account strategist, interaction designer, programmatic publisher manager, developer, growth manager – just to name a few. They were also scattered across different industries and had discussed often in the interviews the difficulties of navigating unclear occupational futures and ethical grey zones encountered in their work (see Ye 2020).

Data Collection and Analytical Strategy

Over the years 2014 to 2016, I accompanied nine individuals from a cohort of Digi and interviewed each of them on three occasions, marked by significant transitional moments: when they commenced their training (T1), when they were looking for work (T2), and when they had been in work (T3). This resulted in a total of 27 in-depth qualitative interviews from this interview group. In this paper, I refer to this group of interviewees I followed over time as *aspirants* for they are continually aspiring or striving, not only in relation to their individual career trajectories but also in relation to the development of emerging occupations (Ye 2020). The age range of the aspirants I followed in this study was twenty to fifty years old. Five were male and four were females. Their educational backgrounds varied with some having only upper-secondary qualifications to others having already obtained a Master's degree. A proportion of them had previous work experience before they embarked on HVE. This variety in attributes is quite similar to the patterns of selection of candidates into Digi and SX in general and is particularly useful for capturing the experiences of different types of learners undergoing a training journey, in tandem. I had also conducted cross-sectional interviews with the school's staff and alumni, made frequent visits to the Stockholm campus, visited SX campuses outside of Sweden, lived in the neighbourhood of the Stockholm campus for a quarter of a year, and attended events organised by the school. These activities allowed me to gain a better understanding of the school's organisational culture.

The analytical strategy employed in this paper was to identify from the empirical material various kinds of organisational practices that were repeated or that takes place at regular intervals. Van Gennep's (1960) three stages of 'rites of passage' – separation, transition, and incorporation – served as a framework for tracing how the aspirants moved in status from being a training candidate, learner and aspiring worker. Working iteratively with theory and codes that emerged from the data, the analyses identified three types of rituals that were salient in the experiences of the aspirants. They are (i)

initiating rituals, which involve selection from a big group of applicants and participants undergoing rites of admission into the school; (ii) *converting rituals*, where successful applicants learn organisational ways of conforming and adherence; and (iii) *teaming rituals*, where participants are placed in recurring situations of having to cooperate through structured, everyday interaction routines. The findings and discussion sections to follow will present how rituals are used to socialise aspirants into the school and into the vocations they will take on, against the backdrop of education-to-work pathways that are nascent and unstable.

Rituals of Vocational Socialisation for Weak-Form Occupations

Initiating Rituals

An application task, known as the Creative Task, is a dramatized, first-stage evaluation device used by SX gatekeepers to select students into the school. Applicants to all of the SX programmes are assigned a specific challenge and their task is to demonstrate how they can solve a particular ‘real-world’ problem. The Task is often announced with much fanfare as applicants eagerly await its reveal. Participants will then offer a submission that could be visualised using any form of digital technology. The Creative Task is evaluated based on the criteria of ‘innovation, feasibility, and originality’, although it is stated in the requirements that evaluators should not have to take more than five minutes to review the submission.

Aspiring participants of SX hold this test in high regard because they view it as a way to offer good first impressions. Yet, due to the open-endedness of the task, applicants are generally unsure of what is expected of them in their submissions. This uncertainty was felt across the group of aspirants, regardless of their previous educational backgrounds. One aspirant, Erik, who had already undergone another type of vocational training before enrolling at SX, felt that the Task was very vague (or *flummig*, the actual Swedish word he used). One of his contemporaries, Kim, who had dropped out of a leading technological university in Sweden to enrol in SX, was nervous because according to him, getting into SX was ‘the one thing’ that he wanted. Yet, he was uncertain about what the school was ‘looking for’ in the Creative Task as he felt that it was an application process that was not based on grades or clear requirements.

Typically, in school admission procedures, admission artefacts are private; filed in admission folders, hidden behind closed doors of audition rooms, visible only to a select panel of gatekeepers. Embarking on the Creative Task was however a more public act of initiation for the aspirants. It is common for SX applicants to showcase their Creative Task on online portfolios or video channels. The aspirants in the interviews shared how they searched for past and present submissions as a means to model applicants who had been successful or as a way to ‘suss out’ the competition in their cohort. The public display of an admission artefact appears to serve several functions, such as signalling competence to other competing applicants or, upon entering the school, serving as a badge of honour. For the group of aspirants, their submissions for the Creative Task were rather diverse: one produced a video, another coded a game, while others submitted prototypes. Nevertheless, their experiences

converged in their description of the amount of time they had put into preparing for the Task, a demonstration of commitment to the process of getting into SX.

SX capitalises on the Creative Task as a means to begin the process of initiating interested candidates into the school, even before they are admitted. The school organises workshops where people intending to apply can gather at the campus for a brainstorming session that will, according to SX, help ‘kick-start’ their own creative process. Staff at SX also curate an online support group where applicants can solicit feedback from the SX network (alumni, existing participants) before submitting their application. The school uses its admissions procedure as a platform for competing recruits to meet and work together, thus inducting them into an environment of collaborative competition.

If applicants make it through the first stage of the Creative Task, they get a call-back for an SX event called Admissions Day. Over a full-day of assessments, applicants undergo a second-stage of admission activities such as personal interviews, group assignments where they have to collaborate with other applicants, and an individual task. According to SX staff, Admissions Day is not only an opportunity for the staff to get to know applicants, but also for applicants to ‘feel safe’ in their decision to join SX, if they get accepted. Candidates attend presentations from current students, hearing what to expect from the school and what is expected of them.

For the aspirants, the ambiguity of the selection process was nerve-wrecking yet enticing. They described how after experiencing Admissions Day, they wanted nothing more than to get into SX. A consequence of the perceived difficulty of ‘getting in’ is that the participants tended to justify to others the significance of the selection process. One of the aspirants, Leila, who already had a university degree when she applied to SX, related how she appreciated the application process because the candidate–school fit was not measured merely through grades or her CV. At our T1 interview, she described herself as shy during first encounters and that partaking in initiating rituals like the Creative Task and Admission Day allowed her to ‘prove something else’ that went beyond her shyness and introversion.

Honestly after that day, if [SX] said ‘no’, I would accept it... because they analysed me in a very different dimension. So, if it’s a ‘no’ — well, there’s a reason... It seems like a very fair selection.

Leila suggests that she would have viewed a rejection into the school as an outcome she would have accepted because of the mode of selection that was used. She repeated several times in our T1 interview that she found the recruitment into SX to be a very fair process, even though there was a level of ambiguity in the selection tools used. Due to the publicised nature of SX’s selection of potential students, the rituals of initiation cultivate aspirants as candidates through a process of collaborative competition, leading them to experience separation from those who did not secure a spot, and a sense of unity with those who did. Rather than viewing selection and socialisation as distinct from each other, selection into a school like SX could be seen as the start of vocational socialisation. Rites of selection into selective institutions permit us to see how the ‘performances’ of applicants are evaluated and thereby conferred legitimacy (Nylander 2014). The journey of winning a spot in selective schools invokes a transformation that

allows participants to recognise for themselves that they have been consecrated, separated from the others who did not make the cut (Bourdieu 1996).

Converting Rituals

Successful applicants begin their first weeks in autumn at an intensive orientation week. Participants are made to learn about the school's culture, colloquially known as 'The SX Way'. Participants from various programmes are brought together and entrenched in exercises and challenges that pertain to experienced-based learning, self-insight, active participation, and group dynamics. The intensity of this orientation week, according to the aspirants, pushed them out of their comfort zone as they were made to learn different types of group dynamics and understand non-violent communication. For example, as strangers, they were made to engage in intimate tasks like drawing portraits of each other, publicly sharing about turning points in their lives, and giving feedback to others they hardly knew. These activities were not about learning technical or specialist skills. Rather, as Erik notes in our T1 interview:

The first weeks we *didn't even do any work*. We just learnt 'The SX Way', which is this really sketchy thing. Feels like you're in a sect. You get to reflect upon yourself, learn to talk with your group members... you get this kind of work environment guidelines that you have to learn, which we will also be assessed on.

As demonstrated by the usage in the quote above, the words 'cult' or 'sect' were inserted rather casually in several interviews (with both the aspirants and alumni) to describe SX as a peculiar organisation. What these interviewees describe loosely as sectarian conversion, sociologists have called rigorous socialisation, a condition often observed in elite professional schools and one that is necessary for influencing members to adopt standards of the occupational group (Van Maanen and Barley 1984). Rigorous socialisation has also been found to be most powerful when the outcome is uncertain and the aspirant is embedded within a community that requires its members to adopt certain types of values (Van Maanen and Schein 1979).

In the same interview I had with Erik, his suspicious reference to the cultish ways of the school pivoted later on in the interview to a positive explanation of why they had to learn the SX Way. He defended that if participants did not learn the SX Way within the first two days, they would not be able to arrive at a shared platform as a cohort that would allow them to work together: 'we had these rules – this is how you should work. And everyone was more or less willing to do this, try everything out'. The conversion to and adoption of organisational standards demonstrate how rituals of getting in and fitting in can serve as potent facilitators in processes of socialisation.

What was noteworthy in the aspirants' experiences was that after partaking in these rituals on a regular basis, some of them took these practices into their own workplaces or transposed them for use in new ventures. Two of the younger aspirants, Annika and Kim, described in our T2 and T3 interviews how they took rituals they regularly performed at SX into their own workplaces to conduct 'retrospectives' or reflective sessions with colleagues. Maria, one of the older aspirants in this interview group who was part of a team that conducted development workshops for companies using 'tools'

learnt at SX, described at our T2 interview the euphoria she experienced from diffusing the ‘SX way’ of creative collaboration.

When we do these workshops, it’s kind of giving you a high. It really does. It feels like you’re really empowering people, and seeing them grow, and that it gives a really positive energy in the room... That is fun ‘cause you feel like you provide so much value for them and they appreciate it so much and that they really have learnt something that is useful for the future. That is a lot of positive energy.

In the wake of experiencing conversion to the SX Way, Maria and her peers set out to ‘converting’ others. In inviting others to partake in rituals she had herself participated in, Maria describes how she gets a ‘high’ from the ‘positive energy’ these workshops engender. This quote amplifies the emotional significance in partaking in these organisational rituals for aspirants, and is reminiscent of the effects of successful social interaction ritual chains (Collins 2004). As we will continue to explore below, these collectively-produced occasions create frames from which participants acquire a sense of belonging and incorporation into a community.

“Teaming” Rituals

SX is a very emotional place. We’re always creating a group, developing the group, terminating the group, giving feedback.

Daniel, in our T1 interview, noted this key attribute of his experience as a training participant at SX. With learning in SX structured around projects and every project constituting a new team, the participants experienced the seasonal nature of the group as well as the creation, development, and dissolution of team cultures (Fine 1979). Throughout their training programme, SX participants were rotated across teams to deal with business problems posed by different companies. Under a learning partnership programme, organisations are invited by SX to provide a challenge to participants in the form of a brief. Participants then worked on these challenges over four to eight weeks to produce and deliver a concept, strategy, or prototype to the client. SX pitches this as a unique opportunity for organisations to work with the ‘next generation’ of digital creatives. In return, the organisation has to contribute a ‘small sponsorship’, and according to the school, the donation will go directly back into running and enhancing training programmes.

Higher vocational education and training programmes in Sweden are formulated with the advice of steering committees, composed of employers and industry representatives. Members of the steering committee also contribute to the programme by giving lectures or offering work placements (a mandatory component of the programme) to the participants in their own companies. The chairperson of the steering committee of the Digi programme, Nora, described to me how the learning partnership programme was an effective tactic used by the school, as it ‘communicated’ to businesses that the participants that SX trained were ‘valuable... you don’t get them for free’. She asserted in our interview that if any of the ‘big companies’ wanted to get the participants to work

on a project for them, ‘then they pay for it’. These arrangements offer a degree of legitimacy to the learning activity and in the process, shapes and reinforces the teaming rituals the participants experience. Furthermore, legitimacy through collaborations with organisations external to the school is perhaps particularly important in the context of training for weak-form occupations, where work-tasks are newly defined and the emergent occupational group is grappling for visibility.

A consequence of working in teams on digital data strategising projects for ‘real clients’ was that it convinced the aspirants that they were amassing valuable vocational know-how. In several T2 and T3 interviews, the aspirants related how they saw SX graduates as being in ‘another league’ as compared to their contemporaries in universities or other occupational schools. Robert, in our T3 interview for example, described a colleague who was trained in another occupational school, but did not possess the same kind of confidence that he had learnt to muster at SX:

If I compare myself with the guy who was from [another Swedish vocational school] ... he likes to ask for things, “Can I do this, can I do this?” And I think what you learn at SX is to be a little bit cocky about these things: just kick in doors and then you ask for forgiveness and understanding. Actually, there’s not that much you can screw up in a big sense. It only involves ‘clicks’ — no one is going to die.

Working repeatedly on live projects in school, accumulating work experience through compulsory work placement and shorter school-based learning engendered a sense of certainty among the aspirants. These teaming rituals generate confidence which then lead to the aspirants announcing their ‘difference’ from others who are traversing similar pathways. The quote from Robert’s interview above illustrates a confidence he sought to exhibit in his role as a newcomer, working in an area of work where rules were constantly evolving and where he believed he had to display a level of ‘cockiness’ against the backdrop of unpredictability.

One teaming ritual the aspirants spoke frequently about in our interviews was that of ‘checking-in’ and ‘checking-out’. At the start and end of a school day or project team meeting, participants stand or sit in a circle and are invited to share one thing they check-in with: a feeling, a reflection from the previous day, or an attitude they are bringing into the session. An alumnus of the Digi programme told me that there were no limitations to what one could express when checking-in. If someone was hungover from partying too hard the day before and felt like it was valuable for teammates to know, that would be shared with the team and regarded as a form of accountability. They checked out in the same way, sharing, one by one, a feeling (e.g. ‘I did not appreciate the way you handled the conflict just now’), or something significant they take with them (e.g. ‘I was extremely challenged during ideation today’). The process of checking-in, as stipulated in the SX Toolbox, ‘emphasises presence, focus and group commitment’, while checking-out promotes ‘reflection and symbolic closure’. This teaming ritual appears to serve as a regulator of emotions for the aspirants and compels individual accountability to the collective.

Another regular ritual at Digi is team development sessions — a scheduled activity where participants are made to reflect on how their team is performing (or not) to meet with project requirements. These sessions typically occur in the middle of project

cycles and are led by SX facilitators. During a campus visit, one of the aspirants, Annika, had emerged crying from a two-hour team development session. She described the session as one where participants had to remind each other why they applied to SX in the first place. She exclaimed, 'It was so intense, like us being against each other for like the first hour and like disagreeing! But then in the last hour [of the session], everything changed. Now we're working so much better together'.

The aspirants often related to the team development sessions, emphasising its impact on their learning process. Take, for instance, this passage from Erik's T2 interview when he had just commenced his work placement:

Before SX, I always thought a malfunctioning group was a conflicting group with a lot of conflicts, which I learnt by now that it isn't. Because you need conflicts, and there will always be conflicts. And that doesn't mean you have a malfunctioning group? It's more that your group is progressing towards trust, and structure within the group, since you're starting to question each other.

Erik describes the teaming ritual, restating jargon from conventional team development ideas such as the cycle of fighting, progressing toward trust, and finding structure within the group. Although it was uncomfortable in the beginning for the participants to be repeatedly put in random teams and to work toward common goals, over time, the aspirants described how they learnt to 'trust the process'. Teaming becomes a ritual for them to rehearse cooperation, and the expression of cooperation becomes a situational performance through which conflicts between them are managed (Sennett 2012; Collins 2004). By being located in a team, they are viewed as incorporated into the organisation. That sense of belonging becomes necessary for them to build up a kind of 'vocational faith' as they progress in their education-to-work pathways.

Cracks in Rituals and Vocational Socialisation

Rigorous recruitment and selection procedures, coupled with strong organisational value systems, have been found to be associated with higher levels of member commitment (Caldwell et al. 1990). In the sections above, we see how through repeated interaction with one another in a vocational education setting framed by organisational rituals, the participants amassed emotional energy and confidence. The rituals which the participants experience over the course of training in this specialist school not only warms up their ambitions, they also draw them deeper into committing to and being confident about embarking on occupational pathways, even if these pathways lead to unclear labour market destinations.

How are these rituals important for the participants embarking on weak-form occupational pathways? Rituals can exert a conservative force of stimulating participation and screening out those who do not contribute; it becomes less easy for one member within a group to free-ride, consequently ensuring stronger teams and commitment (Iannaccone 1994). Converting and teaming also appears to be necessary for socialisation into occupations that are young and in nascent stage, where job tasks are evolving or where someone's position in the organisation is not clearly defined. The need for these individuals to be able to work with different types of teams and people is

accorded significance by the school precisely because the nature of their work is not fixed and is evolving. This characteristic of their occupational pathway was frequently restated by the aspirants, as shared by Annika at our T2 interview after she had completed her internship: ‘I think tools — especially in digital — they’re always going to change. But the things I’m learning through teamwork, they can’t be learnt somewhere else’.

When rituals of vocational socialisation are effective, the behaviour of participants can be ‘spontaneous’, in that their conduct becomes taken for granted and predictable (Berger and Luckmann 1991). In the context of this specialist training school, we see how rituals emerge as both a mechanism for normative control and additionally, as a way to facilitate the integration of opposing forces of order and chaos, individual and group (Bell 1992; Kunda 2009). As rituals strengthen the participants’ sense of social location and become a means for them to experience belonging and community, they also inculcate a sense of difference from others (Cohen 1985, 50). Partaking in rituals becomes fundamental to the way that participants are compelled to cope with what they are often warned by industry practitioners as the ‘chaos’ that will be inherent in highly volatile digital creative work environments.

But, what happens if, and when, rituals crack? As sociologists of education and work, we know from earlier research that socialisation can never be completely successful. As Berger and Luckmann (1991, 124) note, there will always be variations and differences in the way individuals ‘inhabit’ the new sectors they are being inducted into. Van Maanen (1978, 22–23) also proposed that there are two waves in organisational socialisation: the first formal phase, which stresses general skills and attitudes that participants should learn, while the second emphasises the application of rules to particular situations in order to perform their roles. When the gap between these two types of socialisation is large, there can be disillusionment (Van Maanen 1978).

Such tensions were revealed when the aspirants faced difficulties in reconciling their individual needs and desires with the goals of the collective. Robert epitomises this tension in our T1 interview:

I’m extremely test-oriented. And I get really frustrated with all the discussions, ideation and stuff like that. I guess it’s an important thing, but that’s my main frustration here... I really, really long to do something that does not involve a team. And as I said, like all these discussions [*laughs*] sometimes it’s driving me crazy. I try to be very diplomatic about it. I don’t want to start any arguments because I realise it’s a very important thing for some people to have that [working in teams].

Describing the frustration he experienced from having to constantly work in teams and engaging in organisational rituals, Robert tried to manage this grievance because the tenet of ‘team is everything’ is central to the school’s ethos. However, it was apparent that there was discontentment when going through the motion of playing the role that was expected of him. By the same token, other aspirants discussed the challenges they faced in partaking in organisational rituals. Some expressed a desire for less emphasis on team development sessions or the constant requirement to engage in symbolic, ritualistic activities, and a longing for more in-depth explorations on challenging topics and learning of technical skills instead. There was also a shared anxiety that stemmed

from the aspirants feeling like they had only ‘scratched the surface’ because their training programme was short and accelerated. The uncertainty about their lack of ‘technical expertise’ might be compounded due to the weak-form nature of the occupational area they were being trained for, the lack of ethical codes to guide occupational behaviour, coupled with the speed in which they were expected to be integrated into the labour market after graduation (Ye 2020). The opposition between individual motives in vocational training and collective expectations of being cooperative demonstrate that rituals are not always effective in fully ‘converting’ participants into the sectors they will inhabit.

Meanings of rituals are never fixed in that performing rituals can have different effects on different participants, based on their own interpretations (Turner 1969; Cohen 1985; Kunda 2009). While rigorous socialisation is compelling when outcomes are uncertain and these rituals act as a form of stabiliser in the aspirant’s traversal into weak-form occupations, these rituals, as we observed above, might not always be successful. The tensions that occur particularly between the individual and the collective signify that trust and confidence-building in education-to-work transitions are not straightforward processes, even if rituals can serve as a catalyst for igniting vital processes of vocational socialisation.

Concluding Remarks: Faith-Building in Weak-Form Occupational Pathways

This paper examined organisational rituals as a way to gain insights into how vocational socialisation can take place through higher vocational education and training. The analysis uncovers how rituals that initiate, convert and locate aspirants in a team are efficacious in bolstering their individual and collective confidence in navigating unclear destinations in the labour market. Earlier anthropological work has emphasised that it is in repeated, routinised practices like rituals that conviction of the soundness of one’s religious conceptions are generated (Geertz 1966). Here, within the context of a highly uncertain moment of education-to-work transitions, there is a resembling need for assurance and belief in their occupational futures that are experienced amongst the aspirants. Above and beyond *membership* or *commitment*, concepts often featured as important for vocational research, this paper proposes that the notion of vocational *faith* could be useful for examining school to work pathways that involve less tangible labour market outcomes, due to their nascency and instability. Faith in occupational pathway is different from commitment; the distinction is made because there are no strong rewards, career system, or consistent line of activity that these participants can be committed to (Becker 1960). The aspirants have to believe that the pathway they are on will lead to a positive labour market outcome for them if they are to muster the motivation to embark on education and training in the first place.

Furthermore, the idea of faith also signals that the belief and confidence in a particular education-to-work pathway is shared to some extent. Under conditions of uncertainty, as in the case of preparing for occupations that are emerging or are in weak-form, expectations of a career can be viewed as projections, not actual forecasts (Beckert 2016). While a weak-form occupational trajectory cannot be easily visualised,

the aspirants make decisions and take actions based on cultivating faith that there will be future gains. Partaking in organisational rituals become vital for aspirants in this vocational context of weak-form occupations as these processes manufacture predictability as well as generate assurance and belief in future work possibilities.

Schools that are vocational in nature have been conventionally assumed to be inferior to schools with academic and theoretical profiles (Billett 2014; Berner 2010). Accounts of 'strong schools' have concentrated on those that are regarded as elite, with long histories or successful graduate labour market outcomes. One would not generally expect to find a school within this segment of vocational training to have a strong school culture, where programmes are shorter and are said to suffer from 'short-termism' (Karlson and Ronquist 2016). As we have seen here, the role of the school, even if vocational in profile, goes beyond instruction by playing other functions. Initiation and conversion rituals of selection and induction, coupled with the intensity of everyday teaming rituals, serve as passageways for providing regularity at times of uncertainty, especially during the stage of vocational socialisation. When successful, these rituals engender confidence and produce strong collective sentiments amongst the participants, processes that are vital for building faith for embarking, traversing, and persisting in emerging occupations.

However, to assert that rituals work in isolation in producing the observed effects of faithful crossings into weak-form occupations would be simplistic. Transitions are boundary-crossing activities; the stage these participants are in, that of entering new roles and exiting previous roles, makes the situation fertile for influencing their role behaviour and propensity, or vulnerability, to conform to organisational rituals (Ashforth et al. 2000; Ashforth 2000; Evans 2019). In addition, the relatively advantageous labour market structure that the participants were embedded in at the time of research was beneficial to the participants as the faith that was built in the school could be sustained when they searched for and went into work. At a time where the Swedish economy was strong, the participants entered a labour market where their training qualifications and accompanying skill sets were seen to fulfil a desirable niche area. The strong economic situation enabled the creation of new occupational roles, stoked optimism about the availability of work and opportunities, and facilitated faith-building in these vocational pathways. This then leads to a related question, of whether faith building in weak-form occupations is only sustainable in a labour market with an abundance of opportunities, rather than when the economy is cooling off or in a recession. The usefulness of organisational rituals taking place in schools for providing participants with a sense of certainty and for establishing collective vocational identities in times of economic downturns and crises, might therefore be valuable to investigate in future research.

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to recast attention to examining the power of educational institutions in fashioning processes of vocational socialisation. While the popularisation of vocationalism in higher vocational education offers opportunities for researching and understanding how training participation and consequent labour market outcomes can vary by attributes of class, gender, age and ethnicity, this paper argues that it is similarly necessary to continue research that attends to school culture in vocational education settings. Examining how repeated organisational cultural forms like rituals can affect status-changing experiences of participants in vocational

education is pivotal for uncovering variation in training experiences and subsequent labour market outcomes that are produced in, and between, occupational schools.

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