

A Phenomenological Interpretive Analysis of the Experience of Becoming a Teacher: The Case of Lithuania

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Abstract: Theoretical literature reveals that there are various concepts of identity and professional identity, but it is evident that teachers with a stronger teacher identity are more successful in the education system and less likely to drop out of the system. It is also evident that the most intensive professional identity formation occurs during the years of study, which can be called the most intensive years of becoming a teacher. The Lithuanian education system faces various issues, such as the shortage of teaching staff and low teacher status in society, the non-attraction of the best candidates to the teaching profession, etc. Despite this, young people still choose to become teachers. This study explores the experiences of pre-service Lithuanian teachers. Seeing the process of becoming a teacher as the phenomenon of identity formation, it raised the following question: what is the experience of becoming a teacher during the years of study? An interpretative phenomenological analysis of 11 in-depth interviews of future teachers has been conducted. Three meta-themes emerged from the analysis. The article discloses one of the meta-themes of significant others by presenting future teachers' experiences through their voices and revealing the meaning they make. The results show that the multidimensional essence of teacher identity can be affected by those around you and disclose the unique recurrences of the Lithuanian future teachers' cohort experience in relation to the theory.

Keywords: professional teacher identity, initial teacher training

Introduction

Research on the development of teachers' professional identity during their studies is an important area of research in education and teacher professional development, as teachers' professional identities determine the quality of their work. It is during the years of study that teachers' professional identities are most intensively formed (Cuadra-Martínez et al, 2023; Beijaard, 2019).

Professional identity is central to becoming, being and staying a teacher (Danielewicz, 2001; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2010; Beijaard, Koopman, & Schellings, 2022; Backhouse, 2022). As aspiring educators begin their journey towards becoming teachers, they encounter theoretical studies, pedagogical practices, and sometimes initial work experiences that intertwine with their expanding knowledge, acquired attitudes, and personal narratives, laying the groundwork for their professional identities. All of this forms the basis for a lasting perception and projection of oneself as a teacher, one's attitude towards the teaching profession, one's teaching philosophy, one's work ethic, and ultimately, most importantly, one's pupils' achievement. Through the voices of future teachers, the phenomenological study reveals the complexity of the process of becoming a teacher, in which prospective teachers construct their professional identity by trying to understand who they are as teachers and who they would like to be or not to be.

Teachers' professional identity has been studied since the 1980s. Nias (1985), who is considered to be a pioneer in teacher professional identity research, argued that the personal and professional identities of primary school teachers are often interrelated, and that many primary school teachers are value-driven idealists or perfectionists, and are therefore more likely to be frustrated than pragmatic teachers, thus highlighting the link between individual personal qualities and job satisfaction and success in teaching. There is a tendency in the literature to see professional identity as an integral part of personal identity or as one of the multiple identities that we have. Postmodern approaches see identity as decentralized and in crisis, thus highlighting the bigger impact of contexts than self (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

Identity, professional identity and teacher professional identity theories and concepts are quite numerous. There is no single agreed definition of what identity is and no single view of how it is discovered or constructed. Much of the research on teachers' professional identity draws on these identity theories and concepts, which view teachers' professional identity as one occurring in relation to others, rather than at the individual level; and a dynamic, ever-changing or fluid, not self-existent but constructed and acquired. Research on teachers' professional identity often draws on studies by Gee (2001), Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop (2004), Akkerman & Meijer (2011), Beauchamp & Thomas (2010), Flores & Day (2006).

There is a growing body of research on teachers' professional identity around the world. Rushton et al (2023) provide a systematic theoretical review of research on teachers' professional identity between 2000 and 2021, which shows that teacher professional identity is increasingly becoming the subject of

research and that this research has increased even more rapidly since 2010. However, the same authors argue that there is a need for further research on teachers' professional identities, which covers the different domains of being a teacher, the points of contact between them, and the links to policy decisions and practice. For this reason, this study aims to investigate the professional identity of future teachers in the Lithuanian context; a context marked by ongoing reforms.

Method

Research question and the foundation of the methodology

This study sought to answer the question 'What is the lived experience of becoming a teacher?'. Since the problem question highlights a concern with the experience of becoming a teacher and the focus is on the personal experience and seeking meaning in this experience, the study adopts the method of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (hereafter abbreviated as IPA), which is considered to be one of the appropriate methods for this type of research question. Moreover, IPA very often touches upon issues of identity even when the object of study is not identity as such (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2021).

The aim is to construct a meaningful reality, which is understood as consciousness and not as an objectively existing thing that is independent of our thinking, in other words, it aims to shed light on the experience of becoming a teacher and its characteristic features as they appear in the minds of the research participants. The analysis seeks to describe the results in a way that makes them understandable to the reader as a meaningful named reality.

IPA seeks to analyze people's subjective experiences and to understand the meaning that individuals make of a phenomenon in a given context. Although it belongs to a type of phenomenological research, it has some distinctive features that distinguish it from other phenomenological approaches. IPA is not a philosophy (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021, p. 6), but it has been most influenced by three areas of cognitive philosophy - phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Peoples, 2020; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021). In essence, analysis is derived from hermeneutics and has been influenced by the key philosophical ideas of E. Husserl, M. Heidegger, J. P. Sartre and M. Merleau-Ponty. It is distinguished from other phenomenological approaches by its idiographic approach, which combines psychology and interpretation.

Participants and data collection

According to Smith & Nizza (2022, pp. 14-15), achieving a deep understanding of a phenomenon requires purposive sampling by selecting only those participants who can share insights about the phenomenon they are experiencing; achieving depth and insight requires an idiographic approach, whereby the experience of each participant is scrutinized in great depth and detail, and the aim of studying a particular experience requires the group of participants to be homogeneous, even though this homogeneity can be hard to define, as the definition of the group of participants can be dependent on the circumstances.

In this study, only students of full-time concurrent initial teacher training programmesⁱ were selected for in-depth interviews. The choice was made in the belief that studying in this type of programme is more intensive, students have more contact with teacher trainers, and focus more on their studies and learning to be a teacher than on other activities. In this type of programme, a subject or a specialisation is studied in parallel with pedagogical-psychological and didactic subjects, and students are exposed to pedagogical practice earlier.

It has been decided not to focus on social and special education training programmes because of the uniqueness of their field, but to focus on studies that prepare teachers for secondary, primary and early childhood education. The aim was to attract participants who finished high school less than 10 years ago and who haven't got any other higher education qualification. At the same time, it was important that the participants already had at least 1 semester of studying experience and no to very little experience in the field of education (not longer than 7 months) which shouldn't happen before choosing to be a teacher and long before entering the studies. Education is in crisis in many countries, but the study was limited to Lithuanian students because teacher education in Lithuania and other countries differs, and, in addition to the documents regulating teacher education, attitudes, for example, towards the profession and the role of the teacher in society, differ. The aim was to attract students from different Lithuanian higher education institutions, although IPA research does not claim to be representative, or applicable to a wider population. All participants happened to be women, but this was a coincidence, not an intention.

Eleven participants were recruited from universities and colleges¹ (from 5 different teacher training institutions in total) located in the biggest cities of Lithuania – Vilnius, Kaunas, Šiauliai, and Klaipėda.

¹ There are two types of higher education institutions in Lithuania – universities (are entitled to provide studies of ISCED levels 6, 7 and 8) and colleges (are entitled to

To better realize the bracketing and to allow the research participants to share their experience as openly and freely as possible, the selected participants were not known to the researchers and did not have any prior or anticipated future professional or personal relationships, and they have been provided with a minimum amount of information about the researcher who was conducting the interview (the doctoral student in the field of education), and with the suppression of any facts that may influence the research participants' openness.

The interview question and the supporting questions were formulated in such a way as not to reveal the perceptions, opinions, etc. of the participants about the phenomenon, but the experience and how the research participant makes sense of that experience. The interviews were conducted only once with each participant, in person or via MS Teams.

Ethics

The first principle that has been followed is respect for personal privacy. During the study, participants were free to share their experiences according to their willingness to reveal themselves to the researcher, no pressure was applied, and a respectful attitude was maintained.

The second principle is that of confidentiality and anonymity. The commitment is not to disclose in the study any facts about the research participant that could identify him or her and thus violate his or her right to privacy. The real names of the research participants have been replaced by pseudonyms, which are common Lithuanian names. The research participants have been informed of this. The participants were also informed that the information about them (name, email, telephone number and pseudonym in the study) would only be accessible to the researcher who conducted the interviews.

The third ethical principle of fairness was realized by ensuring that the participants entered the study voluntarily, were not embarrassed or exploited, and that an atmosphere was created in which the participant felt that she was equal to the researcher and that therefore none of the students was related to the researchers by any personal, academic, or other ties.

Data analysis principles

While there is no one right way to conduct an interpretative phenomenological analysis, and the specifics of the analysis may vary (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2021; Matulaitė, 2021; Peoples, 2021), the study

provide studies of ISCED levels 5, 6 and 7. Colleges can grant short-cycle, professional Bachelor's, and professional Master's degrees)

followed the general steps, principles, and strategies of the IPA process with each interview transcript (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, 2021), the hermeneutic nature of the process is presented in Figure 1.

After analyzing each case individually, a general meta-theme structure was developed in an attempt to reveal the authentic but similarly lived experience of the participants' professional identity formation and how they make sense of their experience. Once again, the super-themes and even emergent themes of each participant were revisited collectively by both researchers. The titles were changed several times during the process, and in the process of creating the overall structure of the entire group meta-themes.

Each participant's interview was revised numerous times, trying to understand how the meta-theme was developed in the text of that particular participant, and reflecting on how much of relevance the meta-themes are to the researchers and their experience. This was followed by a critical interaction with the literature.

Three meta-themes emerged from the analysis: the world of becoming a teacher, the significant others as helpers or interferes, and the image of the ideal teacher I want to become.

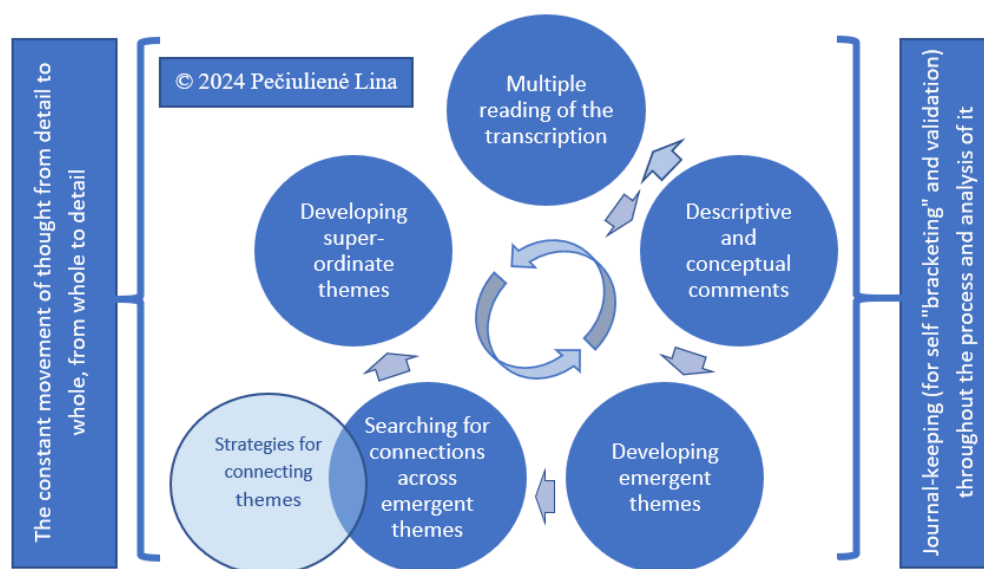


Figure 1: The process of a separate interview analysis in IPA

Analyzing the meta-themes of the whole group of participants and returning to the transcriptions, it was noticed that the narratives of the participants are very character-rich, which naturally led to the emergence of a separate meta-theme, as the significant others are painted in vivid pictures.

Recalling the Heideggerian notion of being-in-the-world, his *Dasein*, and trying to understand how the research participants are in their world, it is easy to see that these significant others, in relation to the research participants, affect their existence and their perception of themselves as future teachers. The influence of the social context, which is created primarily by others around us, and its impact on the teacher's identity is also discussed in the literature. The meta-theme of significant others appeared in each of the interviews, and was chosen to be revealed in this article.

Results

Looking again at the perceptions of all the participants in the study, and even at the super-ordinate themes that emerged in individual cases, two groups of significant others were distinguished – a group of those who *help* the process of becoming, who promote the perception of oneself as a future teacher, and the other group of those who *interfere* with the process in one way or another. The following is an analysis and interpretation of these groups of significant others, in search of commonalities of experience.

In the narratives of all the participants in the study, the most significant actors in the process of becoming a teacher are, first of all, **the children, and the students**. Being able to participate in a teaching internship during the formal studies process or get their first jobs related to a future profession (teacher assistant, babysitter, teacher) allows pre-service teachers to try teaching or engage in activities related to teaching themselves.

Even though some of the participants were very sure about their career choice before entering the studies, meeting children or students there, getting to know them in those contexts, and establishing a bond with them, many times is the turning point when participants claim they have got a clear sign or sort of confirmation about the teaching profession being the one for them. They also often claim to have realized that their “profession choice was correct”, that they are “on the right path” or that they are where they “have to be” for the first time:

I think it was trying to work in kindergarten in the summer that was the best decision. And... .. that feeling that this is my path and I want to keep going... Because those children... they are like that. I love that they are so straight and bright, they say everything that they think... And they're so full of that energy, that... Those eyes are so bright. They always seem to be happy, there's no worries, this one didn't work out, so they try somehow differently then. (Erika)

The extract above is also a good example of what images of children and pupils the participants draw. In addition, they often show what they like about their chosen profession and how it differs from other professions: “*I always knew that I didn't want a monotonous job where I was sitting in front of papers or something*”

(Jurga), “working with children is very different from working in an office or as a freelancer” (Greta).

The interview transcripts reveal research participants’ anxiety when they first encounter children or students in their new roles. Some of the participants claim success in making connections with children straight away, while others see some failures and room for improvement. However, in general children or students were positive towards the research participants and that experience worked as an encouraging factor to their professional identity formation:

It was the first few days where you're sitting there and don't even know what to do. And it's like the same kind of nervousness being around these kids, it seems like there are so many of them, and they look at you so curiously: who are you, where did you come from? And then [you have to prepare] those presentations and activities for them to do. That's when it started to work and I was able to connect with those kids. It was a great feeling then [laughs]. And then becoming a teacher was even more intense. (Emilija)

Most of the images of children or pupils are very positive, often highlighting their honesty, playfulness, curiosity, openness, friendliness, enthusiasm, and spontaneity. There are very few images of children who lack learning motivation, are presented as uncontrollable or causing distress because of something, most often it’s crying or having a tantrum. By drawing positive images of children or students, the participants often show what they value in life themselves, and what they like about their chosen profession.

Through their experiences with children or pupils, future teachers rethink their professional identity by getting to know their strengths and weaknesses as professionals, which encourages them to reflect on their existing professional competencies. Experience with children gives a lot of positive feelings and emotions but it can also highlight their various fears (e.g. not being able to take care of children properly, not being an authority figure, not being able to find a balance between strictness and friendliness, not having the competencies to work with children with special needs), how well prepared for the profession they feel and what is worrying them:

You can't always keep so many children in your sight. So, I'm kind of afraid of that responsibility, because during the practice, they say: ‘Can I leave you with the kids?’. For half a day or an hour or something like that. So, I'm still thinking: I'm okay with it, but when one to the left, the other to the right, then you look over there and you go to the next playground, and, you know, <...> they walk there in a line, you see one of them has stopped, and the other children have stayed behind the corner. So, with the, how to say, the smaller ones, it's... Well... a lot a lot a lot of responsibility [smiles]. (Rūta)

These stories of lived experience also show how the interactions with children make participants think of different things in their lives: from reflecting on their professional choice and discovering their professional vocation to other things (for example, Jurga realizes how hard work raising children is so she reflects on how grateful she is to her mother for raising her, and Greta reflects on her motherhood, perhaps even worrying about whether she will be able to have children or not, Erika and Vida start to think about going deeper into the education of children with special needs, etc.). The participants claim that the choice of becoming a teacher and the experience during the internship transformed their personalities:

Already, it seems that I have signed a lifetime contract to learn, grow and develop with children, to become better and better. So somehow things have changed a lot. Maybe the responsibility is even greater. Well, actually it has changed me as a person, even though it's only been seven months [of study]. (Jurga)

This extract also reveals the participants' attitude towards the profession – it is not just a trade, where you work certain hours and close the door at the end of the day, it is a way of being in the world, where you have chosen to be engaged with your pupils and be a lifelong learner yourself.

Being in the educational setting and having an opportunity to bond with children or pupils while trying your new role, is like entering another world, where other *laws of time* (because the day passes very quickly, because you can go back to your childhood, etc.), *energy* (you may be tired, but you will recharge your batteries after spending some time with children), *communication* (sometimes the children do not speak, sometimes they create their own words, etc.), *recognition* (you might be a first year student, but to them you will already be a teacher, a tutor, even when they meet you in the outside world, let's say a shop, and this is much more important than teachers educators' evaluations, etc.) and *the human relationships* (where love is boldly expressed, where you can hug, be your authentic self, and not be afraid to be wrong) apply.

That world beckons to the research participants with its unexpected kindness, playfulness, wonder, acceptance, closeness, and authenticity, and then you want to be a part of that world and nurture what is in that world yourself. The group of children and pupils is essential, the most important, supportive and reinforcing factor in the professional choice and the development of the professional identity of future teachers.

For the majority of the participants in the study, the parents of the children or pupils were also significant others, especially for the participants studying preschool pedagogy (an exception would be participant *Kristina*, who is studying the pedagogy of the subject and will be able to work with pupils of

different ages). The study participants were quite often worried about their preparedness and competencies to work with parents, who in their stories were often unreasonably abusive, pretentious, demanding, confrontational and even aggressive, while others were indifferent to their children, withdrawn, alcoholics and lacking social skills.

Sometimes their own first-hand experiences or the observed experiences of mentors, the stories they heard, were a source of fear and self-doubt as a teacher. Most of the parents reported by the participants in the study are much more disturbing than empowering figures in their choices. Will they be able to find a way to communicate cooperatively with parents when they start working as teachers, or will they be able to cope with the challenges described by their mentors, other teachers and colleagues? Will they be able to avoid their own unsuccessful experiences in the future?

It's actually very scary to come across parents like that, where, well, you want to help, but they don't accept your help, maybe so. Or well, they don't think it's that important. Also, [children] with disabilities too... When an educator notices something and when they have to tell the parents... well, it's very scary. And anyway, when they don't accept your opinion yet, and you can't change anything, and you see that there's something wrong with the child, and you want to help, but you don't have the right to do it. That's a very, very scary thing. (Jurga)

The parent's skepticism about young inexperienced pre-service teachers and even young in-service teachers, who do not have children is evident. **The tension between generations of teachers** is also evident. Many of the participants presented an infinite variety of positive and negative images of the teachers, mentors and potential employers they met in the past and within the study contexts. Some of those reinforced their choice to be a teacher, inspired, encouraged, strengthened, advised and trusted. Without knowing it, the facilitators themselves were role models of what a teacher should be, and sometimes also helped by giving a piece of direct advice and providing the internship placement. Meanwhile, other teachers were disturbing the participants, causing contradictory and negative feelings, such as anger, intimidation, sadness, etc. - they were the kind of teachers that the participants did not want to be emulating in any way. These were disturbers of choice and obstacles to becoming a teacher - acting as antagonistic figures.

I came in as a trainee and she literally called me naive, because I'm studying such a subject like pedagogy. And she says to me, this teacher: 'I discouraged my daughter-in-law from studying pedagogy because it is the worst job in the world'. 'So what are you doing here today?' - I had thought to myself then. (Vida)

Prospective teachers feel the inferiority of the profession, not only from the teachers themselves but also from the desperate desire of managers to fill the shortage of teachers, without any regard for the kind of person who comes into the job in either a professional or a pedagogical sense.

I'm very happy to be here and I'm not questioning my choice, but... m... I have had various experiences which show me that the situation is also quite bad because <...> in an ideal world, it seems that teachers should be people who have a lot in themselves, and often you see a situation where it is such a shortage that really anyone could be admitted to that position just for the sake of having somebody to look after the children and to be there for them. (Rasa)

In the background of the stories, some teachers' fatigue, dissatisfaction with low pay, lack of enthusiasm, inability or unwillingness to work inclusively, strained relationships within the teams, with the parents of the pupils, the desire to distance oneself from the children, dissatisfaction with the children and the parents, and a disrespectful and even aggressive attitude to the children are all present in the accounts (two stories mention cases of possible violence against children, with even the involvement of the law enforcement authorities).

Most of the participants mention the law of inclusive education coming into force. Despite external preparations (sensory rooms, etc.) the study participants' accounts suggest systemic incompetence: children with special educational needs are provided with assistants who do not understand anything about the peculiarities of working with those children, or no professionals who have the competence to work with such children. Very often those children or students are left on their own, just spending time or learning something on their own away from others, often seen as a troublesome nuisance. Teachers' reluctance to work with such children, fear, and lack of knowledge about what to do is evident. This is stressful for the participants and, although they do not have confidence in their skills, they are very annoyed with the current situation and the attitudes of some educators. Sometimes they try to do their best during the internship for those children or they feel willing to learn more about addressing special needs in the future. Prospective teachers, when confronted with the older generation of teachers, often feel the inconsistencies of educational paradigms: sometimes they cannot even explain their disapproval of what they see in practice due to a lack of competencies, but they have a kind of an intuitive feeling that what they observe does not correspond to their internal attitudes towards the teaching profession. They are concerned about the distance of the teacher from the children, the top-down approach towards the child, or the expectations for children to be excessively submissive. The teachers of the older generation are more concerned about order and following their instructions rather than about the spontaneity and initiative of the child. These experiences are disturbing and perhaps depressing for future teachers, which is perhaps why their stories often include the motive

of seeing themselves as qualitatively different teachers, the “next generation” that will “change everything”, create a different future, and come into education.

I think that it is us the young people who will start the upheaval in kindergartens, especially in state kindergartens, because you can feel that especially those teacher assistants keep mentioning that...’ Well, I’m going to have to tidy up so much, - and so on, - ‘What a mess it’s going to be there, and I’m the one who’s responsible for hygiene, and I’m going to be punished afterwards if they can find a grain of rice or something in there’. (Greta)

This extract also discloses the authoritarian organization culture of some internship places and the mood of resistance or ethical dilemmas in future teachers, which is evident in some of the interviews. Mentors emerge as particularly significant for the development of professional identity. Sometimes the mentor may call you naive about your career choice and label teaching as the worst profession in the world as it is evident in the previously given extract from Vida’s interview, and even not let you into the classroom anymore because of how much the pupils liked the lesson you have conducted.

In other cases, it is the mentor's encouragement and support that helps you to believe in yourself as a future teacher because he or she confirms to you that “you will be one” (Jurga’s case), and you feel much more confident. A mentor can also overlook you and you will feel “invisible” like a “ghost” (Emilija’s case) and only the children will rescue you in that situation by showing that you are really present.

Sometimes the mentor can involve you in the process in such a way that the children will see you as a teacher even when you are not yet ready to be one yourself (Diana), and give you so many opportunities to do things, that you will work countless hours to get the best result with an enthusiasm (Asta, Emilija).

Some of the participants present the images of their childhood teachers, who may act as role models for the participants or are still involved in the process of becoming a teacher (when the knowledge is shared, when opportunities for internship under their supervision are provided, when the participants' predilection for pedagogy is noticed, etc.), but they may also be antagonistic figures and by remembering those the participants project themselves as opposites to them.

Because I remember when I was in primary school, I went with a sore tummy and nausea because somehow there was just no connection between all of us. And I was very scared to go to school in general. (Jurga)

It is worth mentioning that the education system as seen from the perspective of the participants' accounts is under a lot of pressure due to the quality of it, the shortage of teachers, prestige of the profession. The interactions with significant others might be encouraging but also disturbing for prospective teachers, and they wonder, more or less silently, whether the bright side - their special bond with children, the pupils themselves - will be enough of a counterbalance to motivate them and make them still want to and be able to stay in the profession.

The immediate environment - family members, friends, classmates - is another group of significant others that both reinforce and disrupt identity development. This group is most active at the moment of choice when they support or oppose the participants' choice to be teachers, but their influence is evident in various stages of becoming a teacher. Some of the participants in the study were confronted with the public discourse represented in the attitude of people close to them towards the teaching profession as 'no good' etc., but other participants were supported to follow their heart into teaching by their close environment, even though their initial reaction to the choice was rarely positive.

Sometimes there was a change of attitudes towards the teaching profession in the participants' environment when attempts to discourage this professional choice shifted into reconciliation and acceptance with the participant's choice, recognition of the participant's abilities and inclinations, of her professional choice, and even, finally, support and encouragement to enroll into the pedagogical studies or carry on studying.

Discussion and Conclusion

The theories generated by Erikson and Mead respectively are often employed in identity and professional identity research. Burke (2009) states that Erikson's idea of identity is more related to self-concept, but Penuel & Wertsch (1995) claim that interpretation of it depends on the researcher's choice. It can be seen as the one which also makes considerable reference to human development as a socio-cultural process, and discusses the historical, cultural, and institutional contexts in which identity is shaped.

According to Burke (2009) in Mead's theory, the self exists in the social environment, and is created through interaction and communication with others. The mind is important in connecting the self to the social environment, it allows the individual to reflexively perceive the self as an object, to distinguish it from the environment and to coordinate his/her actions accordingly in order to achieve the goals of the self. Looking through the perspective of those theories, teacher's professional identity emerges and changes through interactions with others in professional contexts.

The choice of the research participants to talk about various others who are significant to them in becoming teachers is logical then, even though the interview question and how it was conducted didn't imply that. The meaning that the research participants make of their lived experiences of becoming a teacher by interacting with significant others helps us to understand their experience of their professional identity formation which is neither straightforward nor very consistent.

From the perspective of the authors mentioned above, the group that should be important to prospective teachers is the community of teachers, with which prospective teachers theoretically aspire to identify. Indeed, as the analysis shows that teachers are a group that often figures in the narratives of prospective teachers, but the community of teachers representing this group is very diverse, and not all of the teachers that the research participants met in educational institutions or that emerged in their childhood memories are those they would be willing to be identified with, nor would the research participants accept all of their opinions about themselves as part of their self-image. For example, Vida, who is considered a loser by her mentor, cannot accept her mentor's view of either the teaching profession or herself.

The literature also shows that pre-service teachers are not always welcomed in educational institutions, and that appropriate mentoring is crucial for the formation of professional identity and the success of the entry of pre-service teachers into education (Curry, Webb, & Latham, 2016; Trent, 2011; Crosswell, & Beutel, 2017; Gallchóir, O'Flaherty, & Hinchion, 2018; Kaelin, 2013). Through effective communication, support, advice, and feedback, mentors can help to overcome the difficulties that occur at the beginning of teaching and increase the confidence of future teachers, thus positively influencing their identity development (Izadinia, 2015, 2016).

While some mentors were indeed significant for the participants in the study in terms of strengthening their identity, not only Vida, but also the other participants in this study encountered mentors who had the opposite effect on their identity. Other teachers and educational staff were also significant in the narratives: memories of them or encounters with them caused a confusion of feelings, ranging from a sense of being where you are supposed to be to a sense of being lost or even disillusioned with oneself as a prospective teacher, with demoralising behaviour, unfavourable attitudes towards the student or the teaching profession.

Sometimes, the choice of teaching as a profession is motivated by good school experiences, and prospective teachers imagine themselves as teachers based on images of teachers they have met (Trent, 2011, Mifsud, 2018). However, not all images of teachers met in childhood are positive. Sometimes, the goal of becoming a teacher is to be qualitatively different from those you met along the way as a student (ibid).

Both positive and negative images of teachers encountered in childhood are present in the accounts of the participants in this study, but whether teachers were the main reason for their choice of profession is questionable, as each participant's career choice stories are unique. Based on the experiences of the participants, it can be claimed that several interrelated factors motivated them to choose a profession, but that the role of the teacher was not decisive in any of the stories, but it cannot be excluded that the positive experiences of the teachers met may have had a positive influence on the final decision.

According to social identity theory, a professional identity would be more collective than personal, as the perception of 'myself' as a teacher stems from my self-identification with a particular group, which 'I' perceive as teachers. According to Tajfel's theory (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979), social identity is formed through certain processes: the first is cognitive and involves the categorisation of individuals into groups (social categorization) and the assignment of oneself to a group or groups as personally valuable (social identification). The second is motivational, i.e., the desire to distinguish one's group from other groups, or else to maintain a positive feeling of in-group distinctiveness.

In this study, the participants' disapproval of some elements of the education system is quite pronounced, as well as the negative portrayal of some of the teachers working in the system, and the question arises as to why seeing such antagonistic figures of teachers and mentors does not make the prospective teachers lose their professional identity and their motivation for pursuing the profession they have chosen.

According to Amiot and Jaspal (2014), identification with a new group takes time and passes through certain stages, because sometimes the groups one belongs to have a contradictory status in society, and it is difficult to integrate belonging to that group into one's self, and the overall structure of identity. Trent (2011) also found that the prevailing view of pre-service teachers is dichotomous, with pre-service teachers projecting themselves as modern and seeing those in the system as traditional, suggesting that this view may unjustifiably increase tensions between teachers who are new to the education system and those who are already in it.

While many of the participants in this study experience similar attitudinal conflicts, as they often find it difficult to accept the image of the teacher that is created by some rather antagonistic teacher figures, it could not be argued that all teachers in the education system are viewed in the same way and that the dominant attitude is negative, as a significant number of the teachers present in the system, even if they are remembered from their childhoods, are seen as examples of the good teacher that the participants aspire to be.

Pelini (2017) discusses preservice teachers' attitudes towards the social representation of teachers in different studies, and summarizes that attitudes can be threefold: the teacher can be seen as a victim (passive, not empowered to act, not valued, doing work for little reward, taking over even parental responsibilities), as the one to blame (often represented through negative stories in the media, where the teacher is portrayed as under-educated, mistreating students, violent, delinquent, drunken, and so on.) and as a saviour (who replaces parents for children, taking care of them, their future and the future of society as a whole, and is, therefore, an important person in society). She points out that these perceived representations strongly influence students who choose to study pedagogy, and that the third one is much rarer than the first two, and argues that teacher education programmes need to pay attention to how those who choose to study see the teaching profession and to take this into account when designing the study programme.

The attitudes of pedagogy students towards teaching highlighted by Pelini (2017) can be found in this study, as teachers are sometimes portrayed as victims (overworked, underestimated, helpless in front of parents, left alone with the child's challenges), as guilty of something (violence, cases of poor education of children), but it seems that teachers, especially the "good" ones, are mostly perceived by the participants of this study as the saviours of the society, the saviours of the future, and it is this perceived role of the teacher that is the most important for the participants of this study (e.g. , "when we make the little ones good persons, I think our world will be better" Greta). Perhaps it is because this role of the teacher as saviour is perceived as the most important one, that the successful bonding of the research participants with their children and pupils becomes a counterbalance in the face of antagonistic teacher figures or distant mentors. Perception of a teacher as savior helps to see a professional group in positive light, and it is with this group that the participants in the study want to identify themselves.

Participants of the study talked a lot about children and pupils and drew attention to their behaviour and traits. In Curry, Webb, & Latham's (2016) study on the experiences of beginning teachers, the participants also focused on the topic of pupils and were concerned about pupils' needs, behavioural problems, cultural values at odds with those of education, and the home-education divide. The researchers missed the representation of positive aspects of pupils and their lives and suggest that teachers may not be able to provide effective education in the face of negative attitudes towards pupils' cultures. In contrast, in this study, prospective teachers portrayed children and pupils in exactly the opposite way, mostly positively, but as in Curry, Webb, & Latham's (2016) study, the participants were concerned about the well-being of some of the children whose needs were not being met, both in the family and possibly in the institution. Perhaps this difference is due to the fact that US society is much more diverse and the cultural differences between children, students and

teachers themselves are so great that they can even be shocking to novice teachers lacking intercultural competence. The participants in this study did not experience huge cultural differences. However, the social problems of society (alcoholism in the child's environment, neglect, lack of concern for the child's welfare and needs) are evident in their stories.

Relationships with parents also influence the identity development of future teachers. Lundqvist, Rinne, & Yildirim's (2024) study conducted in Denmark and Sweden, countries that already have a legal framework for parental involvement in education, with significant parental decision-making power in educational institutions, found that teachers experience difficulties in their relationships with parents. Such relationships disturb their self-perception as teachers and can affect teachers' still emerging and rather vulnerable professional identity when confronted with parents who tend to see teachers from the perspective of the client, as service providers, rather than as educational experts.

In the narratives of the participants of this study, parents figure as an important group of others, because during the practice they either encounter parents themselves or see their mentors or other teachers' relationships with their parents not always being easy. They are aware that working with parents is an inevitable part of being a teacher, and that this work can involve a wide range of situations which can be very unpleasant - when you have to inform parents about their child's needs and difficulties, and sometimes even protect the child from their own family, and when the child is neglected, not cared for, etc. Parents in the study are also highly critical of the teacher because of age, experience and even whether the future teacher has children of her own. On the one hand, they understand the parents' desire to do the best for their children, but on the other hand, they also feel the parents' disrespect, and unwillingness to communicate and cooperate, they hear unjustified criticism of teachers and they can see how this makes teachers who are already in the profession feel. Therefore, the participants in the study doubt their competencies to cooperate with parents, understand the importance of these competencies and expect to master them with experience. The claim that working with parents is more difficult than working with children often comes up in the participants' stories, it is the area where teachers experience the most negative emotions and difficult situations, and it is often the dark side of being a teacher. Nevertheless, not all experiences with the families are negative, because in some of the stories a trusting, constructive relationship is being built between parents and future teachers (Erika, Rūta, Giedrė, Emilija).

To conclude, this paper foregrounds the notion of teacher self-identity as a dynamic process that is forming as would-be teachers experience multiple encounters in their formative years. There is ample evidence that such

encounters do affect self-perception. Many move on despite the difficulties, others become more determined, some opt out.

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ⁱ In Lithuania the Teacher's Qualification can be obtained in ITE programs that can follow either concurrent or adjacent model, in concurrent ITE programs pedagogy is integrated into the teacher training study program. On completion of the program, a graduate is awarded with Bachelor's or Professional Bachelor's degree and a Teacher's Qualification (More information about it available here: <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/lithuania/initial-education-teachers-working-early-childhood-and-school>)