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**TEACHER'S IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH  
REFLECTION**

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**Abstract**

The aim of a person's professional development is a gradual awareness of one's own personality, professional and life activity and its planning and perfection, readiness to analyse oneself and find a personally significant meaning in a particular professional activity that defines and forms a person's professional identity. In today's world, the key to successful professional activity is a strong development of self-identity. As reflection makes human actions more meaningful, raises awareness and suggests changes in attitudes, behaviours, actions in individual and professional contexts throughout life, the aim of this study is to reveal how Latvian teachers, working in different educational institutions and with several years of pedagogical experience, understand the essence of teacher's professional identity by analysing their past, present and future teaching practices. The teaching experience of research participants – 80 Master's students of Liepaja University, study programme General Education Teacher, are summarized applying a thematic analysis method, which allows to determine the factors influencing one's own identity, sources of experience, weaknesses, ways for overcoming the obstacles, and specificity of the teacher's identity. The research questions deal with teachers' self-reflection, self-perception as educators, and professional activities that shape their professional identity. The research results describe teachers' reflections on their pedagogical activities, revealing several professional identity perfection dimensions, such as social responsibility, attitude change, search for alternative solutions, assessment of progress, and others.

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## 1. Introduction

Reflection is a key to learning and also to formation of one's identity. It is a strategic instrument that leads to understanding the professional I-concept, allows using different reflection frameworks allowing analyzing one's own pedagogical activity, giving opportunity to work independently (Avraamidou, 2014; Brooks, 2016; Davey, 2013; Mikelšone & Odina, 2016).

Globalization of education and personal experiences contribute to modernization of the teacher's profession, mobility, new values and methods and effects of commercialization and privatization (Arber et al., 2014; Luk-Fong, 2013; Ospina, & Medina, 2020). The changing policies demand adjustment to the new vision, accountability, management and effectiveness (Edwards & Edwards, 2017). Meanwhile, the teachers can either have faith and hope in the reforms proposed, or oppose them – undoubtedly it will affect the learning outcomes as well as reflection and professional identity; moreover, at the same time teachers as agents of innovations should be loyal to the schools, children and authorities (Bower & Parsons, 2016; Buchanan, 2015). Every generation of teachers re-introduces the following questions: what kind of teacher am I; how can I be a 'good' teacher; what is the teacher's scope of responsibility; how can I assess the quality of education. These questions are directly linked to reflection (Bukor, 2015). As Dewey (2012) has stated: "We do not learn from experience – we learn from the reflection on experience" (p. 35).

The teacher's professional identity and status have to be defined by the teachers themselves. It is usually difficult to measure the long-term impact of any teaching. Davey (2013) suggests that the identity of a teachers' educator is even more complex, and the self-understanding of identity is rooted in reflections, which are, indeed, very common when it comes to the goals and dispositions of teacher's profession. The historical, economic and political context of a particular country must always be taken into the account (Bates et al., 2011). When developing the individual approach to professional identity, it is important to respect also its wider context. It can take place through listening to oneself, writing and re-storying, but imaging and revisioning is also possible.

Hanna et al. (2019) have developed an overview of quantitative identity measurement methods and have summarized them under six domains, such as self-image, motivation, commitment, self-efficacy, task perception, and job satisfaction. In another study, the same authors (Hanna et al., 2020) consider the teacher's identity as a second-order construct (deconstructed into motivation, self-image, self-efficacy, and task perception), and they use through learning, teaching, practicing and autobiographical reports, interviews and observations quantitative and qualitative approaches allowing a factorial design experiment. Although diverse identity theories use different terminology, they usually support solid and strong, emotional and enthusiastic teachers, and speak about role anticipation, occupational values, and feelings of intrinsic satisfaction (Hanna et al., 2020). Another important instrument for exploring teacher's professional identity is a narrative analysis, which enables understanding of the teacher's unique multifaceted personality, never applying the existing solutions in the same way, but inventing new ones every day; narrating helps self-positioning and understanding of the ongoing events (Sultman & Brown, 2019; Taylor, 2017).

Discourses, longitudinal and life-history studies are instrumental for strengthening teacher's identity. The personal narratives of teachers, revealed during the teaching, learning, autobiographical reports, interviews and observations reveal the essence and specifics of professional identity, which are essential for teacher's profession. Also, metaphors are recognized as efficient tools for developing teacher's professional identity (Erickson & Pinnegar, 2017; Mikelsons & Odina, 2016).

Teachers' interactions are often filled with tensions, and they become aware of the necessity to look at themselves through a critical lens and rebuild their identity while evolving as human beings (Jenlink, 2014). Unfortunately, many early career teachers drop out, and this is often related, among other factors, to their personal identity, which must be supported, reinforced and acknowledged (Johnson et al., 2015; McIntyre & Hobson, 2016). Becoming a teacher and continuing to keep up with self-development is a never-ending activity (Olsen, 2016).

The issues of teacher's identity formation and reflection in the context of Latvia are explored by Silova et al. (2010); there are studies dedicated to formation of Latvian music and language teachers' identity (Fernández & Manuel, 2010; Ivanova & Skara-Mincāne, 2016). As Mikelsons et al. (2014) suggests, the self-awareness in teacher's profession is growing, although the society does not always support the teachers.

## **2. Problem Statement**

In the times of change the teaching requires new vision. Changes in education system create changes for teachers' professional activity, as well as identity. The role of teachers has changed; therefore teachers must constantly work on their self-development. Often teachers professionalize and commercialize their work in order to survive these changes, but reflection remains crucial for developing this new professional identity. In other words, changes in education bring on changes in teacher's work and professional identity, and this can take place through reflection.

## **3. Research Questions**

The research questions deal with teachers' self-perception as educators, self-reflection, and professional activities that shape their professional identity. The research questions are:

- What are the main concerns of teachers in Latvia?
- What experience influences teacher's professional identity?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this study is to gather and present the ongoing processes related to the Latvian teachers' understanding of the development of their professional identity through self-reflection. The obtained results help to understand the teacher's identity within its development.

## 5. Research Methods

The data for this phenomenological research study was gathered from analyzing focus group discussions and participants' essays employing content analysis method. The participants of this qualitative study are 80 Liepaja University Master's level students, practicing teachers, mostly women (3 men), aged from 23 to 65, working in different parts of Latvia – in big cities, small towns and villages, teaching the regular curriculum, afterschool activities, and different disciplines from pre-primary to higher education levels including life-long education sector. In the process they participated in pair and group discussions, performed video-analysis of their own work and work of others, discussed the content of books, articles and episodes of films. Then they presented short sketches on themes borrowed from everyday events of teaching practice. Later, they wrote essays about their professional career and reflected upon their understanding of teacher's identity. While perfecting their own professional knowledge, teachers had to retrospectively reflect upon the gains and losses, as well as compare their experience on various stages of professional development working in diverse fields and in various circumstances. They also demonstrated the assessment methods they use in everyday teaching encounters and engaged in the role-plays.

The answers are coded and grouped around the key themes, generalizing ideas and supporting the selected points through the excerpts from the essays. The data will be summarized in following sections: Self-perception of what it means to be a good teacher, Self-perception of teacher's professional identity, Sources of experience for development of teacher's professional identity, The factors hindering the development of teacher's professional identity, The impact of the school environment on teacher's professional identity, and finally some practical remarks related to teacher's professional identity, employing teacher's professional identity components described by Rivilla and Mata (2009). The obtained results help to understand the teacher's identity within its development.

## 6. Findings

According to Rivilla and Mata (2009), the teacher's professional identity is formed by 1) knowledge about profession, 2) professional knowledge of how to be a teacher, which includes attitude, morals, professional values; 3) involvement in pedagogic activity, and 4) practice - to know how to act professionally. The results help to understand the teacher's identity within its development. The research data shows that teachers mostly link their understanding about professional identity with professional knowledge of how to be a teacher or examples of good practice. They rarely talk about their own involvement in pedagogical activities, although it can be sensed when they describe their satisfaction with work and their ideals. When characterizing oneself as a teacher, the respondents tend to describe more the real self – how I perceive myself, and less the reflective self - how I am perceived by others, and the ideal self – how I want to be in the future (Horney, 2013). From 80 respondents, 50 were focusing on the real self.

Further we will illustrate the findings with ideas and quotes from focus discussions and essays written by the respondents reflecting of teacher's professional identity.

### **6.1. Self-perception of what it means to be a good teacher**

For children a teacher is the important Other who differs from their family members but collaborates with them as well as with colleagues. According to the respondents, it is not fair if the child considers the teacher as his/her second mother (or father). The teacher must be tough and nice at the same time, should have authority, and the children should listen to him/her and obey. Pupils feel who loves them and who enjoys being with them. They recognize the value of justice and equality of treatment.

Everybody, and especially teachers, must learn new things all the time because everything around is changing so fast. Teachers can learn from their pupils and pupils' parents, from colleagues, courses, books, films, etc. When discussing a problem, they learn from a spectrum of opinions and become richer and more flexible than before. Teachers should be ready to detect the specificity of every child's learning process, to encourage and motivate him/her to overcome the obstacles. Therefore, one should never say that he/she knows how to teach or how to solve a difficult issue, but to continue acquiring new knowledge about the essence of human development.

Questions make pupils think. Photographs taken by the teacher are more interesting than those downloaded from the Internet. Personal views and stories stimulate more than texts from the textbooks. Whenever it is possible, the connection to literature, drama, and improvisation should be established. When children attend school with joy and willingness to learn, it is a success.

Good teaching is comprehensive, systematic, based on humane principles and sustainable development, broad and versatile, without borders, specific, focused on meaningful understanding of the material, which is pragmatically applicable in the future. Self-confidence hatches when a professional is confident in the teaching material, and thus he/she earns respect from the students. The best educators have a charisma, they are confident, they do not need to "buy" attention from the class, they do not concede to provocations, and they work with all pupils.

"As a teacher I do not just want to be a person who helps others (children, teenagers and adults) to obtain some new knowledge, I want to give to my disciples professional skills and to prepare them for their future, to promote their self-development, both physically and mentally, as well as to teach self-evident life skills. I want to be an example for my students helping to find the right way in everything – polite manners, behavior in society. I want them to be interested in education, improve their knowledge, and promote their self-growth and to help them to achieve their goals reaching them as fast as possible. I want to be like a friend to my students, so they feel free to come to me and tell me what is suppressing them, or explain things they don't understand. Therefore, it is important that children communicate with their peers and adults, not just be with themselves."

The outer image of the teacher must be calm, self-confident, polite, and emotionally intelligent, but the communication style should be firm, peaceful and friendly. "The strongest teachers were those who put their pupils 'in place' but manage to do that gently and without threats." Teachers should keep the record of everything they do in class and be accountable for their actions because children are watching, judging, copying, imitating, generalizing, or rejecting the world around them.

In participants view, a teacher is not just a profession; teacher is a supportive friend, a trustful and attentive person. Students must realize that they are learning for themselves and for their own future, and the teachers should be aware of the pace in which they demonstrate this road. Moreover, teachers must show how the goals can be achieved and how the knowledge is acquired, so that pupils can organize these processes themselves. Visualization and self-employment are important part of bootstrapping.

## **6.2. Self-perception of teacher's professional identity**

The data analysis shows that often teachers link their self-perception with their memories from the time they were pupils at school. About their past teachers speak with emotions, but often generalizing and not providing particular substantiations and facts. It can be explained with unwillingness to talk about themselves, but others, for example, by saying that “dutiful pupils gained more from school than the rebels who constantly expressed their opinion”.

Several respondents admitted that not all of their educators have been good, but with some they had positive relations. The need for communication in the pedagogical process is acknowledged also for development of self-identity. Respondents stress that the chance to talk and discuss, not only to acquire knowledge, was appreciated. They liked teachers who were interested in their students and who gave positive feedback. Good teachers adjusted their assessment criteria to the interests and abilities of students; they changed along with the new generation and new instruction tools, striving to attain quality, to respect children, to promote their well-being in the society and to love their job. Their inner motivation stimulated the growth of their students, leading to the achievement.

Teachers must be tolerant towards innovations. The participants point out that every teacher has many roles, and a novice educator must try to build simultaneously multiple connections, acquire ways of self-regulation and control over the events. There are no ready-made formulas; open-mindedness, adaptability, endurance, and readiness to try out innovations help a person to evolve as a teacher. Textbooks are not enough; the university gives only guidelines, yet, teachers continue to learn, otherwise they risk becoming boring and using outdated methods. Teachers' curiosity never ends, as well as their desire to show the joy of discovery to other people.

“I think I am fortunate that the teaching process has gone smoothly. It is probably due to being a dad myself and being an assistant coach for some time. Since I was not associated with the school at the beginning of my teaching career ..., it was other teachers who encouraged me to move forward. My family and friends, who often said - I need to become a teacher, also provided a valuable support and encouragement. Of course, before starting my teaching, I studied in-depth various sources and watched different videos about conducting classes in schools. Prior education also played an important role, providing me with the theoretical insights into social interaction, communication, work groups and more.”

Teachers should meticulously observe pupils during all their activities, discovering new ideas, understanding what is going on and comparing already established views to the reality. Teachers need a sense of humor, but also they need to understand the peculiarities of the developmental stage – thus the

teachers must be careful when choosing and telling jokes. They give to their audience at least as much as they had once received themselves. “If the teacher has lost his/her pedagogical conviction, he/she has to walk away from this work. No child will benefit from a teacher who does not understand what his/her own job motivation is”.

### **6.3. Sources of experience for development of teacher’s professional identity**

The very first childhood encounters relationships in the family, educational institutions and in the playground may reveal the type of personality. Childhood experiences are often transferred to one’s career, as well as role-plays to the profession. Many children like to play ‘schools’, they try out teacher-pupil roles, developing empathy, cooperation skills – skills needed for the teachers. Later, the childhood experiences gain a new quality. Very often, the best students start their pedagogical careers already during their studies: when they succeed in learning, they are involved into teaching as assistants to the main teacher. Moreover, students explain to each other how to solve problems and discuss various subjects. The teachers who treat their pupils with respect continue to be the role models for their former pupils.

It is important that different pedagogic methods and approaches are utilized to avoid uniformity. Despite of old or new teaching methods applied, the teacher’s personality, his/her manners and the language that he/she uses is more important. Another methodological question remains: which teaching is more effective – the one that tries to teach everything to everyone and prepare the pupils for the final examinations or the one that steers up curiosity and fun? The participants mostly endorsed the second approach but could suggest only a couple of cases when it really was implemented.

It is a privilege to be born in a teacher’s family. When growing up, interesting dialogues take place at home. Discussions with one’s own parents, sharing of knowledge, observations of their behavior and explanations they give become an important investment. It is useful to watch educational videos, workshops, blogs and webinars on certain topics. When some tips and hints are needed for solving complex situations, one can start chatting to those who are in the same field to get the clues, ideas and instructions, most of which can be implemented immediately.

Teachers’ own children make them to understand what the teaching means, especially if one has a child whose health is not perfect. A lot can be learnt from the colleagues when they exchange memories of all the *faux pas* that they have had as novice teachers. It helps to take the videos of lessons and watch them alone or in a group analyzing what was successful and what need improvement. Some books, movies and Internet resources may open new horizons.

### **6.4. The factors hindering the development of teacher’s professional identity**

According to the respondents, many good initiatives stumble upon limited time, absence of wisdom, deficient willpower. A poor skilled teacher is not able to make decisions, has no compassion, cannot admit errors or refuses to explain them. Such teacher has no ability to notice every pupil’s individual capacities and to engage with pupils in in-depth conversations. The teacher must work with the pupils towards their growth, protecting and nourishing their abilities and their minds.

It shows lack of professional mastery, which manifests itself in lack of methodical knowledge (Rivilla & Mata, 2009). A weak teacher is inconsistent and incoherent, he/she promises and forgets, gives too much of useless homework, punishes and praises without explanation, shouts when children do not listen to, and is simply too lazy to search for new information or to do something outside of his/her obligations. The absence of pedagogical skills manifests itself in handling serious cases, showing helplessness in front of the class. Thus, the obstacles for professional teaching are the lack of academic knowledge and poor understanding of organizational culture.

The learning communities can be oriented towards gossiping and not self-development. It is tricky to work in a small town where people know each other and keep gossiping about everyone. Additional challenge is to work at a school where one of your parents is a teacher and all others know everything about your family; or to work in a school where you studied yourself. The difference between the levels and quality of education that the teachers received before in the same educational establishment can also cause mutual disagreements.

“I think it is important to work on the motivation of pupils, the development of self-motivation, because motivated pupils feel the need for quality education. I am aware that there are many gaps in our education system, and pupils must learn things that later will not be applicable. Neither the assessment system is friendly to them. I've had a lot of tough moments in my life. My hard life experience as a child allows me to understand other children. In the past, my way of thinking was similar to many others. It was easier to see the bad things around than to weigh the situation and act. For self-improvement, I try to attend different courses in which I learn to understand the pupils. I have improved my own way of thinking because I believe that the change in education starts with the teacher. I also read unconventional literature that expands my thinking. In order to be a good educator, one does not need to read purely pedagogical literature. There is also a need to read what children are reading today, because it helps to understand the pupils, as well as address the inner child in yourself”.

#### **6.5. Impact of the school environment on teacher's professional identity**

Educational establishment is a place for innovations. Besides, the school must feel like a confident and comfortable space where a common life takes place for the children and teachers. Even if we know some stories about the others, we should every person as individuals. When a class functions like a team and the school is like a second home, the synergy of many souls achieves the best results.

The classroom environment influences the degree of involvement and successful learning. It is much easier for a subject teacher to have his/her own classroom arranged in a way that the children may learn from the environment. A clean, bright, good, informative, joyful atmosphere helps promoting the progress. Too much decorations, games, posters restrict freedom. Structured purposeful teaching aims to lighten the burden of everyday planning; with the help of reflection it is possible to organize the process, to set the rules, to develop the content, to decorate the everyday routine, to liven up the imagination, and to relieve the load of work.



## 6.6. Some practical remarks related to teacher's professional identity

All parties involved in the pedagogical process must be aware of their rights, obligations, and responsibilities. All parts in the teaching process must contribute to the development of a suitable, confident, and engaging atmosphere. An effective teacher-student interaction is built upon a constructive dialogue. Teachers must look through the students' eyes in order to solve the problems and find answers. Some teachers are guides, and some are leaders, but all of them must stand for justice and morality and not give up. The initiative of the teacher takes diverse forms (e.g., events) corresponding to different aims. Teachers should seek for interaction with a wider society, cooperate with diverse stakeholders, and not be afraid to get feedback whenever they can.

Novice educators spend a lot of time preparing each lesson hoping that later, when the process becomes familiar and materials are ready, everything will run effortlessly. Flexibility must be squarely equipped. The teacher must constantly follow what happens in the world, in other countries and cultures, as it is beneficial when organizing debates, quizzes, games. "The educator develops his/her personality through nonbinding activities like music, sport, travel, visits of cultural events and, of course, reading, and teacher must be prepared for everything".

The appropriate body language is important, the feelings must be handled, and emerging problems discussed. The speech of some teachers is too monotonous. Many have problems with their voice and must take care of it; they must also learn how to alternate it. Educational process can also be emotionally draining and therefore requests control over the feelings. Educators must switch from the classroom teaching to their life at home remembering that those who live with them are not their students.

Teachers are people who want to improve the society, who try to be the best they can be: "I love my work; I love the pupils I work with and I hope we can do better together in our surrounding world. The result will come slowly, but it will be worth it!"

"A teacher should not only be a *life coach*, who serves the people by doing his/her job. A teacher should be an example to his/her students, a person in whose footsteps the students would gladly walk". Improvisation allows the teacher not to stick to the prepared plan but to adjust it anew to the current setting. Still, "it seems that the longer you work at school, the less you know how to do the job". A self-assessment should be supplemented by valid proofs and evidence. Satisfaction comes when the job is also the hobby.

The teachers who follow a different paradigm struggle to change their point of view.

## 7. Conclusion

According to the respondents, communication awakens the thought, thus, it is important that teachers understand the students and *vice versa*. Respondents often idealize the teacher and believe that this ideal can be reached – although randomly, not always and not by everybody. They realize that all the time the students want something new, ambitious, fascinating and exciting, something that would bring joy and significance into the subject teaching. The research participants are against the dullness. This can be viewed as exaggerated statement, because the pupils must also learn to cope with boring things, they

must acquire the ability to find activities for themselves and must learn to see some beneficial and practical sides also in the dull situations they encounter.

The teachers learn from their colleagues, students, encounters, and other sources; this is immanent to the profession, although not easy to grasp. Paradoxically, they tend to be conservative but at the same time emphasize the innovative methods; and they do not trust the textbooks too much. A positive, inspiring attitude helps to overcome the difficulties; it stimulates the “ability to smile, joke, and search for opportunities and not for excuses”.

Applying self-reflection, teachers can better understand themselves, develop their pedagogical identity and their teaching methods. The reactions of students help to analyze what was a failure and what can be a success. Many who suffered from their teachers in their childhood can now comprehend their students better.

All participants highlighted the ability of the teachers to have authority and to maintain the discipline. At the same time, they supported the idea of making everybody feel special and of practicing democracy. Not surprisingly, the pupils like active, attractive, interesting and creative lessons the most. Nowadays, the teachers are especially exposed to the criticism and therefore must be brave enough to face the frustrations. It does not mean that the teachers must reject all the comments but that they are obliged to integrate their advanced experience into curriculum.

Teachers confess that they like children, and pedagogy for them is more satisfying than commerce. It seems that all of them want to be great and passionate teachers – teachers in a unique manner; nobody wants just to fulfill the standards. The relationships between students, parents and educators must be developed on the grounds of reciprocal empathy, recognition of rights, fair play, and awareness of emotional impact. The educators must abandon some of their persisting stereotypes and superstitions and evolve into self-confident persons; they are on the way to competence-based approach, ready to accept challenges and invest in the development of the reformed system. The teachers must reflect upon their own skills and find out what their strengths and weaknesses are, and the pupils should do the same. The teachers help their students to develop their own identity, understand the beauty of learning, and to acquire knowledge, competences, and values. Everyone has several teachers behind, and the best reward is when the students make progress and are grateful.

For reflection to be fruitful, it is important to change the way of thinking and attitude. First of all, it is important to understand and accept the reflection as a value, to develop ability to observe, describe and analyse events and activities, search for alternatives. Reflection allows seeing clearer one’s own achievements and growth as well as growth of the students. Reflection and search for teacher’s professional identity go hand in hand.

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