

STUDY II

A narrative examination of early childhood teachers' shared identities in teamwork

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Abstract

This study examines the two kindergarten teachers' shared professional identities in teamwork in an effort to clarify what constitutes their shared identities and how these identities affect the teachers' professional practices and beliefs. The relational nature of identity maintains that individuals are not the only constructors of their identity, and the literature on teacher education emphasizes the importance of identity in teacher development. The in-depth analysis of the two kindergarten teachers' narrative interviews revealed how the educators constructed their professional identities by intertwining the features of their context, feedback, and teaching. The findings indicate that the shared professional identities of the two early childhood teachers are developed and negotiated through four shared features: commitment, feedback, educational tasks, and professional agency. Together these four shared features shape the teachers' professional roles and pedagogical practices – either by giving support to professional growth and empowerment or by having a decreasing effect on the teachers' professional identity and agency in early childhood contexts.

Key words: shared teacher identity, professional development, agency, teacher narrative.

Introduction

The professional identity of teachers has been an important focus of research in the past decade, especially as it is related to such factors as collaboration, quality of teaching, and teachers' professional preparation (e.g., Hong, 2010; Recchia, Lee, & Shin, 2015; Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011). At the same time, policy shifts have increased early childhood teachers' performance expectations, regulation, and accountability pressures (e.g., Osgood, 2006, 2009). Educators often perceive these changes as complex, stressful and unsupportive of their professional autonomy and day-to-day practice (Bullough, Hall-Kenyon, & Marshall, 2014; Fenech, Robertson, Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2007). Osgood (2006) argues that early childhood teacher identity has been reshaped

under this era of standardization and tightened control. Teachers tend to endure their daily work with guilt, stress and experiences of incompetence due to growing emotional and academic needs, placed on them by colleagues and bureaucracy (Madrid & Dunn-Kenney, 2010, p. 399).

Furthermore, teachers are often surprised by the challenges in collegial collaboration with adults, that is, colleagues and parents (Recchia & Beck, 2014; Souto-Manning, Cahnmann-Taylor, Dice, & Wooten, 2008). Efforts to improve ECE “should not only emphasize what teachers do but also who they are and how they are affected by the doing” (Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, MacKay, & Marshall, 2014). If we want teachers to develop in their practices, “we need to equip them with confidence to instigate a re-examination of even the most entrenched practices”(Oertwig, Holland, Crawford, Ritchie, & Clark 2016, pp. 131). As Urban and Swadener (2016) note, early childhood teachers professional development mostly takes place in relationships between individuals, based on shared knowledge(s), practices and values. Thus, early childhood teachers’ professional identities matter in their relationships (e.g., McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 231), to understand ‘the other’ (Reay, 2010, p.277). As teacher educators’ aim is to help teachers to become producers of knowledge for their professional development (Stremmel, Burns, Nganga, & Bertolini, 2015, p. 158) there is a need to know more in detail how shared professional identities influence educational practices. In order to connect more distinctively the aims of this study and the theoretical preunderstanding of the used teacher identity literature, the research questions of this study are explicated next.

Research questions

This study aims to clarify how the two ECE teachers work on their shared identities influence their professional beliefs and practices. In particular, the study focuses on two issues:

- 1) What constitutes the two early childhood teachers’ shared professional identities?
- 2) How do the shared identities of these two teachers affect their professional practices and beliefs?

Sociocultural view on shared teacher identity in early childhood education

Becoming a teacher requires the construction of professional knowledge and practice, but it also calls for the development of a professional identity (McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2007). The concept of “professional identity” is understood generally as an impression of one’s self as a professional agent based on one’s life history and developed during one’s whole life (Beijaard, Meijer, & Veloo, 2004). Sociocultural theory views that individuals create their identities together with interested others (e.g., Reicher, Spears, & Haslam, 2010). The theory holds that through active engagement and “negotiating the meanings of experiences of membership in social communities” (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001, p. 5) people change their identities, and create “new ways of being” (Wenger 1998, p. 145).

The need to identify with a group and to develop a sense of identity are both important elements of becoming an effective educator (Flores & Day, 2006). Through a professional socialization process, a teacher internalizes behavioral norms and standards to form a sense of professional identity and commitment to a profession (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). Failure in this process may diminish a teacher’s effectiveness and cause limited capabilities to enacting the role (Ibarra, 1999). The issue is to what extent the aspects of identity formed elsewhere are expressible and negotiable within the new context (Fenton-O’Creevy, Dimitriadis, & Scobie, 2015). An important element in the negotiation process is the *act of positioning*, referring to the parts or roles given or taken in the discursive construction of profession issues (van Langenhoven & Harré, 2003, p.17; see also Holland et al., 2001, p. 127-128). Osgood (2006) and Ryan and Grieshaber (2005) state that ECE identity is formed through discourse, where teachers share multiple identities in their social contexts. Various discourses such as *professionalism* (e.g., Osgood, 2009), *quality* (e.g., Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013; Fenech, 2011), and *managerial* and *democratic professionalism* (e.g., Sachs, 2010) shape teacher identity by giving multiple interpretations of what it means to be a “good” ECE teacher (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005; Moss, 2006). Generally, early

childhood educators need to become reflexive, develop “professional selves” (Osgood, 2006), and evolve beyond the technicist approach (Naughton, 2016), that is, teaching preservice teachers “tricks of the trade”, teaching is more than technique and best practices (Stremmel et al., 2015).

In ECE, shared professional identity is associated with many issues: a sense of common experiences, understandings and expertise, and shared ways of perceiving problems and possible solutions (Larsson, 1977; Wenger, 1998; see also Tanggaard 2007, p. 459). Through diverse knowledge bases and (practical) controversies educators reach answers to the vital professional questions, such as what it means to be a child, and what it means to upbringing children. The way educators respond to them, individually and collectively, shape their educational practices, and the institutions they are working (Urban & Swadener, 2016, p. 8). Hence, identity is produced and reproduced through manifold professional socialization (Evetts, 2003) during which educators learn in dynamic interaction within their contexts (Bandura, 1986) and feedback facilitates educators to become more self-aware of their competence and performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). The dialogical nature of feedback is integral to learning and teaching, and understanding feedback as a process rather than product enables teachers to view and analyze feedback according to socio-constructionist principles (Price, Handley, O’Donovan, Rust, & Millar, 2013, pp. 43–44). The process of negotiating, making comments, and interjecting counter revisions employs critical reflection as a core activity in teachers’ learning process (Recchia & Beck, 2014). In this study, we emphasize feedback to signify both knowledge and dialogue focused on teacher’s actions and their thought processes (e.g., Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Methods

The study focused on early childhood teachers organizing and communicating their experiences with and through narratives (Bruner, 1991; Bullough, 2014, 2015). The perspective emphasizes the interpretative power of researcher to closely and carefully consider the ways in which teachers socially define and position themselves within their contexts (Bullough, 2008).

The Finnish context and participants

In Finland, formal schooling begins from the year in which the child turns 7 and enters Grade 1. Preschool as preprimary education is free of charge, four hours per day/700 hours per school year. This is for 6-year-olds, organized in day care centers (kindergartens) or schools as a statutory duty by municipalities. Child's provider(s) are obligated to attend child's participation in preprimary education. Preschoolers have also the right to attend so called "supplementary day care" in day care centers or in family care. A national ECEC curriculum outlines expectations for children from birth to 7 years old. A national core curriculum for pre-primary education establishes guidelines specifically for 6-year-olds. Both curricula broadly describe principles and activities however, leave more detailed planning and implementation to local curricula and teachers, allowing educators to take into account their contexts (Korkeamäki & Dreher, 2012). The planning is child centered, and the broad purpose of teaching and practices is to support both a child's positive self-image and opinion of one's self as a learner. In early childhood and preprimary education children have the right to learn by playing and enjoying one's learning. Assessment of learning is ongoing and holistic; there is no standardized testing.

The Finnish model of ECEC is described as "educare" due to the basic elements of care, education and teaching taking place mainly within the framework of the public day care system. The goal of ECEC is to support the comprehensive development and learning of children and working together with parents. For the first time in Finnish ECEC Curriculum the role and expertise of kindergarten teacher is defined as being the bearer of overall responsibility of planning, evaluation and outcomes of the goals and practices, as well as development of the practices in one's team and broader community (National Curriculum Guideline for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2016, pp. 14, 17). In day care centers, all staff must have at least a secondary-level education (nursery nurses in the field of social welfare and health care), and one-third of the staff must obtain a tertiary education-level degree (i.e., Bachelor of Education, Master of Education or Bachelor of

Social Sciences). Members of staff with different educational backgrounds work with the entire age range (children from birth to 6 or 7 years). In Finland in the mid-1990s, the Bachelor and Master of Education degrees for kindergarten teacher qualifications were launched. Additionally a Bachelor of Social Sciences degree, a broad degree of social pedagogy/social work qualification, at the polytechnic level was also accepted for working as a kindergarten teacher. So there is a “difference in the quality of working orientation and skills between kindergarten-trained teachers and the other occupational groups” (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, Neuman, 2010, p. 135). All Finnish universities offer kindergarten teacher education, share the idea of the teacher as researcher, and also highlight the ability of teachers to become aware of the basic principles and values guiding their actions, as well as evaluating and developing one’s work (Onnismaa, Tahkokallio, & Kalliala, 2015, p. 200).

Two qualified kindergarten teachers, *Anna* and *Maija* (pseudonyms), participated voluntarily, both working in separate day care centers. Maija has 2 years of college-level teacher education, while Anna has a 3-year university education with a stronger emphasis on early childhood education (Karila, Kinos, Niiranen & Virtanen, 2005, p. 137). These two teachers were chosen because their long working experiences offering rich professional knowledge. Anna is in her late 40s, with more than 20 years of teaching experience. Her team normally consists of two more colleagues (a kindergarten teacher and a trained nurse) who share the caretaking of 20 to 22 6-year-old children in a suburban preschool. Maija is in her late 50s, with a working experience of nearly 40 years. She works in a day care center, alternating her working position as a preschool teacher (6-year-old children) and as a kindergarten teacher (children from ages birth to 3 or 3 to 5). This alternating in Maija’s day care center takes place every 2 or 3 years as a part of the day care’s teaching “cycle,” providing teachers opportunities to work with both children under 5 years and with preschoolers when they are 6 -years old. Maija’s team normally consists of two colleagues (a kindergarten teacher and a trained nurse), but when working in the small group (14 children age 3–5) as a kindergarten teacher, she has one trained nurse colleague.

Data collection and analysis

Both participants were interviewed twice for approximately 3 hours in total. Before the interviews, the teachers were asked to reflect on their professional careers. The interviews were semi-structured and guided by open-ended questions that allowed free responses. The interviews were videotaped and transcribed, and the teachers were provided with a copy of the interview transcripts. The analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995) started by multiple readings, working with a single interview at a time. The narrative interviews were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013). The data was first analyzed using descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009) by the main author. After descriptive coding, both authors negotiated the codes and further developed the analysis toward conceptualization and categorization. The themes were gathered in a data-driven way: identification of patterns in categories generated conceptual themes (e.g., “commitment” consisted of devotion to children, valuing the profession, and educational goals) (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At this point, the authors compared data across teachers and found similarities and differences in themed entities. We were also aware that the subjectivity of our backgrounds and insights as an early year professional and teacher educator were possible biases (Maxwell, 2013). However, the awareness and knowledge of the subject also had a positive impact by adding rich data through in-depth interviews and questions probing the phenomena. At the end of the analysis, “telling the story”, we used exemplifications by showing the type of data that related to a particular themed concept. The interviews were conducted in Finnish. The translations for the quotations were made by authors. The resulting teachers’ narrated storylines (Bullough, 2015) were interpreted by both researchers and validated together with the participant teachers as “member checking” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

The findings are presented in two phases. First the teachers' condensed career paths, interpreted from all of the interview data, provide an overview of the two teachers' transitions and experiences during their careers.

Anna's career path: While working in her first occupation as a practical nurse, Anna felt inconsistency between her professional values (e.g., having time for genuine dialogue and encountering) and hectic practice. These values did not turn out to be feasible as a practical nurse, so Anna decided to change her occupation, a decision affected by the notion that she has a good connection with children. These were the reasons she decided to study to be a kindergarten teacher. During her professional career, Anna has experienced four different day care communities and leaders, as well as various teams. In the first day care center, the atmosphere between colleagues was good, and Anna felt accepted to participate. After maternity leave, she had a temporary post in another day care center, where she worked as a substitute teacher on different teams. This experience felt strange because she was working as a responsible and trained teacher without her "own" team and group of children. Because she did not have a teacher's normal responsibilities and autonomy to answer for and take charge of a teaching and planning continuum, Anna felt that she belonged nowhere. After 6 months, she accepted a permanent teaching position in that same day care center, where she eventually worked 9 years. Those years were her "university of life," during which she learned, after many years of hard experiences and struggle, finally to stand up for important professional values. After this professional empowerment, she left to go to another day care center where she felt freedom to teach as an autonomous teacher, with a sense of professional respect. The leader's respectful management, trust and positivism provided positive feedback to Anna and to the community, as stated: *"To have a good feedback helps us to develop in our work, and this way you also learn to love your work more."* (Anna)

The child-group was challenging, but the commitment of the working team enhanced her professional development by being willing to search out new knowledge, by having innovative dialogue, and by being reflexive. She talked about hard work but also about job -satisfaction, motivation, and belongingness as a participating professional agent. Anna is now working as a preschool teacher on a team with two colleagues. According to Anna years of professional experience have not lessened her will to learn and develop as a teacher focusing on children and their diverse needs.

Maija's career path: Before kindergarten teacher studies, Maija had worked for 1 year as an apprentice in a day care center. Her first position as an in-service teacher was a 1-year temporary post in a day care center, where she was often astonished by the embedded cultural teaching methods and implicit routines. When trying to do differently, she felt excluded. Maija underlined that children were in the realm of her professional focus, and these values and her way of being present and responsive with children segregated her from the staff. Maija stated: *"The children were amazing, but I thought about some of my colleagues, that they were not quite on 'the lie of the land'. They did not took teaching as one should...seriously... I felt myself as an outsider."*

As a novice and stand in teacher, she did not stand up to colleagues but wondered about their entrenched ways and felt isolated. After this stand-in post, Maija accepted a position in another day care center where she could share the values of teaching. *"There was such a director, who had been working twenty years, still enthusiastic. I looked her as a role model of a good teacher...putting her heart in to the teaching."* That period was a time of professional development as an older and experienced assistant facilitated her making practical decisions (e.g., scheduling), and she was "never walked over, letting me succeed." The turning point came when she returned to teaching from maternity leave to a new day care center to face routine methods of practice, although eventually she challenged the prevailing practices. The collegial dialogue empowered the teachers to open up and renew their educational practices. Since her return, she has been working in that

same day care center, except for 1 year when she worked as a preschool teacher in another institution. This period was a struggle as she felt that her professional knowledge and skills were looked down on, she was shut out of the team's informal dealings, and formal communication was strained to minimum. She tried to assimilate into the team's old methods, causing both disequilibrium between internal and external values and doubts about her own professional skills as a skillful agent. After return to the old community, she regained her professional balance and self-confidence by reflecting these experiences with colleagues.

Next, the following section presents the teachers' four shared identity themes. In order to derive an in-depth understanding of these features, the themes were constructed as storylines that emphasized Anna and Maija's beliefs, experiences, and circumstances. In each storyline, the quotations of teachers are included in the text and in the tables. At the end of each storyline, a summary of the themes is presented in the context of the relevant literature on teacher education. *Shared commitment*

Anna considered that professional conduct and values were fundamental to her own work and in the work that she shared with her colleagues. For Anna, professional conduct meant interacting ethically with colleagues, parents, and children. She also reflected on the struggle she experienced in her first long-term position and how the leader of the day care center affected her and her team's shared work: *Giving information only to particular people, having little respect towards nurses.... [One] learns to defend one's own principles and one's colleagues.*" In the "university of life" years mentioned previously, she learned, after many hard experiences (including lack of support and trust by the leader) to finally stand up for professionally important values, children's rights, and her colleagues. Anna was passionate in her stance: *"Those years have taught me that I will say what I think."*

Anna stressed the importance of social skills during respectful encounters, as well as the need to be present, receptive, and connected both emotionally and mentally. She held teaching children in high esteem, and felt dedication to the children and families. She highlighted aspects such as noticing, being present, being emotionally available, playing, and caring as important components of her professional ideal of shared working standards. Anna viewed the positive change in her work as due to the improved collegial joint working and shared commitment to professional values and ideals. Professional noticing, shared values, and reflection motivated Anna and her colleagues to experiment with, improve, and change their teaching practices, thereby supporting their professional development. She also contemplated the need to enhance positive, shared perspectives on and dispositions to new, though necessary, changes in practices.

Maija perceived her commitment to the profession and her professional values as a matter of being able to respect both her own working practice and that of the community. Her former experiences as a young novice unbalanced her professional commitment as she adjusted to the embedded ways of the community. She stated, "*I thought that I can't teach children that way... [because it was] against my professional training.*" Over time, as she matured, Maija's intrinsic professional commitment nearly ended her career when facing the inconsistency between her own [internal] and the community's professional values and practices. The imbalance she experienced between her internal epistemological beliefs and external professional values and commitment was a powerful factor that caused her to face a role conflict and doubt her own professionalism. However, a change occurred through professional reinforcement and shared reflection with her colleagues. Together they were gradually able to reexamine their educational values, which led to changes in professional practices. In Maija's case, she committed her professional development to promoting these professional values both in her teaching and within the community. Maija emphasized her professional commitment, underlining the shared goals that were established and achieved in dialog with her colleagues in the community.

In summary, the commitment of both Anna and Maija to shared professional goals appeared to be multidimensional. They stated their commitment to the profession, the organization, and the children's well-being and learning. Their values, styles (i.e., self-conception as a teacher) and beliefs concerned devotion to the children, engagement in communal work, and pedagogical approaches. Table 1 presents an overview of the two teachers' shared identity themes on commitment.

Table 1

Shared Commitment Affecting the Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

SHARED COMMITMENT	<i>Anna</i>		<i>Maija</i>	
	IDENTITY FEATURES	EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE	IDENTITY FEATURES	EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE
Professional values	<i>Working for the best interest of children and families: "We have a professional responsibility to pay attention to the way we confront children, colleagues, and parents. We have to intervene and discuss things thoroughly, however challenging it might be."</i>	Commitment to children	<i>Emphasis on working community: "I have always thought, that I am working as teacher for the sake of the children. And, if we work to achieve a good day for a child, then we have to do things according to [this goal]."</i>	Commitment to community
Professional styles	<i>Warm, caring and thoughtful interactions: "When I come [enter] to my workplace I start feeling like a teacher... as caring and being present.... I personally prefer that we [team] genuinely listen to the children, not just pretend."</i>		<i>Dialogical support between colleagues: "We talked about these things... what kind of day care center we would like to have for our children... [T]hey should be allowed to play a lot... [T]his is what we want for other children also. It started here."</i>	
Pedagogical approaches	<i>Sensitive to children's initiatives: "During the years of working, I have learned to change routines: things that don't include [enhanced practices] can be cut off. But you have to be able to give pedagogical reasons for change."</i>		<i>Supporting the development of children: "I thought I can't go on being a kindergarten teacher, I can't make children stand in line... and everyday [a] different focus on teaching [structured by adult] interrupts children's initiative play. That [means] everyone has to do what the teachers have planned."</i>	

The teachers' commitment was an indicator of their attachment to and identification (see Firestone & Pennell, 1993) with the profession, which involved the strong willingness to stay in the ECE field (Han, Yin & Wang, 2016) and to engage in collaborative, reflective, and critical practice (Malm, 2009). Their contextually bound experiences led the teachers to address their commitment from slightly different perspectives in order to examine the community's role in it. Anna emphasized occupational and ethical consideration for others because of her experience with professional

conflict and struggle. Maija expressed her behaviors and commitment as involving her colleagues and community, highlighting her shared organizational commitment (see e.g., Bogler & Somech, 2004). As Norris-Watts and Levy (2004) stated, employees seem more likely to become affectively committed to the organization if their feedback environment is supportive. After facing a professional role conflict, Maija was forced to play two or more roles simultaneously which did not fit well together (Scott, 2015). She regained her role and values through shared commitment, which both provided her with support in achieving the professional goals of her collegial community and ensured her continuing professional development. These transitions and struggles showed that the contextual social influence and shared reflection had a positive effect on the teachers' daily practices and commitment (see Thomason & La Paro, 2013).

Shared professional tasks

Anna reported that her practice and professional values were mutually dependent, that is, she taught according to her professional ideals (i.e., child-centered, caring, and assertive) and learning goals. Her teaching skills were acknowledged by the team, and she was given "the most challenging children," which refers to compiling their personalized learning plans. Because her colleagues recognized and trusted her, Anna's self-confidence and self-esteem as a skillful and competent teacher increased. She emphasized the close relationship with the children, as well as the mutual trust and educational responsibility shared among her colleagues. She wanted to do "right" and adhere to her professional values as well as the values of her colleagues. Anna considered that teachers were the main carriers of educational responsibility and learning outcomes. The clarity of professional tasks was a vital factor in Anna's well-being and working in teams. However, her narration was ambiguous and expressed conflict about the number and nature of the tasks shared by colleagues. She felt pressured and obligated to share "basic routine tasks" with others. When describing her professional tasks, she addressed the teachers' various, informal, and professional responsibilities: "*We do, for example, the discussions with parents... personal- and group-learning*

evaluations, and date the personal learning plans.... [I]t is systematic work that we do, depending on and following the season.” Regarding the importance of being autonomous, agentic teacher, focused on professional duties she stated that: “You should do all this in your workplace, and if you are too nice, then you say, ‘I’ll have still time to write’, and then there is December, and those learning plans are still not written.” Nevertheless, Anna considered balancing her professional tasks demanding, although she stated that through experience, she had learned to know her limits a little better than before.

Maija matured from an uncertain novice to a self-confident professional. Her professional confidence was nurtured by both successful teaching experiences and beneficial interactions with her colleagues. The children’s development and learning outcomes were crucial in promoting her self-esteem, motivation, and job satisfaction: “To win the child’s confidence, it is a pure joy to me. [It’s] like detective work to find the thing ... what it is with this child that brings us together, with what we can feel the connection.” Her self-efficacy was also comprised by external and contextual feedback and experiences. When they were negative, they caused feelings of vulnerability, self-doubt, low efficacy, and low job satisfaction: “One did notice how the orientation of pedagogy, teaching and tasks varied between teachers.... I did a lot of soul-searching.” This became evident in the year she changed day care centers when she worked against her own values and tried to adapt herself, “like a puzzle piece of various shapes”, to the new, unfitting context. Before this change, she had considered herself a skillful teacher who was capable of collaborating: “I had always thought that I got along with everyone.... If somebody didn’t, it didn’t matter; I will... I don’t know why, eventually we could not even speak to each other.” The feedback she received reduced her trust in herself as a skillful educator who was capable of autonomous action. After she returned to the old workplace and team, she regained her trust through the interaction and feedback from her colleagues. Maija emphasized that educational responsibility should be shared in teams and in the community. However, she felt perplexed by the complexity of the issue.

In summary, Anna and Maija's teaching was strongly influenced by their context, which also reshaped their efficacy and beliefs about themselves as skillful educators. Table 2 shows an overview of the shared identity themes relating to their professional tasks.

Table 2

Shared Professional Tasks Affecting the Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

SHARED PROFESSIONAL TASKS	<i>Anna</i>		<i>Maija</i>	
	IDENTITY FEATURES	EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE	IDENTITY FEATURES	EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE
Shared efficacy	<i>Hard work valued: "You should know your limits. This must be my weak side, though I have matured... I don't have to do ...accept everything [workload]...[H]owever, every now and then I do feel overloaded."</i>	<i>Tensions in professional tasks</i>	<i>Feelings of vulnerability: "She thought I wasn't capable of doing anything... how to cross the zebra crossing with children following me in a crocodile line. She guided me in every step of the teaching; it was oppressive."</i>	<i>Power struggles in task competition</i>
Distribution of tasks	<i>Problems in shared educational responsibility: "We discussed that they know what they are expected to do and should do, but still ... they feel that everyone should do the same amount of the preparatory work (e.g., taking care of cloths, cleaning the coat rags)."</i>		<i>Dilemmatic shared educational responsibility: "[It is] quite challenging to put into words ... [W]e work and bear the responsibilities together... Well, in the last resort, the teacher is responsible for everything."</i>	
Collective atmosphere	<i>Trust between colleagues: "I feel their trust when they tell me for example... "you know how to deal with this" or "let's ask her."</i>		<i>Collegial trust varies: "It takes some time to build trust ... I think we have that foundation of trust with the older staff ... the orientation ... and the way how one positions oneself in the team, but one has to be able to negotiate."</i>	

Their work was based on trust and shared responsibility. Both teachers believed in the collective efficacy of the team, which, however, turned out to be ambiguous. Although it seemed that daily work was shared, the questions and conflicts related to teaching, pedagogy and work distribution were viewed differently by the teachers. While Anna emphasized the importance of regular dialogue and task distribution between team members, depending on their professional responsibilities, Maija highlighted the role of colleagues and their influence on her working conditions and her image as a skillful teacher. It became evident that both teachers' efficacy and self-perception as autonomous educators were negotiated actively with their colleagues. They both perceived that they "can influence how well students learn" (Guskey & Passaro, 1994, p. 628), which had influenced their effectiveness (e.g., Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). According Hamre

and Pianta (2005), this is a critical factor in the quality of a child's support and capability in further education. Levin and Moreland (1993) stressed that the belief in collective efficacy becomes part of the team's culture and thus affects the quality of professional collaboration and teaching outcome. Furthermore, if tensions with work distribution in teams occur, it indicates that achieving well-functioning and productive roles with shared respect can be challenging (Karila, 2008).

Shared feedback

Anna experienced external feedback as having significantly contributed to her professional identity and agency, thereby facilitating her participation in the community. She regarded even the implicit gestures and the atmosphere as significant feedback: *"There I could work in peace; no one did interfere all the time.... [T]here the leader respected all professionals. Even in the playground I had a feeling of peace."* The community's positive feedback and trust returned her confidence as being skilled and effective teacher: *"I felt that my professionalism was appreciated, it was something like an implicit gesture. There I noticed that I had done things right."*

Anna perceived that giving feedback was challenging, and she stressed the delicate nature of collegial work in balancing between vulnerability and professional obligation. Anna spoke about time, space, and professional agency that are needed in sensitive collegial discussions, and she felt that the hectic nature of educational work was an additional challenge. She stated that the amount of reflective and critical feedback is low and that conversation and politeness were the general forms. She related the quality of professional feedback to occupational background, referring to teachers and preservice teachers with whom reflection was related to the questions of pedagogy and professional development: *"I am longing for another teacher working with me, being able to discuss about pedagogical decisions ... styles, instructions."* The most significant feedback she received were the children's compliments on the quality of her teaching and their learning outcomes. Anna expressed her desire for opportunities to share pedagogical feedback and

reflection: *“I have been quite lonely with these questions (planning and evaluating teaching). There is another teacher in the other group, but they have had their own things.... [We] haven’t had a conversation or opportunity; let’s put it that way.”*

Maija noted that feedback is important both individually and collectively: *“In our community, we are used to sharing the positive feedback given by parents to all of us [staff].”* Maija considered that feedback was tool for enhancing change. However, at the same time, she addressed the need for courage in work cultures, where positive or critical feedback about ones’ specific work behavior was more or less missing. She reflected that educators feel vulnerable regarding feedback, and they often fear being evaluated by others. Regarding feedback from the children, Maija also stressed her feelings of vulnerability and being liked: *“She had been there before me, and the children draw princesses and like ... it felt ... that they don’t like me.... It took some time to handle.”* She also spoke specifically about team-level feedback, which was the most common form. Teams address educational issues at a non-personal level, relating the conversation and evaluation to the team’s shared performance, thus referring to a team’s collective identity. The feedback shared in daily practice tended to be well-intentioned conversation, in which the presence of professionally critical and personalized feedback was lacking. Maija regarded professional feedback and reflection as a part of the professional responsibility of teachers, highlighting the concrete nature and essential pedagogical details and goals pursued: *“Evaluation ... what goals we have reached, I feel that teachers [not only] have the responsibility to raise the issues of success or failure but also ask for the opinions of colleagues.”* Furthermore, she also stressed the importance of the role of preservice teachers in facilitating both the receiving and giving of reflective feedback during their teaching practicums. She stated, *“I liked the way the person said, the dressing situation was done quite nicely’... precise feedback, not like ‘you are so skillful’; it doesn’t tell you the essence.”*

In summary, these experiences revealed that powerful feedback is a social tool for deconstructing the positions and shared identities of teachers and teams in their work context.

Table 3 presents an overview of shared identity themes relating to Anna and Maija’s professional feedback.

Table 3

Shared Feedback Affecting the Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices

SHARED FEEDBACK	Anna		Maija	
	IDENTITY FEATURES	EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE	IDENTITY FEATURES	EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE
Sources of feedback	<i>Low amount of collegial feedback: "She doesn't give me direct feedback about my teaching or instructions... [S]he says, "you just always have strengths"... and so on, and in a way this tells me that she is content, trying to encourage me ... but it lacks ..."</i>	Need for collegial reflection	<i>Low amount of collegial feedback: "Too little ... [W]e are starting a feedback-giving project.... [O]ne can give positive feedback to colleagues basically about everything. ... [W]e have been thinking about using stickers ... to help visualize the amount ...to enhance the positiveness ..."</i>	The need for individual feedback
The experiences of feedback	<i>Supports coping and well-being: "When you get feedback, including the gestures and facial expressions ... it's like a positive presence and atmosphere saying that I am doing good work."</i>		<i>Supports commitment and willingness to change: "To gain such a culture and courage in being used to express positive feedback...." "You managed wonderfully"... We are used to giving feedback to the children, why not to our colleagues?"</i>	
Challenges of feedback	<i>Fear of giving negative feedback: "It is really hard to do this in a way that doesn't hurt your colleague's feelings. In our community, we have discussed that we have a responsibility to take care of these things."</i>		<i>"Niceness" of feedback: "The amount of straight professional feedback is low and something like a clever singing moment but it lacks an in-depth message."</i>	

It seems that by avoiding critical feedback, and maintaining “social harmony,” the community may lose opportunities to use critical feedback as a means of better understanding the relationships between their beliefs and actions. Teacher beliefs are a “framework that organize meaning and inform practices” (Rimm-Kaufman, Storm, Sawyer, Pianta, La Paro, 2006). The tensions related to collegial feedback were perceived mainly as a lack of professional and individual focus, which is a tool for shared learning and social reflection. Critical feedback was avoided to preserve the niceness and delicate nature of their relationships. Hence, collegial feedback was limited to common courtesies, although they disclosed that delicate feedback was a professional “duty”, and they mentioned the vulnerability of daily relationships. This contradiction between avoidance and duty may be interpreted as a tension in the use of critical reflection to de-privatize

one's beliefs and behavior (Norris-Watts & Levy, 2004). However, by de-privatizing, actively requesting and reflecting on professional practices, educators could create opportunities for shared, professional learning (Cherrington & Thornton, 2013). The potential of feedback to facilitate learning and agency has been recognized (Hu & Choo, 2016), and it can be an important element in improving teacher agency in the context of in-service teacher education (Charteris & Smardon, 2015).

Shared agency

Anna's response revealed her desire for belonging, and it underlined the significance of teamwork that informs shared roles and positions and makes possible certain types of participation and education. When she felt unable to participate fully, she felt less agentic and she lacked a teacher identity in teamwork: *"Though I worked in a day care community for six months, but ... everyday working in different team [The] community is nevertheless quite based on teamwork ... even if you collaborate with everyone, it is your team you belong to."* Anna described her agency and autonomy as interwoven with ethical professionalism: *"This is professionalism ... that I will not accept work in conditions I feel are not suitable for children or adults. I have to be able to make a decision."* According to Anna, the construction and formation of shared roles and positions manifested in various ways in different day care contexts. A precondition of this shared action and teaching is reciprocal dialog in which the team negotiates and agrees on joint pursuits, goals, and responsibilities, thus sharing information. Anna stressed the importance of friendly relationships, cohesion, confirming to common rules and individual agencies, being congruent, and confirming unity: *"In teams we discuss for example how we behave in certain situations and why. ... Yes ... [We strive] for the kind of cohesion, how to act in the same manner, to confirm unity."* These negotiated dialogs facilitated the shared understanding of effective agentic performances and enabled colleagues to know their own roles in relation to others. Thus, negotiated dialogs provided a shared vision of collegial conceptual agency.

Maija perceived the team cohesion as a significant factor in positioning one's agency by either enabling full and active participation or limiting the agentic capacity to effect change, thereby maintaining the status quo. Maija highlighted the responsibility of actively building one's professional position and tasks in the team. Furthermore, she addressed collective efficacy in teamwork: Agents are in a reliance relationship with each other. Negotiated and effective quality outcomes (e.g., with parents) are everyone's responsibility, and they depend on the collective efficacy of the team. She particularly emphasized partnerships based on trust: *"I had promised to grandpa ... and she did not awake that boy, but another child ... several times. It reduced the family's trust in us and impaired our relational agency."* Maija stated that although dialog is the key to a team's evaluation, this diverse work and counterproductive outcomes are challenging. Maija expressed that professional self-esteem is the prerequisite for successful collaboration when positioning oneself as a professional agent both within a team and with parents: *"I don't remember difficult parents, though I don't behave like "I know ... I am [an] expert".... I listen to parents and trust that we work it together... for the best interest of the child."* Maija underlined that without the right to participate one would be an outsider, which is how shared conceptual agency is damaged: *"They were friends and they didn't ask me to participate, strange They had all the things they were used to I thought that I should follow their way, but it becomes a burden if you do it against your own values."*

In summary, the storylines described in detail opportunities for shared agency by emphasizing slightly different perspectives. Both teachers maintained that the team influenced how they positioned themselves as professional agents (see Coldron & Smith, 1999). Table 4 shows an overview of the two teachers' shared identity themes relating to professional agency.

Table 4

Shared Agency Affecting the Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

SHARED AGENCY	<i>Anna</i>		<i>Maija</i>	
	IDENTITY FEATURES	EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE	IDENTITY FEATURES	EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE
Participation	<i>The feeling of belonging: "The feeling of not belonging... not having my own place in the team and children, in that situation you actually don't know or ... identify all the issues you are or can be responsible for."</i>	Compliance to team	<i>Old habits prevail: "Feeling oneself as a member of the team... [O]n the other hand it depends on the colleagues who are welcoming the newcomer... [W]hat are the rules and norms... of the community?"</i>	Compliance to personal demands within a team
Negotiation and decision-making	<i>Striving for shared understanding: "We discussed how to improve practices, and then decided to have a go with the new way... [I]f it didn't work, we changed it back but the important thing was that we engaged in it together."</i>		<i>Need for self-confidence and communication skills: "One needs to be prepared, trust oneself and the practices we need to do... or change, if you can justify and explicate the reasons... [T]hen it normally works."</i>	
Team cohesion	<i>Kindness in relationships: "This year we had a small, challenging child group, but it was a great year.... [The] children saw how we adults pulled together drawing the lines with care and affection... the attention of adults... you can see it from the children's behavior and from us, adults, between us."</i>		<i>Living with power balances: "It is almost like with young children ... you think that they are able, but then you notice that they don't know how, and then you have to adjust... [I]t is the same with new colleagues, you have to be able to negotiate about why, what, and how."</i>	

Anna highlighted that the significance of negotiations, team cohesion, and congruence supported agentic effectiveness and trust. Maija emphasized the quality of the dialog among team members to enhance the interaction and above all that participation depended on the interrelationships among team members. In particular, Maija experienced several dilemmas during her transition, in which her professional identity as a capable agent was repositioned and questioned by a new team. The team's cohesion, which is defined as the tendency of a group to bond and remain united while pursuing shared goals or the affective satisfaction of each members' needs (Tekleab, Karaca, Quigley, & Tsang, 2016), can also serve as a limiting factor in agentic engagement by restricting the choices of appropriate subject positions (Reynolds, 1996). In Maija's case, her agency—the capacity for autonomous, empowered action—was more or less excluded by the team, which sustained the embedded rules and norms. Finally, Maija, after adapting and submitting to her colleagues' ways, recovered her self-trust as a capable agent when she moved to a different team (Moreland & Levine, 2009, p. 21). Anna's experience of team cohesion was positive because the team and her compliance with facilitated her shared agentic engagement. The literature

on teacher education suggests that teacher agency is a key capability that facilitates student learning, continuing professional development, collaborative teacher learning, and school development (Toom, Pyhältö, & O'Connell Rust, 2015). The storylines of Anna and Maija narrate a distinct conception of teacher agency as constructed socially.

Discussion

The findings showed that shared professional identity of Anna and Maija was informed by commitment, tasks, feedback, and agency. The results indicated the ways in which these factors affected the two teachers' identification with and positioning in their work. Contextual feedback from colleagues, children, workplace culture, and leadership and their ongoing negotiations shaped the teachers' shared professional identities while they aimed to develop a stable and continuous sense of themselves. When the formation of the identity process was successful, the teachers expressed feelings of well-being, cohesion, job motivation, heightened collective and self-efficacy, and shared responsibilities in teamwork. However, they also reported challenges as they tried to cope and identify themselves with the roles and subject positions available to them. We know that both teacher education and the quality of pedagogy are important. Thus, the ability of teachers to "examine and reframe assumptions about themselves as teachers and [change] agents as well as examine taken-for-granted" practices (Price & Valli, 2005, p. 71) should be enhanced (see Vandenbroek, Peeters, Urban, & Lazzari, 2016). The features of shared identity are important during this era of global pressures in ECE. Despite the fact that there is a consensus in many countries regarding ECE pedagogy that it should build on children's needs and interests, there is globally a shifting tendency toward academic expectations [school readiness], outcome assessment, and growing attention to instructional quality (Flynn & Schacter, 2017). Flynn and Schacter (2017) assert that "teachers of young children may feel the need to adapt their teaching in response to increasing EC [early childhood] and kindergarten standards and the growing prevalence of assessment in preschool" (p. 183). Thus, the features of shared identity should be supported in both

preservice education and in-service teacher development in order to foster the entire community's shared learning and development. In the next section, we focus on the features of shared identity as they relate to teacher education.

Implications for teacher education

This study viewed commitment as an important attachment that indicates both the willingness to stay in the ECEC field and the engagement in collaborative and reflective practice. In particular, novice teachers described their commitment as a "calling" and as deriving intrinsic satisfaction in working and caring for young children. They dealt with different kinds of obstacles while they constructed meaningful work and found a balance between commitment and tasks, finally finding a sense of one's self and self-efficacy. Being passionate about others' learning fuels commitment, yet a sense of passion can diminish (Day, 2012). Thus, the loss of a sense of purpose and well-being, which are connected to a positive sense of professional identity, may weaken the ability to manage in emotionally vulnerable contexts of teaching (p. 17). Additionally, low commitment reduces student achievement (Firestone & Pennel, 1993). As Firestone and Pennel (1993, p. 498) reminded us, if what is done depends primarily upon impersonal controls over work, accountability rests with others. They recommend autonomy for teacher candidates during teacher education, which would allow teachers to attribute their success to themselves. Although autonomy is important, we should not forget that the most remarkable variable in preservice teacher's positive teaching commitment is the support they receive in their teacher education programs. In other words, both faculty support and mentor support during practicums contributes to the commitment to teaching of preservice teachers, which can affect their intention to actually enter and remain in the teaching profession" (Rots & Aelterman, 2008, p. 530).

When they negotiated their professional tasks and responsibilities, the teachers felt pressured. Anna had to defend her professional obligations and standards as a teacher focusing on

learning and teaching. Maija had to negotiate the foundation of her own and her community's educational values. Also evident was that the teachers' self efficacy beliefs were also negotiated in teams, and they affected on the type of future the teams sought to achieve, how they managed their resources and the plans and strategies they constructed. Furthermore, once established they seem to be resistant to change (e.g., Bandura, 1997). According Bandura (1997), "these processes, which shared efficacy beliefs activate, affect how well group members work together and how much they accomplish collectively" (p. 478). Stephen (2010) emphasized that ECE practitioners should be able to talk about practice and pedagogy "without being construed as involving attack or defense" (p.26) in order to negotiate on competing discourses (Bullard, 2003). Recent studies also emphasized the importance of systematically reflecting on one's teaching (e.g., Freese, 2006), the careful examination of routine and taken-for-granted assumptions and practices (e.g., Price & Valli, 2005; Stremmel et al., 2015), and making sense of ongoing process of development of professional identities (e.g., Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). Meier and Stremmel (2010) advocated narrative inquiry because it has the "potential to produce change in teachers' and teacher educators' identities, beliefs, and practices" (p. 256). Recchia and Beck (2014) suggested that by providing more supported opportunities for preservice teachers in both understanding and experiencing diverse contexts teacher education could be able to offer them "a more realistic picture of the field, and a stronger base from which to advocate for young children and for themselves as new teachers (p. 220) (see also Jalongo & Isenberg, 2008; Schuck, Brady, & Griffin, 2005).

While individual teachers bring their own frames of reference in responding to situations (e.g., Friend & Cook, 2003, p. 31), receiving feedback helps teachers to broaden their professional knowledge and identities. Although the teachers in the present study greatly appreciated feedback as an instrument for professional development, they required opportunities to examine feedback from their peers and contexts that informed their practices (e.g., Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2006). In valuing feedback, notions of vulnerability (Hargreaves, 2001) also arouse and mirrored the challenges that

critical dialogue still faces in ECE communities. The perception of vulnerability may hinder or prevent the future development of both the individual and community. To support the ability of future teachers' to give and receive feedback during their teacher education, we should carefully engage them in these processes, such as in collaborative and critical video mentoring (Danielowich, 2014) and peer reflection (Daniel, Auhl, & Hastings, 2013). As Daniel et al. (2013, p. 169) reminded us, the need to belong may be challenging, but the awareness of the importance of critique as part of professional learning should be encouraged in providing and receiving critical feedback. By examining prevailing beliefs, one can contribute to professional collaboration and growth, which could help teachers to engage in critical reflection and to enhance the renewal of their working communities (Achinstein, 2002; Bullard & Bullock, 2004; De Lima, 2001). Indeed, dialogical "feedback can direct and facilitate learning if its content focuses on tasks, processes, and actions" rather than the individual's personal characteristics (Hu & Choo, 2016, p. 330).

In this study, teachers' professional agency is considered their relational capacity to affect intentional action (Kögler, 2012), including the emphasis on self-regulative and collaborative learning (e.g., Martin, 2004). Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy also invest in their teaching by seeking to meet the needs of children (e.g., Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). According to van der Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard, and Popeijus (2015, p. 684), "collaboration with others appears to be essential for teachers as change agents". In the present study, the teacher's narratives revealed their need to participate and their desire to be accepted as full agents. The teachers also experienced the challenge of unquestioned beliefs and practices in their teams and communities and in order to change they needed collectively shared agency. However, as Price and Valli (2005) noted, being a change agent is often problematic for preservice teachers because they are powerless to effect change, and "as novices, they often have difficulty even thinking of themselves as teachers" (p. 58). Hence, teacher educators need to have an understanding and awareness of the positionality of both themselves and their students. Only by offering multiple

notions and purposes of change (e.g., professional, political, institutional, and social contexts), could teacher educators position themselves without pressuring students to adopt a similar stances. Attention should be focused on the conditions and contexts (e.g., personal-biographical, interpersonal, and institutional) that facilitate or hinder change (Price & Valli, 2005). This focus implies that teacher educators should support student teachers in reframing their taken-for-granted beliefs and practices. It is known that pre-service teachers (PTs) tend to experience resistance towards pedagogies (Korthagen & Kessels, 2001) which challenge their prior conceptions and encourage to shape understandings (e.g., Leijen et al., 2015). Adler and Iorio (2015, p. 305) suggested that action research is a vehicle for questioning policies and practices and engaging in agency in teacher education. Willegems, Consuegra, Struven and Engels (2017) show that collaborative research for PTs improve their knowledge and attitudes towards collaboration, reflection, inquiry, and student-centered teaching. In line with Mule (2006), they adhere that PTs learn more in studies where collaboration between in-service teachers and PTs follows a design of shared inquiry (Willegems et al., 2017, p. 242). The capacity of action research to bring about social change is especially emphasized (e.g., Taylor, 2010; Kemmis, Mc Taggart, & Nixon, 2014) when action research is utilized in teacher education projects and research partnerships (e.g., Moran, 2007). Researching genuine classroom problems in real settings, and in ways that combine both theoretical knowledge and practical observations and experiences is shown to be useful (e.g., Hatch, Greer, & Bailey, 2006). As Moran (2007) has emphasized, besides practicum and lectures, e.g., writing reflective journals, child observations and interviewing them, videoing one's own and colleagues' teaching, benefitted to change in participation of PTs and their use of strategies aimed at teaching in more authentic and deliberate ways (Moran, 2007, p. 422). Thus, also teacher educators need to become "students of learning in their own settings" by employing similar methods in order to provide insights into the learning practices of student teachers (e.g., Souto-Manning, 2012, p. 55).

Concluding thoughts

What “new” viewpoints can the Finnish context contribute to the large body of literature on teacher identity? Agreeing with Urban and Swadener (2016), we believe that contextual issues and ways of knowing and doing are not universal models for understanding and evaluating the quality of early childhood services. However, if Finland has educated and respected ECE staff, broad curricula, autonomous teachers, and ECE practices that do not include the standardized assessment of children, we think that our constructive perspective and practices (Toom & Husu, 2016) could be useful to others. We acknowledge that the practices of early childhood teachers in multi-professional teams are complex and demanding, and we provide an example of the ways in which professional identities could be constructed as becoming and relational. The awareness of and challenges to professional identity are starting points in considering different approaches to supporting quality outcomes in ECE.

If early childhood teacher education views preservice teachers as “constructivists” and “sense-makers”, then we should concentrate on studying and supporting their actions as reflexive teachers as well as the awareness of their socialization processes. Instead of arguing in favor of “knowledge-for-practice,” we emphasize the need to integrate teachers’ “knowledge-in-practice and knowledge-of-practice” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, pp. 255–278) to support extended collective professional development. Although we emphasize the strengths of our study, we also acknowledge its limitations. The analysis was based upon a small homogenous sample that lacked diversity (e.g., gender) and represented teachers within particular contexts. Thus, the present findings might not be applied to other contexts. However, we imagine more in-depth examinations of ECE teachers’ experiences (Richardson & Placier, 2001) should be connected to their professional learning and development in different places and positions.

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