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# Beginning student teachers' agency in teacher identity negotiations

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate student teachers' agency in their identity negotiations as first-year students on a path towards becoming teachers. A narrative inquiry approach was employed in the analysis of the interviews conducted with 16 Finnish student teachers. One master narrative and two counter-narratives were identified in which student teachers' agency was manifested in teacher identity negotiations. The master narrative suggested sustaining internalised preconceptions of teaching. The counter-narrative of transforming teacher identity illuminated a transformation from preconceptions towards a teacher education's institutional, culturally bounded story of teaching. The counter-narrative of questioning teacher identity entailed questioning the normative master narratives of teaching and actively producing counter-narratives. The findings highlight the importance of recognising and unravelling the master and counter-narratives in teacher education, which may guide the nature and varieties of teacher identities and agency possible for future teachers.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Student teachers; identity; agency; narratives; teacher education

## Introduction

The importance of student teachers' agency in identity negotiations has been widely acknowledged in teacher education research (e.g. Alsup 2006; Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Bullough 1991; Dugas 2021; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015; Friesen and Besley 2013; Galman 2009; Heikkilä et al. 2022; Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011; Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate 2016). Agency in professional identity negotiation is defined as being able and willing to determine one's professional positions and the contents of one's work in relation to the community and the wider social world (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate 2016). Teachers' professional identity and agency are regarded as intertwined: individuals actively invest in their identity negotiations in professional contexts, drawing from their own interests, beliefs, and experiences as well as from the socially, culturally, and historically determined expectations and frames for teachers' work (Beijaard,

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Meijer, and Verloop 2004; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015; Furlong 2013; Lanås and Kelchtermans 2015). Agency in identity negotiations is not viewed as an individual's capacity; rather, teachers' and student teachers' agency and identity are regarded as being continuously negotiated in and through relationships (Heikkilä et al. 2022).

Agency manifested in professional identity negotiations has been linked to, for example, an easier beginning in the teaching profession, the ability to manage complex situations involved in teachers' work, and remaining in the teaching career (Alsop 2006; Day and Kington 2008; Hong 2010; Knowles 2003; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013). Previous studies have suggested that to address many of the problems which new teachers face in their induction phase, teacher education should focus more on developing student teachers' agency and identity (Alsop 2006; Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Dugas 2021; Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011). For example, problems with classroom management, relationships with pupils and colleagues (Dugas 2021; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013), becoming members of the school organisation (Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002), and experiences of emotional burnout (Hong 2010) have been associated with aspects of teacher identity and agency. Teachers' professional agency has also been associated with their understanding of themselves as societal actors who can contribute to the practices and policies within their educational contexts and who can participate in the development of transformations necessary for responding to the challenges in their community and in society at large (Lanås and Kiilakoski 2013; Matikainen, Männistö, and Fornaciari 2018; Simola et al. 2017; Toom and Husu 2016). Despite the expectations set in the curriculum for student teachers for active engagement in identity work and professional agency development in their studies, previous research has suggested that these aspects remain on the margins of teacher education (e.g. Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Dugas 2021; Juutilainen, Metsäpelto, and Poikkeus 2018; Lanås and Kelchtermans 2015; Matikainen, Männistö, and Fornaciari 2018; Rautiainen and Räihä 2012; Simola et al. 2017).

The context of this study is Finnish teacher education, which has been regarded as an exemplar of a high-level education system and high-quality teacher education (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017; Toom and Husu 2016). Finnish teachers have a high level of autonomy in their work and there are no formal accountability mechanisms or evaluations of teachers (Simola et al. 2017). However, in this type of context, political, cultural, and epistemic frames and expectations (Heikkilä et al. 2022) and normative ideas about the ideal characteristics of a 'good' (student) teacher (e.g. Lanås and Kelchtermans 2015) are likely to exert an impact by shaping how pre-service and in-service teachers develop their agency and negotiate their professional identity during studies and in work life. To investigate teachers' professional agency negotiations, Heikkilä et al. (2022) have utilised master and counter-narratives as an approach to highlight the relational nature of these negotiations and have demonstrated how counter-narratives take shape in relation to culturally mediated master narratives. In the present study, a similar kind of approach is adopted to examine student teachers' agency in identity negotiations in an analysis of first-year student teachers' interviews utilising a narrative inquiry approach. Prior literature suggests that by examining narratives, it is possible to reveal what is socially and culturally expected and normative, as well as to examine what forms of power relations are embedded in the social world that is being narrated (e.g. Bamberg 2004; Heikkilä et al.

2022; Hyvärinen 2020; Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt 2020; Meretoja 2020). The present study adheres to this approach by investigating and seeking to unravel the potentially emergent and evolving master and counter-narratives in teacher education. Thus, this approach views narratives as providing underlying indicators of what kind of teacher identity and agency appear to be possible for future teachers.

### Student teachers' agency in teacher identity negotiations

Teachers' professional identity has been defined in various ways from different theoretical perspectives. In this study, teacher identity is understood as an ongoing process which is affected by a range of internal factors, including personal conceptions of self, one's intentions and goals, and external factors, such as experiences in varying sociocultural contexts, expectations of others (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009; Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop 2004; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015), and social and cultural narratives related to teachers and teaching (Furlong 2013; Lanas and Kelchtermans 2015; Søreide 2006). Framing and negotiating a professional teacher identity entails reflecting on how one personally thinks about being a teacher and understands one's work as a teacher (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate 2016; Sachs 2005). The process of teacher identity negotiation is thus active and embedded in social actions in different contexts (Cobb, Harlow, and Clark 2018; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate 2016); hence, agency is regarded as intertwined in teachers' and student teachers' identity negotiations.

When entering teacher education, student teachers do not begin their teacher identity negotiations from an 'empty space': they have years of experience within schools, observing teachers' work from a pupil's viewpoint, and they have internalised and normative preconceptions of what it means to be a teacher (Alsup 2006; Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Britzman 2003; Bullough 1991; Furlong 2013; Kagan 1992; Lanas and Kelchtermans 2015; Lortie 1975; Olsen 2008). Student teachers' lay theories of teaching are influenced by various factors, such as childhood experiences and teacher role models (Knowles 2003), the impact of parents and other close family members and home discourses (Alsup 2006), and cultural images and expectations of teachers that shape the collective narratives of teaching, which have been found to exert a profound impact on teacher identity (Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Dugas 2021; Furlong 2013; Lanas and Kelchtermans 2015; Uitto et al. 2015). Studies have demonstrated that student teachers' lay theories of teaching are difficult to change, since they are deeply internalised and often embedded in societal master narratives (e.g. Alsup 2006; Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Britzman 2003; Bullough 1991; Furlong 2013; Lanas and Kelchtermans 2015). Here, *master narratives* are understood as culturally expected and accepted courses of events and actions, framing what are interpreted as 'normal' or 'typical' means of being and acting (Bamberg 2004; Hyvärinen 2020). However, master narratives are embedded in certain social and cultural contexts and can be contested and challenged through *counter-narratives* (Bamberg 2004; Bruner 1991; Hyvärinen 2020).

In Finland, the teacher profession is highly appreciated, and teacher education attracts thousands of applicants each year (Toom and Husu 2016). The status of the teaching profession has developed through socio-historical phases (see Simola et al. 2017), and although Finnish teachers are not officially monitored or

evaluated, there are implicit norms that constitute the master narrative of a 'good' teacher (Lanas and Kelchtermans 2015). Societal master narratives guide people's actions, but they can also restrict agency as they reduce the possibilities for action (Bamberg 2004). This has also been demonstrated with respect to teachers' agency and identity negotiations, as previous research has illustrated that teachers' identity narratives cluster around shared narrative resources, strengthening and bestowing dominance to some narratives, while positioning others as alternative or oppositional (Søreide 2006). Teachers have also been found to negotiate agency through counter-narratives that oppose societal master narratives (Heikkilä et al. 2022). Thus, it is crucial to analyse and gain understanding of the types of master and counter-narratives that exist regarding teachers and teaching, as these narratives indicate what is perceived as good and valuable and, ultimately, what is possible for teachers to do, think, and feel within their professional identity (Lanas and Kelchtermans 2015; Søreide 2006).

These societal master and counter-narratives also affect student teachers' agency in identity negotiations in the context of their teacher education studies (see Lanas and Kelchtermans 2015). Previous studies have suggested that if the normative ideas affecting what types of teacher identities are socially and culturally available for student teachers are not explicitly brought to conscious awareness and reflected upon critically, the integration of new information provided in teacher education into students' professional identity negotiation may not take place or remain inconsequential, and students may instead rely on their preconceptions (Alsup 2006; Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford 2005; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013). Furthermore, when entering the teaching profession, new teachers facing the reality shock of the school environment are inclined to revert to their initial understanding or cultural master narratives of teaching (Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013). Thus, we find it crucial to investigate the social and cultural narratives that frame student teachers' agency in teacher identity negotiations.

## Study design

### Research questions

The aim of this study was to investigate first-year student teachers' agency in teacher identity negotiations using a narrative inquiry approach. The research questions were as follows:

- (1) What types of narratives (master and potential counter-narratives) can be identified in the data consisting of student teachers' interviews?
- (2) How is student teachers' agency in their teacher identity negotiation manifested in these narratives?

### Data collection

The data were collected via thematic interviews with 16 first-year student teachers attending a five-year degree programme in primary school teacher education (comprising

a continuous path from bachelor's degree to master's degree in education) at one medium-sized Finnish university. The 16 students who volunteered to be interviewed were between 18 and 27 years of age, with a mean age of 20.5 years. One of the participants was male, and the others were female.

The first author conducted the individual student interviews between February and June 2014. The interviews were conducted in Finnish. The themes of the interviews focused on the students' experiences during their earlier school time as pupils, their paths to teacher education, and their perceptions of themselves as students in teacher education. Students were also invited to discuss what they perceived as important in their teacher education studies, how they perceived themselves as part of their learning group, and what types of resources supported or restrained them in achieving their goals. The students were encouraged to share their experiences and perceptions in their own words as freely as possible. The interviews lasted from 32 minutes to 1 hour 6 minutes. All of the interviews were transcribed, which resulted in a total of 255 pages of transcribed text (Times New Roman, font size 12, line spacing 1.5). The quotations that were selected to illustrate the data were translated from Finnish to English by the first author.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines established by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines (2019). Accordingly, the students provided their informed consent, and their anonymity was guaranteed.

### *Methodological approach: narrative inquiry and data analysis*

The methodological approach in this study is narrative inquiry, which is useful when investigating how people negotiate social interactions, positioning, and identities (Bamberg 2004; Heikkilä et al. 2022; Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt 2020). In this context, narrative inquiry is understood more broadly than merely as stories that contain specific characteristics, such as a clear plot, a temporal order, and a narrator (Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt 2020). In narrative inquiry, two approaches to data analysis are possible: *analysis of narratives*, wherein the data itself is in the form of stories, and *narrative analysis*, wherein the goal is to configure data elements – for example, storied episodes – to form a unified narrative that imparts meaning to the data (Polkinghorne 1995). In this study, *narrative analysis* was used to analyse the meaning of normative master narratives and counter-narratives opposing the norms with respect to student teachers' agency in their teacher identity negotiations. Master and counter-narratives reveal prevailing, alternative, and sometimes opposing means to narrate experiences and relationships (e.g. Hyvärinen 2020; Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt 2020; see also Heikkilä et al. 2022).

The analysis started with a careful reading of the transcribed interviews. Initially, individual student teacher interviews were examined in detail because at this point, the preliminary aim was to explore how individual students negotiate their teacher identities in different relations as individual stories. Summaries were created of all the interviews, concentrating on the parts in which the student teachers talked about themselves and their experiences, thus constructing a picture of their *relations* to different experiences, social settings, and other people (see Heikkilä et al. 2022; Squire 2008). As the analysis progressed, it led to the notion that student teachers' identity negotiations were tightly interwoven into the social and cultural contexts and relationships, and narratives could not merely be examined individually. Hence, we started examining the data as a whole.

Subsequently, a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was conducted to identify essential elements across the whole data set. Thematic analysis can be used when investigating master and counter-narratives, and in this kind of process it is possible to reveal similarities and differences across qualitative data and to identify themes that emerge predominantly across stories or themes that are unique or absent (Parcell and Baker 2017). Through thematic analysis, we identified four relational themes which illustrated different aspects of oneself in relation to significant others, experiences, and settings, and through which student teachers negotiated their teacher identities. These four themes were the following: 1) relation to *school* as a pupil, 2) relation to one's *career choice*, 3) relation to *teacher education*, and 4) relation to one's perception of *teaching*. We explored how all four themes were manifested within the 16 individual student teachers' interviews: Hence, altogether, 64 accounts (16 students x 4 themes) depicting the themes were considered in the next phase of analysis.

As the next step after the thematic analysis described above, a narrative analysis was carried out. Since our aim was not to analyse students' individual narratives, but to form an overall understanding and synthesis of how students discussed their experiences in relation to the four themes, we considered in detail the 64 thematic accounts across the data. Based on the narrative inquiry utilising these accounts, three narratives were configured (Table 1). Of the 64 accounts, 40 reflected a relation to the four themes (i.e. relation to school, career choice, ITE, teaching) which were seen to compose the master narrative of *sustaining an internalised teacher identity*; 13 reflected relation to the themes composing the counter-narrative of *transforming teacher identity*; and 11 reflected relation to the themes composing the counter-narrative of *questioning teacher identity*.

The master narrative of 'sustained teacher identity' was identified as a dominant storyline because it was most prevalent across the data. Students also used expressions referring to the 'typicality' in association with accounts comprising this narrative (see Bamberg 2004; Hyvärinen 2020). The two counter-narratives were identified as 'counter' because they adopted their meaning in relation to the master narrative, opposing and countering the established expectations of the master narrative (see Bamberg 2004; Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt 2020). They were also present in the data to a substantially smaller extent.

Various rounds were made back and forth between the original interviews and the configured narratives in line with the 'hermeneutic circle' typical for narrative analysis (Polkinghorne 1995; Squire 2008). This process aimed to ensure that the original data and configured narratives were compatible with each other. The first author was mainly responsible for the analysis, but the third author also read some of the original interviews and all of the summaries. This enabled frequent discussion about the interpretations during the analysis process to ensure reliability. The three narratives illuminating student teachers' agency in teacher identity negotiations and synthesis of the accounts with respect to the four themes are presented in Table 1.

## Results

### *The master narrative: sustaining an internalised teacher identity*

The master narrative appeared to begin developing already during student teachers' own school time. There were several instances in which student teachers described the 'typical' expected characteristics and normative behaviours of prospective student teachers



**Table 1.** Master and counter-narratives: first-year student teachers' agency in identity negotiation.

	Relation to school as a pupil	Relation to career choice	Relation to teacher education	Relation to perception of teaching
The master narrative: Sustaining internalised teacher identity	<b>Compliance with norms</b> Being a 'typical' prospective teacher: active and good pupil, achieving high grades, conscientious in schoolwork, following teachers' instructions	<b>Teaching experienced as innate</b> 'Familiar' occupation; Personal characteristics suitable for a teacher; Always liked school; Always wanted to become a teacher	<b>Teacher education as qualification</b> Orientation towards areas of teacher education that correspond to internalised ideas of teaching; Compliance with teacher educators' authority; Aiming to achieve good grades and qualify as a teacher	<b>Teaching as practice</b> Practical studies (e.g. practicums, subject studies) emphasised as highly important; Agency in relation to the teacher's practice
Counter-narrative 1: Transforming teacher identity	<b>Accounts of agency</b> Autonomy and agency in relation to some areas of learning and school	<b>Teaching as a reflected choice</b> Careful consideration of career choice; Teaching as a future profession not viewed as self-evident	<b>Teacher education as learning to become a teacher</b> Meaning of teacher education for learning; Agency and ownership of one's learning for future teacher work; Breaking away from authority compliance	<b>Teaching as complex and multidimensional</b> Questioning one's preconceptions of teaching; Evolving understanding of the complex and multidimensional nature of teachers' work; Transforming teacher identity in line with teacher education's story of teaching
Counter-narrative 2: Questioning teacher identity	<b>Resisting norms</b> Questioning or transgressing school norms; Acting against normative behaviour	<b>Teaching as uncertain</b> Drifting before or to teacher education; Doubts about willingness or suitability in relation to becoming a teacher	<b>Teacher education as contradictory</b> Agency and ownership of meaningful learning; Questioning some areas of teacher education	<b>Teaching as critically reflected</b> Critical reflection regarding the core of teachers' work; Unresolved questions

already as pupils at school. These included descriptions of being an active and well-behaved pupil, achieving high grades, and being conscientious in completing one's schoolwork. Students often used the term 'good pupil' to refer to the idea that they had been compliant with school norms and adhered to teachers' instructions.

Heidi: I have probably always been a kind of basic 'good girl' as a pupil, completed my work [...] probably the kind of typical prospective class teacher.

Pia: [I have been] a kind of a 'good pupil', active, [laughing] [...] maybe always kind of a teacher's pet because of my activeness. I have always liked school very much [...] I have always wanted to take care of my school work conscientiously...

There were also instances in which students referred to their personality traits as reasons for why they believed they would be suitable for a teaching career. For instance, some described themselves as being inclined to be dominant – being a 'big sister type', as one participant expressed it. They were born to be instructors and noted that they had a natural proclivity to take care of others. In this way, being and becoming a teacher was understood more as an innate capacity of the individual rather than as a development of professional identity through teacher education. Students provided accounts implying that because they had observed teachers' work from the pupil's perspective or because they had parents or other relatives who worked as teachers, they understood what it means to be a teacher (see e.g. Alsup 2006; Britzman 2003; Lortie 1975).

Heidi: To become a teacher ... I maybe chose that because it felt kind of like familiar and safe, because I knew what kind of work it is ... And because you get to do so many kinds of things [as a class teacher]. Like I have always really liked sports, music, crafts, and so on, and you get to do all of these, it is so versatile job. And I have a younger brother, so I have always looked after him and his friends, and been like a teacher's assistant at school. So, it was something I had already done and liked doing.

Within the master narrative, the students' relation to teacher education was linked to providing a qualification for a teaching job. Their orientation towards studying in teacher education was characterised by their adherence to and respect of teacher educators' authority, aiming to abide by what they believed was expected of them, striving to achieve good grades and qualifying as a teacher.

Moir: [Me and my friends] discussed the grading [of some courses] because they are now graded just pass or fail, and of course, as we are adults, you take care that you pass, but if the grading was like from zero to five, would it increase motivation? Now you have a kind of feeling that 'this [assignment] is good enough, I will pass', but if you thought you were going to receive [a grade of] three or four, then maybe you would do something more.

In the master narrative, student teachers highlighted the practical studies in teacher education, such as teaching practice and subject studies, as most relevant. These were emphasised as being highly important for their future work, whereas the more theoretical studies, such as basic studies of education, were regarded as detached from the teachers' 'real work'.

Heidi: Yes, it probably is those teaching practice periods [that make you feel you want to be a teacher] [...] there, you notice how you are doing in the class and what you can improve

and what the real practical work is because it is a completely different thing than what we read in basic studies [of education].

In the master narrative, minimal (if any) reflection or questioning was present with respect to one's own preconceptions or teacher education studies. In the master narrative, it appeared that student teachers were oriented towards and interested in those areas of teacher education that corresponded with their internalised perceptions of teaching and teacher identity (i.e. teaching as practical work). Hence, in the master narrative, student teachers' agency in teacher identity negotiation was manifested as aiming to become the kind of teacher their preconceptions of teaching pointed to.

### *Counter-narrative 1: transforming teacher identity*

The first counter-narrative challenged the master narrative by highlighting changes and transformations that student teachers experienced as needed in order to negotiate a subjective and evolving teacher identity. In this counter-narrative, student teachers' own school time was already characterised by opposing the master narrative in some ways. Rather than being a 'typical' prospective student teacher and complying with school norms and rules, student teachers described minor acts through which they had questioned or challenged the norm of being a 'good pupil' – for example, not wanting to complete homework assignments or not paying attention at school and speaking with friends during classes. Some described acts of questioning their teachers' opinions or teaching methods, through which they had aimed to gain agency as pupils.

Elisa: I always criticised teachers a lot. I think I was always like 'Why can't we do this like this?' or 'Why don't pupils ever get to [write on] the board? Why only teachers do?' [laughing]

Within this counter-narrative, choosing to pursue a career choice in teacher education was a carefully reflected decision that had required time and experiences through which an understanding of the teacher profession had started to transform.

Elisa: I started to do substitute teaching, and through that, I discovered aspects [of teacher's work] which I hadn't even thought about before. I had maybe thought of it as an easy choice, like you are 'just a teacher'. And I felt that maybe my family was also like 'You are not becoming JUST a teacher, are you?' [laughing]. But later, I have realised that this field is so much more; it is so multidimensional and interesting, and that is probably why I got interested in it and wanted to apply to become a teacher.

In this counter-narrative, the understanding of teachers' work appeared to have started to evolve or transform during the first year in teacher education or just prior to applying to teacher education. Hence, the relation to teacher education was characterised through learning to become a teacher. Countering the master narrative in which accounts of student teachers implied sustaining one's internalised preconceptions, in this narrative, accounts indicated a wish to learn new perspectives and to transform one's conceptions of teaching. The accounts reflected questioning one's own previous thinking and acting patterns and seemed to manifest agency and ownership of one's learning. They also involved depictions of aiming to break away from traditional authority compliance, such as not seeking to set high priority on achieving good grades or pleasing external authorities, but rather to learn in order to become a good teacher.

Paula: Previously, I have very much concentrated on achieving, but now the kind of ‘achieving just for the sake of achieving’ is gone. And it [learning] is truly for the future, and that really changes how it feels to learn, when you do it for a purpose and not just to get a good grade.

This counter-narrative depicted student teachers’ motivation to engage in reflection on the new information that they faced in teacher education studies, and practice agency in their teacher identity negotiations towards transformation. Through learning in teacher education and transforming one’s ideas of teaching, this counter-narrative revealed student teachers’ aspiration to understand teachers’ work as complex and multidimensional in nature.

Paula: Previously, I have very much concentrated on achieving, but now the kind of ‘achieving just for the sake of achieving’ is gone. And it [learning] is truly for the future, and that really changes how it feels to learn, when you do it for a purpose and not just to get a good grade.

Elisa: You probably easily follow the old patterns or [teach] the same way your teachers did, just continue the tradition and don’t start questioning [it]. And that has also been challenging at first, that you need to question and think about different aspects. But I feel that this is an important and a good thing because I don’t think that you can evolve if you can’t question or think about why you are doing something . . .

However, in this counter-narrative, the accounts of students did not directly include examples of questioning or critically reflecting on what was taught to students in their teacher education. One student stated this in the following way:

Paula: I really respect [X.X., i.e. teacher educator guiding the small group], and, yeah, you could say that I kind of admire her. The way she leads the group is something I would like to do as well as a teacher. So, I kind of see her as a model for myself. And I haven’t really seen anything from her yet that I would criticise, so it’s also kind of scary because then I could be misled. Or like maybe I eagerly accept everything she says because I kind of admire her.

Hence, this narrative, did counter the master narrative of sustaining internalised preconceptions, and at the same time could be interpreted to adhere to what could be described as the institutional, culturally situated ‘master narrative’ of teaching and learning in teacher education (e.g. advocating student-centred, socio-constructive views of learning) (see Bamberg 2004; Hyvärinen 2020). In this narrative, student teachers’ agency in teacher identity negotiation could be seen to be manifested as a transformation from preconceptions towards teacher education’s story of teaching.

### *Counter-narrative 2: questioning teacher identity*

The overarching characteristics of the second counter-narrative included questioning and a critical stance towards normative societal master narratives. Resisting master narratives appeared to span across different contexts and times. In the accounts reflecting this counter-narrative, one’s relationship to school as a pupil included resisting some school norms, either by questioning normative expectations or by directly challenging or transgressing school norms. In the next extract, the interviewee refers to the concept of a ‘good pupil’, which also emerged in the master narrative, reinforcing the existence of the norm while also countering it:

Jasmine: [I was] kind of a wild child, energetic and lively, did a lot of mean things, and like, [adults saying] ‘is that kid ever going to become anything sensible’ [. . .] not like a very ‘good pupil’.

In this counter-narrative, the relation to teaching as a career choice was not firmly set or clear. Accounts of one's trajectories towards teacher education were not straightforward and could include a drifting phase before deciding to apply for teacher education, or uncertainty about why one finally ended up in teacher education. In this counter-narrative, the relationship to teacher education emerged as contradictory or ambiguous. The accounts included descriptions of some aspects of teacher education as highly important and meaningful which had resulted in understanding of teaching being evolved and transformed. However, accounts involved also questioning of some aspects of teacher education and pondering their meaning for teachers' work.

Ella: Those mass lectures I have intentionally skipped. It feels somehow so artificial, like I haven't applied to study just that. Of course, I applied to this school to study this field [teacher education], but I'm not always sure whether those things that [a lecturer] tells us are useful for me.

Accounts reflecting this counter-narrative also highlighted the dichotomy between theory and practice, but contrary to the master narrative, the accounts included instances of experiencing teaching practice as restricting one's agency, and not allowing one to teach according to the theoretical principles or educational ideals adopted by the student teacher.

Jasmine: I had read about these educational ideas that I would have wanted to try out during teaching practice ... but then, I was given the class, and like 'These things you need to cover with the pupils, in this timetable', so, no ... Then you just go and follow the teacher's book, go along with the old patterns, and no one's goals are met, probably.

In this counter-narrative, accounts reflected that understanding of teaching and teachers' work had evolved and transformed during teacher education. Rather than negotiation of teacher identity in a straightforward manner in line with what the teacher education appeared to present as desirable, the accounts could be interpreted to reflect an aspiration for deeper reflection and questioning. The accounts seemed to imply facing some cognitive contradictions which caused one to question and critically reflect upon what is at the core of teachers' work and whether or not one is willing or suitable to become a teacher.

Ella: That [idea] has not grown [here in the studies] that this [teaching] is what I want. Maybe that I *can* do this. But I don't know if I'm a little too theoretical, like maybe I like studying more [than teaching]. I have received good feedback [in teaching practice], but I have probably taught by copying. That I can do, there's no problem. But now, as I start to become more conscious of things, of children, how they react and why, do I then change my teaching towards what I want and stop copying? Then I don't know if I'm a good teacher anymore.

Phoebe: I probably had not thought of what the work is actually like when I started to dream about it. After the first teaching practice, I thought, maybe this is not for me after all [...] it felt overwhelming that there were so many things happening that you should take into account. And there are so many children, and they all have their own needs that should be considered in teaching and in interacting with them. That felt really hard.

Within this counter-narrative, student teachers' agency in teacher identity negotiation was manifested as questioning the normative master narratives of teaching and actively producing counter-narratives. However, this process of questioning and

countering appeared to prompt some students to also question their suitability to become teachers.

## Discussion and conclusions

In this study, we explored Finnish first-year student teachers' agency in their teacher identity negotiations and applied a narrative inquiry approach which resulted in master and counter-narratives being identified based on analysis carried out across the interview data. Master and counter-narratives reveal what is socially and culturally expected and normative (e.g. Bamberg 2004; Heikkilä et al. 2022; Hyvärinen 2020), and our findings highlight the importance of recognising and unravelling the master and counter-narratives within teacher education. These narratives frame what types of teacher identity and agency are perceived as possible for future teachers. In particular, our study calls attention to the counter-narratives, as they may shed light on the prevailing presumptions and practices and offer suggestions regarding spaces for agency in identity negotiation in teacher education.

In this study, the master narrative suggested that student teachers' agency in teacher identity negotiation involved seeking to achieve the expected goals while sustaining one's internalised preconceptions of teaching as practical work. The implications of this narrative can be interpreted in several ways. Previous studies have demonstrated that unconscious lay theories may hinder student teachers from connecting what they learn in teacher education to their evolving teacher identities; for instance, when they meet the demanding realities of the classroom, they are more likely to revert to their preconceptions or adapt to the context without reflecting on their beliefs and knowledge about teaching and learning (Androusou and Tsafos 2018; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013). This may undermine their motivation, weaken their agency at work, and compromise their continuous negotiation of teacher identity (Hong 2010; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2013). However, as the participants in this study were first-year student teachers, it is possible that they encounter experiences with teacher education later in their studies that prompt them to start questioning and critically reflecting upon their preconceptions.

The potentially worrisome issue from the perspective of continuous development of teacher education programmes is the apparently hegemonic position of this type of master narrative amongst the student teachers in this study. The master narrative that regarded teaching predominantly as 'practice' appeared to also propose social and cultural norms attached to being a 'typical' future teacher. This may, in turn, restrict student teachers' possible identities and their agency in the teacher identity construction. In Finland, new teachers are expected to become 'change agents' who are able to critically reflect upon and evaluate what types of changes are necessary in education and can also implement the required changes (Toom and Husu 2016). Hence, traditional views of teachers as experts transferring knowledge to new generations are no longer valid (see Simola et al. 2017), and teacher education is called for to support students developing critical reflective views regarding teaching.

The counter-narratives of our study offered valuable insights concerning student teachers' agency in identity negotiation. First, the counter-narrative of transforming teacher identity illuminated agency in teacher identity negotiation. This was manifested as readiness and will to transform one's preconceptions of teaching towards

knowledge encountered in teacher education. However, this counter-narrative could be interpreted to also suggest adoption of the teacher education's institutional, culturally framed narrative of teaching without questioning or critically reflecting upon it more deeply. We argue that in teacher education, it is important to enhance students' awareness of the culturally dominant master narratives, even those of contemporary teacher education. This entails encouraging students to critically reflect upon and even question what they are taught and what they encounter in teacher education so that they can negotiate their teacher identities consciously and learn to adopt critical agentic stances regarding contemporary narratives of teaching and learning throughout their teaching careers (see e.g. Leijen, Pedaste, and Lepp 2020; Søreide 2006).

The second counter-narrative, questioning teacher identity, encompassed accounts of student teachers' agency in teacher identity negotiation as questioning the normative master narratives of teaching and actively producing counter-narratives. Our findings suggested that student teachers may reach this kind of questioning through critical reflection and through transforming their understanding of teachers' work. This kind of reflective questioning is a goal of teacher education. However, it appeared in this study that the process of questioning and countering might have led some students to also question their ability and willingness to become teachers. This finding may indicate that student teachers would need more support from teacher educators during critical reflection processes. Furthermore, this finding may point to the entanglement of master and counter-narratives: if the master narrative delineates what is favourable for a prospective teacher, is it more difficult to negotiate teacher identity if one's experiences and aspirations do not 'fit' the master narrative? More research is needed regarding this question, and how teacher education can support every student's agency in teacher identity negotiation.

This study has some limitations. One limitation was that the participants were first-year student teachers, and their path towards becoming teachers was merely beginning. Hence, it is possible that the master and counter-narratives may evolve or transform during their teacher education. In this study, data were gathered at only one moment in time; thus, interpretations of student teachers' identity development cannot be made. Furthermore, we do not aim to claim that the narratives of this study would be all-encompassing; rather, these are the narratives that could be identified from the data collected from the 16 student teachers in a specific context and time. Our aim has been to use narratives to highlight the social and relational nature of student teachers' agency in identity negotiations. Hence, we have not investigated individual student teachers or aimed to review their identity negotiations in any manner; rather, we turn the focus on the narratives that are not individuals' 'own', but that are socially and culturally constructed and reconstructed in the context of teacher education. By doing this, we have also aimed to diminish the risk of misrepresenting an individual student's experiences and stories, a question to be considered in an experience-focused narrative research (Squire 2008). As we did not interpret individual students' stories, we did not perform member-checking to ensure the reliability of interpretations. Two of the authors participated in the interpretation process, as explained in the data analysis section.

In teacher education, it is important to consider what is being pursued regarding future teachers' professional identities and how student teachers' agency in identity negotiation

is being supported. Based on our study, we suggest that in teacher education, different emerging master and counter-narratives should be unravelled and critically reflected as these narratives may frame student teachers' agency in identity negotiations.

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