Becoming a Language Teacher: A dream come true or a source of anxiety?

Anne Huhtala, University of Helsinki

In this qualitative study the author examined personal narratives written by 14 Finnish speaking student teachers of Swedish, in order to find out what they tell about their thoughts and feelings concerning their future work as language teachers. The following three themes were in focus: firstly, what university students tell about their reasons for wanting to become teachers in the first place; secondly, what kinds of worries concerning their future work they mention in their narratives; and thirdly, how student teachers could be supported during transition from teacher education to teaching. According to the study, students choose teaching for reasons that are related to: (a) teacher identity and (b) teaching profession. They see teaching as meaningful and rewarding, but tell about worries connected to: (a) appearing in class and not having enough subject knowledge; (b) contacts with teenagers and their parents; and (c) heavy workload and lack of time. The results give support to previous studies indicating that novice teachers would benefit from organized mentoring sessions during transition to working life, so as to make it smoother and less challenging.

Keywords: teacher education, professional development, second language teaching, narratives, Swedish

1 Introduction

During earlier decades in Finland, teaching was often regarded as a lifelong commitment, even a calling. In our postmodern world where economic values – and thereby also economic vocabulary – seem to set the tone for talking about working life, the word 'calling' is often regarded as old-fashioned and even patronizing. Besides, many young teachers leave their work after only a couple of years, and many more consider doing so in the future; this phenomenon seems to be common in most Western countries (European Commission 2010a; Sabar 2004; Roness 2011).

For this reason, serious consideration has been given to how the transition from teacher education to working life, as well as the crucial first years at work, could be made easier for novice teachers. The challenging transition from educational context to teaching has been described as a *praxis shock* (European Commission 2010b; see also Kelchtermans & Ballet 2002). Sabar (2004) compares this initial praxis shock with the *culture shock* that immigrants often experience when moving to a new country.

In this article, the focus is on Finnish speaking university students who want to become language teachers of Swedish. Swedish is one of the two national languages in Finland (alongside Finnish), spoken by approximately 5.4 % of the population, mainly in the coastal areas. Many Finns have hardly any contact with the language outside educational contexts, which means that, for them, Swedish can be seen as a foreign language. Lately, there has been a heated debate in the media on the status of Swedish as a (compulsory) school subject in Finnish schools and in the society at large (Juurakko-Paavola & Palviainen 2011). Besides, teaching Swedish in Finnish schools can be more demanding than teaching English, for example. English is seen as a *lingua franca*, also academically (e.g., Mauranen & Ranta 2008), a language that 'everybody' needs and thereby also has to learn, whereas learning other foreign languages is not seen as equally relevant.

I am interested in finding out how student teachers see their future work as teachers: Is it a dream come true or a source of anxiety? My study concentrates on what they write about their reasons for wanting to become teachers and how they see the transition from educational context to working life. This research interest is based on a very practical ground. As a university lecturer involved in teaching prospective language teachers, I am interested in their personal narratives: how they see the transition from teacher education to teaching and what could perhaps be done in order to better equip these future professionals for the demanding school reality of today.

The research questions in this article are as follows: firstly, what do student teachers tell about their reasons for wanting to become teachers in the first place?; secondly, what kinds of worries concerning their future work do they take up in their personal narratives?; and thirdly, how could we support these novice teachers in order to make their transition to working life easier?

2 Becoming a teacher: A demanding process

Teaching is a valued profession in Finland. There are lots of applicants to teacher education despite – or perhaps due to? – the fact that qualifying for a teacher's job generally requires a Master's degree (on the Finnish education system, see Ministry/Education n.d.; on teacher education in Finland, see also Niemi 2012; Maaranen 2009: 11–16). In the international student achievement program PISA, Finland has been ranked among the top countries for several years; the learning outcomes of Finnish students can thereby be described as very good (Ministry/Pisa n.d.). At least partly, the Finnish success in these kinds of assessments has been ascribed to equitable education policies and high-quality teacher education (e.g., Darling-Hammond 2012; Niemi 2012). An important part of subject teacher education is one whole year of pedagogical studies including practicum periods, i.e., practical training periods in schools. The pedagogical studies can usually be divided into two or even more parts, and be taken during several years of study. During these studies, student teachers focus, among other things, on integrating subject matter and pedagogy, for example by giving lessons in their own subject(s) and getting feedback on their teaching.

It is worth acknowledging, however, that even when the quality of teacher education is high, and students are motivated to start working as teachers, transition from education to working life can be experienced as stressful. In this

section of my article, I will briefly present some earlier studies that highlight the challenging process of becoming a teacher and adjusting to the numerous demands of the profession. Questions concerning stress (Sabar 2004), agency (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2011), need of support (Blomberg 2008), construction of community and teacher identity (Trent 2014), and importance of reflection (Golombek & Johnson 2004) are discussed.

Sabar (2004) remarks that the experiences of novice teachers can be compared to those of immigrants: novice teachers go through a similar kind of adjustment process, where enthusiasm and excitement during the 'fantasy stage' are gradually replaced by a cultural shock when the harsh reality of a teacher's work replaces the positive expectations that novice teachers have had. This can lead to feelings of marginality, and novice teachers' lack of self-confidence and their dependence on other people's willingness to help can make them insecure and stressed. Novice teachers may find it embarrassing to approach their more experienced colleagues and to admit that they need help. The workload is experienced as hard, and there are numerous new things to learn and manage. Novice teachers are burdened by the big responsibility that teaching entails, and they are worried about many things, including other people's expectations, classroom management, and relationships with their pupils' parents. If a novice teacher cannot cope s/he will leave the profession, but according to the researcher, also the ones that stay and continue working as teachers, feel stress and disillusionment at this initial stage. According to the title of Sabar's article, novice teachers go –'from heaven to reality through crisis'. However, this process 'is not a linear progression' (p. 157), and the different stages have no clear boundaries.

Novice foreign language teachers' professional development has been examined in a large longitudinal project at the University of Jyväskylä (see also Nyman 2009). Within this project, Ruohotie-Lyhty (2011) studied the development of eleven Finnish recently qualified language teachers during the first three to four years of their career, analyzing interview data and, to some extent, journal entries and written reflections by these teachers. The researcher came to the conclusion that agency is very important in the professional development of teachers. An active attitude made it possible for teachers to develop their teaching intentionally and reflectively, whereas a reactive attitude involved a passive acceptance of outside norms and a traditional view of teaching.

In her doctoral thesis, Blomberg (2008) studied how Finnish novice teachers experience their first year of teaching at comprehensive school. Her data consisted of seven working group meetings and interviews with five qualified novice teachers. According to the study, the first year of work is experienced as hard by novice teachers. The workload is regarded as heavy, building relationships between school and home as demanding, and teaching heterogeneous groups as challenging. Creating contacts with colleagues is also experienced as difficult. However, these novice teachers get pleasure from their work: they see relations with pupils as positive and feel encouraged by their own success in teaching. They comment on the gap that exists between teacher education and the actual teaching job (see also Sabar 2004), and express a longing for support through systematic guidance and induction. As the researcher states, this is a problem not only in Finland, but also globally.

Also Trent (2014) has examined the professional development of teachers. In his study, he was interested in the construction of community and teacher

identity of six Chinese student teachers who worked in pairs during their teaching practicum in Hong Kong. During their practicum, each pair of student teachers shared responsibility for their lessons, from planning to evaluation. Trent studied teacher identity formation 'as the interplay between individual agency and social discourses' (p. 32). The researcher found there was an identity conflict experienced by all three pairs of student teachers during their teaching practicum; being a teacher seemed to mean different things to the practicum pairs and other teacher communities, e.g., more experienced school-based teachers. The student teachers felt that the kinds of professional identities that were esteemed in the community of pre-service teachers (such as having a student-centred approach to teaching and learning) were regarded as problematic and even undesirable in their placement schools. In order to solve this problem and to increase mutual understanding, Trent suggests teacher educators could act as mediators between different teacher communities during practicum periods.

Järvinen (1999) has described teachers' professional development as dynamic and multidimensional, and emphasized the important role of *reflection* in managing the process. The role of reflection is evident also in a study by Golombek and Johnson (2004) where they examine how narrative inquiry can help teachers develop their professionalism. When teachers narrate about their work, their thoughts and their feelings, they give meaning to their experiences, (re)interpret them, and learn more about themselves as teachers. Narratives written by (both novice and experienced) teachers can be seen as 'a mediational space' or 'a semiotic tool that facilitates teacher development' (Golombek & Johnson 2004: 324). By reflecting on their activity, teachers can gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their work (Barkhuizen 2011: 394). (On reflection, e.g., Schön 1983; Emsheimer et al. 2005; Maaranen 2009: 30–38; see also Zeichner & Liston 1987; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2011.)

In this study, I wanted to give student teachers an opportunity to reflect on their developmental process through writing a personal (autobiographical) narrative about their expectations and worries concerning teaching. Naturally, there are numerous positive aspects mentioned by student teachers when they tell about their choice of career; these features have been discussed in more detail in some of my earlier studies (e.g., Huhtala 2008; Huhtala & Lehti-Eklund 2010). As 'emotions are actually a driving factor in teacher development' (Golombek & Johnson 2004: 324), it is important for prospective teachers to have a chance of expressing and (re)interpreting also negative feelings concerning their future work.

3 Data and method

My data consist of personal narratives written by 14 Finnish speaking language students at the University of Helsinki in 2012. All these students have Swedish either as their major or as one of their minor subjects, and they all aim at becoming teachers of Swedish in the future. One of the students is a young man, the rest are women, most of them in their early twenties. There are students who have studied at the university for only a couple of years, whereas others are more advanced students who are almost ready with their studies. All of these students have pedagogy as one of their minors and nearly all of them have already done some pre-service (practicum) teaching as a part of their

pedagogical studies or have worked as replacement teachers for short periods of time.

I gave the participants of three of my Swedish language courses (33 students) an optional writing task with the title: 'Me – a teacher-to-be' (*Jag – blivande lärare*). 14 students chose to write a personal narrative on this subject, and they all gave their permission to use it as my data. As I presented the writing task, I told the students that they could use a question mark if they were still uncertain of their choice or if they wanted to reflect on their choice critically. I got four question marks (one of them in parenthesis) and one exclamation mark; the other titles had neither of these. The narratives were written in Swedish, so the text extracts that are used in this article are translated from Swedish to English. The names used in this article are pseudonyms.

This study can be seen as a narrative study in that I use personal narratives as my data. There are many different definitions for the concept *narrative*. Traditionally it has been seen as a story told about past events or experiences. A narrative can also be defined as a certain type of discourse consisting of a chain of meaningful events that have to do with each other, as well as of an evaluation of the narrated events (Bruner 1996: 121). Also Barkhuizen (2011) emphasizes the multiple meanings of narrative and narrative research. He defines '*narrative knowledging* as an umbrella term to refer to the meaning making, learning, and knowledge construction that takes place at all stages of a narrative research project' (p. 395).

Bruner (1987) points out that there is a mutual connection between life and narrative: they affect and are affected by each other; it can be said that 'we construct ourselves autobiographically' (p. 12), through the stories we tell about ourselves and our lives. When people tell about their lives, they always make interpretations of their experiences. They also make choices about what to tell and what to omit: it is never possible to tell 'everything'. This, in turn, affects the way people experience their lives and how they orient towards the future. The constructive nature of narratives implies that personal (autobiographical) narratives are important for identity formation. Eventually, 'we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives' (p. 15).

The stories that student teachers tell about their past, their present and their plans for the future, can be seen as significant also for their professional identity. As Riessman (2001) points out, 'Personal narratives are, at core, meaning making units of discourse'. Narrators who tell about their lives, 'are performing themselves; they are doing their identities' (Barkhuizen 2011: 399). In my earlier work (e.g., Huhtala 2008; Huhtala & Lehti-Eklund 2010, 2012) I have described (also professional) identity as a flexible, multifaceted, temporal construction that evolves in participation and is constantly negotiated and reconstructed. Identity should therefore not be defined in an essentialist way, for example as a personality trait or as a stable and unchanging notion of self (see also Kelchtermans 2005, 2009).

There are many different approaches and models for analyzing narrative data, and as Riessman (2005) states, researchers can use a combination of them in their work. Her model includes four different approaches for analyzing personal (especially oral) narratives: (a) thematic analysis (emphasis on content); (b) structural analysis (emphasis on form); (c) interactional analysis (meaning making between narrator and listener); and (d) performative analysis (narrating as presentation of identities). Barkhuizen's (2011: 401–405) model has much in common with Riessman's. He presents three approaches: (a) focus on narrative

content; (b) focus on narrative form; and (c) focus on narrative context (e.g., interactional or discursive). (More on narrative research, see, e.g., Bruner 1987; Polkinghorne 1988; Heikkinen 2002; Kalaja et al. 2008.)

In this study, the term narrative is used in a very broad sense, to denote each personal narrative written by the 14 student teachers. I analyzed these narratives using a qualitative, thematic content analysis that can be called *analysis of narratives* (Polkinghorne 1995); this method describes data, e.g., through categories or themes (cf. Riessman's 'thematic analysis" and Barkhuizen's 'focus on narrative content'). When analyzing the data, I coded all the narratives several times, each time concentrating on different aspects of the research questions. First of all, I coded the reasons given by students for their choice of becoming a teacher, and was able to divide these reasons into two categories: reasons connected to (a) teacher identity, and those associated with (b) teaching profession.

When these categories were formed and the themes within these categories were coded and analyzed, I concentrated on the worries expressed by students concerning their future career as teachers. This time, three categories could be formed: (a) appearing in class and not having enough subject knowledge; (b) teenagers and their parents; and (c) heavy workload and lack of time. After that, themes within these categories were coded and analyzed. Naturally, these categories are interdependent, but it can be seen as relevant for this study to consider and discuss each main category separately. The analysis as a whole helped me in answering the third research question about how to support these student teachers during their transition from university to working life. During the entire process, the narratives were seen through a lens of performativity, as presentation of identities (Riessman 2005: 5).

4 Findings

This section presents the results of the study. In the first part of the section I will examine the narratives in order to find out what student teachers tell about their reasons for wanting to become language teachers in the first place. In the second part, I concentrate on the worries taken up by student teachers when they ponder on their transition from university context to working life.

4.1 Reasons for wanting to become a teacher

4.1.1 Teacher identity

In the minds of many language students at university level, becoming a teacher is 'the only possibility', as one of the student teachers (Helena) writes. If becoming a researcher or a translator is not an option, for one reason or another, working as a teacher may feel like a more practical and hands-on alternative. For those who want to start working as teachers, the choice of career has often been more or less self-evident from very early on; 'teaching has always been my dream job' is a sentence I could read many times in my data. In several cases, becoming a teacher has been a dream from the first school year on, or even longer. Seeing teaching as a dream has come up also in earlier research (e.g., Manuel & Hughes 2006; Huhtala 2008).

There are student teachers who tell that they either have had or still have a dream of becoming class teachers, or teachers of some other subject than Swedish. Teaching itself is often regarded as more important than the subject they are going to teach. This has to do with the fact that many of them have been dreaming of teaching since early childhood. However, this does not mean they would dislike the subject(s) they have chosen; they just see teaching as something special.

> I always knew I was going to become a teacher, but choosing which subject to teach was really hard. (Emilia)

> Teaching is a lovely job – the best and the only possibility. (Netta)

During earlier decades, teachers' work was often described as a calling (a vocation). According to Estola and Syrjälä (2002: 90) a *calling* is usually connected with two things: firstly, that a person wants to serve others, meaning that s/he sees his/her work as important from the society's point of view, and secondly, that s/he gets personal satisfaction from his/her work. Nowadays, talking about teaching as a calling is not as common as it used to be. According to this study, however, student teachers tend to see teaching in a way that can only be described as a calling. They describe their future profession using phrases that entail a strong social and personal commitment to teaching. Some of them even use the word 'calling' explicitly. They tell about wanting to help, support and serve other people (see also Thomson & McIntyre 2013: 416), about wanting to do something that matters, both for society at large and for young people. It seems to be important for them to affect young people's lives positively. These students appear to have chosen teaching as a career, at least partly, for altruistic reasons.

Also Manuel and Hughes (2006), in their study on Australian pre-service teachers' motivations for choosing to teach, concluded that their study participants had three main reasons for their decision: they wanted 'to work with young people to make a difference in their lives' (pp. 5, 20); they wanted to engage with their subject area; and they saw teaching as a personally meaningful and fulfilling job.

One of the student teachers, Tea, describes her 'burning desire' to become a teacher:

> One thing that has always fascinated me in teaching is that it feels like something meaningful. I'm not interested in saving or changing the whole world – that is something I neither can nor wish to do. However, if I can make a difference in one young person's life, or perhaps in the lives of several persons, and make their lives better somehow, then I'll be satisfied. (Tea)

This student – like many others – wants to make a difference in her pupils' lives, and it is this wish that she calls the best reward for teaching (see also Kelchtermans 2005: 999). Wanting to be a reliable, 'solid' adult in the lives of insecure young people was also mentioned in the narratives. One of the student teachers, Netta, tells that she herself once was a timid teenager who felt lost and helpless. A warm and trustworthy teacher at upper secondary school had helped

her enormously just by noticing her and her efforts. Another young student teacher narrates:

> A few years ago I was an insecure teenager who searched for her own way of life. At that time it was hard to find any grown-up person I could rely on. I see it as a challenge to get 14-year-old young people to trust me. … I've seen many kinds of teachers during my own school years – and I am so grateful for some of them. In the best case, students remember their good teachers and their wisdoms forever. (Iris)

These student teachers seem to use their own experiences in schools as a resource and as a justification for their decision to choose a career as a teacher (see also Thomson & McIntyre 2013: 415).

Students frequently refer to their own personality traits when explaining their choice of career. They tell about their ability to get along with different kinds of people, to organize and prioritize, to inspire and motivate children.

> I feel extremely good when I can inspire pupils and let my love for languages show. (Helena)

> I think I'm good at making children inspired, and that's the best feeling I know. (Iris)

Interestingly, also the willingness to work hard, to develop oneself and one's work as well as to overcome challenges, came up as reasons for wanting to work as a teacher. Student teachers even joke about their busy schedules and hectic lives.

> I already know exactly what kind of a teacher I'm going to be. I like having a crammed calendar all the time and living on the verge of burn-out. (Vera)

The writers seem to be aware of the fact that working as a teacher requires a lot of work, and they appear determined to manage, and to develop their professionalism. This can be seen as encouraging with regard to these student teachers' future coping. It is an indication of an active attitude that helps novice teachers to get better in their work (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2011). In his study on teachers' coping, Aho (2011: 9) mentions the wish for self-improvement as one of the 'most salient individual factors in teachers' coping'.

In many cases, students have some of their former teachers as important role models:

> During my school years I've had many teachers that I respect and that have been some kind of role models for me. If I can have a similar impact on my own pupils, or at least some of them, I feel that will be the best reward for my work. As it's said, we teach not only our subject: what our pupils remember after ten years is the way we've behaved towards them, and the attitudes and values that we've had. (Tea)

A couple of students also tell that either one or both of their parents are teachers, which has inspired and motivated them to start working as teachers themselves.

> My mother works as a teacher – that's why teaching as a profession has always been a part of my life in some way. (Erika)

Also Thomson and McIntyre (2013: 416), in their study on prospective teachers' goal orientation, have stated that for some of their informants, 'a powerful, *meaningful relationship* with a previous teacher or a family member' has been an important motivator for choosing to become a teacher (see also Manuel & Hughes 2006).

4.1.2 Teaching profession

In their narratives, student teachers describe teaching as a humane and social job that is versatile and rewarding. Many of the writers state that school environment as such and everything that is connected with it fascinates them. Something that I found exciting, was a statement made by the male writer, Tomi. He declares that for him, 'school represents stability and security': school is a safe haven in a world where everything else changes all the time. This remark can be seen as a little surprising, as both the school system and the curricula have gone through big changes during the last decades. But perhaps the writer thinks about the essence of school institution, a setting that has been – and still is – a place for teaching and learning.

He might also have 'the didactic triangle' in mind, a triangle uniting the teacher, students and subject matter (Kansanen & Meri 1999: 112–113; Kelchtermans 2009: 258): the pedagogical relationship between students and teachers is still seen as the nexus of education. Even if Tomi is the only one who mentions the unchanging nature of education explicitly, implicit remarks to the same effect can be found also in other narratives. Here student teachers refer to their own experiences as students and expect to find similar phenomena in the schools of today.

Student teachers often regard working with children and teenagers as one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching (also Richardson & Watt 2006; Roness 2011), and see themselves as good at this kind of work.

> I am good at organizing different activities for children – and kids usually like me. (Maija)

This has come up also in earlier studies. Based on her study on prospective teachers' beliefs, von Wright (1997: 264) writes, 'Many students consider themselves to be skilful with children and socially competent persons – a main reason for wanting to become teachers'.

Students also reflect on the (implicit) demands that teaching as a profession makes on them. Tomi, e.g., is worried about being too impatient, and asks: 'Do I have enough patience to explain the same thing over and over again, if the pupils don't understand what I'm saying?' Here he reflects on his own personality traits in relation to working as a teacher. Nevertheless, he does not see these as a hindrance for his career. Instead, he concludes:

> Concerning my weaknesses, isn't it good that I'm aware of them? In that way I can develop. I don't know what else I would like to do, other than become a teacher. (Tomi)

Prospective teachers seem to be well aware of the demands and challenges involved in teaching. In the following section of this article, I will look more closely at the worries mentioned by student teachers.

4.2 Worries expressed by student teachers

4.2.1 Appearing in class and not having enough subject knowledge

The first category of worries taken up by student teachers has to do with two kinds of things: firstly, appearing in class and secondly, not having enough subject knowledge. There are student teachers who refer directly to their lacking self-confidence when taking up these worries. One of them, Netta, concludes that she is still so young, not much older than the students she will be teaching soon. 'Do I have enough courage to stand in front of the pupils?' is a question that many of the student teachers ask themselves, feeling a bit nervous and even afraid of standing in front of the class. Lacking confidence causes stress (Sabar 2004) and feelings of inferiority.

Some student teachers tell a lot about their timidity and shyness, even 'stage fright'. It is interesting that also university students at an advanced level and even after a couple of practicum periods take up these kinds of problems.

> One of my friends said to me that I'm far too shy and cautious to become a teacher. She is right, I don't want to stand in the limelight, I don't need an audience and – to be honest – due to my 'stage fright' I've struggled extremely hard with my studies. … But if I become a teacher, I'll try to become as good as possible, with this personality. (Iida)

Even if practicum periods (that are an integral part of subject teacher education also in Finland) cannot take away all the shyness and insecurity felt by student teachers, they are still regarded as one of the most rewarding parts of teacher education (also Roness 2011; Bendtsen 2012). This can be seen as natural since practicum periods in schools mainly concentrate on planning lessons (on planning at different levels, Mutton et al. 2011), teaching, observing other teachers' lessons and reflecting on one's own teaching – things that are directly connected to the practical work of a teacher.

Teaching a language that is not your mother tongue is a demanding task. This comes up also in the narratives written by these student teachers. They ask themselves questions like 'Do I know enough?', and 'Am I good enough?' in this foreign language. One of the areas that cause most doubts and feelings of insecurity in future second language (L2) teachers of Swedish is grammar. They are afraid of making grammatical mistakes and wonder if they will be good teachers if they still make mistakes themselves. Another thing that causes distress is oral production. These students have Finnish as their mother tongue, and the languages they are going to teach (Swedish and often also other languages) are foreign languages to them. They would like to be 'perfect' also in the languages they are going to teach, and are sometimes afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation and vocabulary (Huhtala 2012). The fears stated in the following excerpt can be found in many of the narratives in my data:

> Another thing that I've been wondering about is courage. How can I ever become a good language teacher if I'm afraid of standing in front of the

class? Or if I'm afraid of making mistakes? It's quite irritating to have an oral presentation that I've worked hard with because I'm so nervous. Afterwards I can't even tell what happened during the presentation. I do hope this gets easier in the future, so that I'll learn not to worry about my mistakes. (Leena)

A bit later in her narrative, this student teacher tells eagerly about her wish to become a teacher – a long-time dream – and takes up a week-long teaching experience she had a few months earlier. She tells it was 'demanding, but at the same time so rewarding'. This experience made her wish to become a teacher even stronger. Her dream of becoming a teacher is thereby stronger than her fear of making mistakes.

4.2.2 Teenagers and their parents

Working with teenagers is not always easy. This is something that many student teachers comment on. They either mention their own experiences as teenaged students in restless classrooms or refer to their teaching experiences during practicum periods.

In their narratives, student teachers comment on the difficulty of maintaining order in classrooms, or teenagers who do not behave properly. Classroom management is a problem raised by novice teachers in several studies (e.g., Sabar 2004; Blomberg 2008). Besides, if you are a young teacher yourself, teenagers often test you by behaving badly and being extra noisy. Questions concerning authority are taken up by student teachers.

Do I have enough authority over young people? Can I be a confident teacher if I'm just a little older than my students? And how can I keep order in the classroom? How can I make them learn the language? I could continue this list of questions forever. (Erika)

This student teacher, like her fellow students, has lots of questions to ask. As Feiman-Nemser (2003: 26) has stated, 'For the novice, the questions are unending'.

Meeting parents of young pupils as well as of teenagers is regarded as a challenge – and even as something scary (see also Blomberg 2008). As one of the student teachers (Netta) remarks, parents of today are demanding. They seem to consider school as a 'service provider', and young teachers are worried about whether they can provide the service that parents require for their children. Using this kind of vocabulary to describe schools – and thereby regarding teaching as a commodity – can be seen as an indication of a widespread consumerist, 'economy-driven' ideology also in education (Siivonen 2010).

4.2.3 Heavy workload and lack of time

Student teachers know very well that a teacher's work is tough, demanding, and hard (see also Richardson & Watt 2006; Blomberg 2008). Some of them give long lists of tasks they know a teacher must perform, including: planning lessons, evaluating exams and papers, being a member of various teams, writing reports, making decisions that affect people's lives, developing one's own teaching, meeting parents, taking part in teacher meetings and different kinds of courses,

having contacts with student health care, planning school trips, being responsible for the class, etc. Mia, a young student teacher states:

> I did my pedagogical studies last year and got an opportunity to get to know the school world and to find out how it feels to work as a proper teacher. In the beginning it was a shock to notice how demanding and sometimes exhausting it was to work as a teacher. Earlier I hadn't even realized how much responsibility and how many tasks it contains. (Mia)

Novice teachers' experiences of a heavy workload have often come up also in earlier research; the workload of novice teachers is typically the same as that of more experienced teachers, but beginning teachers are simultaneously burdened by many additional challenges, including lacking methods in classroom management, planning and evaluation, as well as adjusting to a new work environment (e.g., Feiman-Nemser 2003; Ruohotie-Lyhty 2011: 34–35). Besides, some student teachers comment on the fact that teacher education allows them to tackle problematic situations one at a time, often together with their supervisors or fellow students, whereas school reality forces them to deal with 'a bunch of problems at the same time', all by themselves, often in face-threatening situations that require immediate action. Even if these things are discussed during teacher education, at least to some extent, reality seems to come as some kind of a shock to many novice teachers.

Expectations towards teachers are high, not only expressed by pupils and their parents, but also by society at large. But perhaps the greatest expectations of all are the ones experienced by (prospective) teachers themselves concerning their own work. This has to do with the serious engagement and commitment that teachers have to their work in schools.

Student teachers especially mention the first year in teaching as hard, naming it 'a frightening thought'. 'Everyone says it is tough', some of them write, 'everyone' meaning their friends and relatives, teachers they know, as well as writers of articles in newspapers and periodicals. Again, students have long lists of challenges that a first-year teacher faces:

> Everything is new: the school, administrators, colleagues, practices of the school, pupils; planning one's own lessons and materials; the enormous responsibility; how to maintain order in the classroom; being in a hurry all the time and getting stressed; meeting parents; participating in different meetings and courses; evaluating papers, …

One thing that seems to worry almost all student teachers is time – or rather, the lack of it. They comment on their fear of having to be available all around the clock, seven days a week. Is it even possible to separate work and leisure time from each other – and how could that be done? This seems to be a question that occupies the minds of prospective teachers. Fear of getting stressed and even fear of burn-out are mentioned by student teachers. One of them writes:

> Your work is not finished when the school day is finished. I'm afraid that I will be too conscientious in my work. A teacher should learn to say 'no', and to stop worrying about pupils in her free time. Otherwise there is a risk for burn-out. (Meeri)

'If the job is hard and time-consuming and if there is no time of your own, is there then any time to develop oneself as a teacher and to develop one's work?' This question, written by one of the student teachers (Netta), is very relevant and hits the core of the discussion on how novice teachers can manage the transition from teacher education to working life and how they can come through the challenging first years at work. Novice teachers express a wish – and a need – to get support in their work, but have doubts concerning the possibility of asking for help. They can be afraid or even ashamed, and feel it as hard to approach their more experienced colleagues in a work environment where all are busy with their own work and where novice teachers are often expected to carry the same workload as more experienced teachers, right from the start.

As Feiman-Nemser (2003: 25) states, 'beginning teachers are on their own, faced with the same responsibilities as their experienced colleagues'. 'Is it okay to ask for help?' and 'Is it okay to talk to others about problems in teaching?' are common questions in texts written by student teachers (see also Sabar 2004). Not having the courage to ask for help can be seen as problematic, since the opportunity to discuss one's work is an important factor affecting teachers' coping (Aho 2011: 9).

5 Discussion and conclusions

I want to come back to the title of my article where I ask if becoming a teacher is a dream come true or a source of anxiety. On the basis of my analysis, it is possible to claim that it is both at the same time. The writers of these personal narratives are really enthusiastic and see teaching as an important and rewarding job. In spite of this, they ponder on how they can cope in their work, i.e., do a good job as teachers; get along with students, parents and colleagues; help those who need help and support, etc., without getting too stressed and without losing their enthusiasm towards teaching. They are prepared to work hard, but not ready to sacrifice themselves and their health for the sake of their work.

What could then be a solution to this problem? In fact, one of the student teachers, Tea, tells about a process that, according to her, has helped her enormously. She describes her own experiences of *mentoring* during the previous year when she did her pedagogical studies. Angelides and Mylordou (2011: 534) define mentoring in the following way: 'Mentoring means that a newcomer teacher is guided by a mentor teacher who acts as a consultant; a supporter', in order to strengthen the newcomer's professional development. (On mentoring: New Teacher Center n.d.; Roehrig et al. 2008; on induction programmes in different countries: Angelides & Mylordou 2011: 535–536.)

An organized and regularly occurring possibility of discussing matters related to teaching can be a powerful tool in teacher development. For Tea, being mentored during a whole school year was a very rewarding process. It gave her an opportunity of 'sharing stories', of reflecting on her work with more experienced qualified teachers. Reflection – especially by narrating about one's feelings, experiences and plans – can be seen as a key factor in developing one's professional identity (Kelchtermans 2009).

Tea tells vividly about the positive effects of mentoring on her. She writes she has learnt to notice what is positive in her as a teacher and in her own teaching.

She has also got more self-confidence, and feels she has become more credible and trustworthy in the eyes of her young students.

> Today, I don't have any problem with starting a new lesson for new students, and I'm more aware of the difference between myself as a grown-up teacher and them as teenagers. ... I still feel insecure at times, but it doesn't feel like a threat anymore; instead, I take it as a challenge. (Tea)

Tea has learnt to get and take more responsibility in her work, at the same time enjoying her teaching (see also Ruohotie-Lyhty 2011: 50, 56–58). But what is most important, she tells she has been able to develop her teacher identity and found her own way to be a teacher, not only by imitating her favourite teachers, but by developing her own way to work in the school context, together with her colleagues. This narrative supports Heikkinen's (1999: 284–285) idea of a teacher's professional identity as a combination of personal identity ('Who am I?') and collective identity ('Who are we?').

On the basis of my data, I can also conclude that former and current teachers are often very important role models and sources of support to student teachers (Manuel & Hughes 2006: 15–16). Students tell they appreciate all the assistance, advice and encouragement their teachers have given them. One of the students, Erika, writes about her own shyness and tells that she even considered choosing another job because of her insecurity. Then, during one lesson in pedagogy, an elderly professor had talked about shyness as a resource, as a means of understanding and accepting the shyness and insecurity of other people. This had made an enormous impact on Erika, and in some way made her stronger and more confident in her plans to become a teacher.

When evaluating the results of my study, it is worth remembering that the participants of this study *chose* to write on this subject, and they wrote their narratives to me, one of their subject teachers at the university. They seemed to appreciate the possibility of reflecting on their professional development, and commented on the writing task in a positive way. These students are relatively certain of their choice of career and willing – as well as able – to reflect on their decision to become teachers and on teaching as a profession. They can thereby be seen as a special group, and the results of the study cannot be generalized or directly applied to other contexts. In spite of all this – and also based on earlier studies – I believe the experiences narrated by these student teachers can be recognized and shared by many others, by prospective as well as novice teachers.

The results of this study give support to previous research (e.g., Roehrig et al. 2008; Löfström & Eisenschmidt 2009; Angelides & Mylordou 2011) where the value of appropriate mentoring has been recognized. Novice teachers would benefit from systematic mentoring during the transition from teacher education to working life. Regular meetings with a mentor, a more experienced colleague, could make it easier for novice teachers to discuss their worries – and ways of dealing with them – and ask all the questions they are pondering on. This would give them an opportunity to develop their teacher identity, and help them in bridging the gap between teacher education and teaching. In this way, the transition from university to working life would become smoother and less demanding.

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