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**Title:** Language teacher identities as socio-politically situated construction : Finnish and Brazilian student teachers' visualisations of their professional futures

**Year:** 2021

**Version:** Published version

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**Please cite the original version:**

Ruohotie-Lyhty, M., Camargo Aragão, R., & Pitkänen-Huhta, A. (2021). Language teacher identities as socio-politically situated construction : Finnish and Brazilian student teachers' visualisations of their professional futures. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 100, Article 103270. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2020.103270>



## Research paper

# Language teacher identities as socio-politically situated construction: Finnish and Brazilian student teachers' visualisations of their professional futures



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The study examined 61 Finnish and 60 Brazilian language teacher students' visualisations of their future identities.
- Two different socio-culturally situated perspectives on future identities were detected.
- The results revealed the radically different social status of teaching in the two countries.
- The study illuminates the role of context in teacher identity development.

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 26 March 2020

Received in revised form

1 December 2020

Accepted 8 December 2020

Available online 2 February 2021

## Keywords:

Pre-service teacher education

Teacher emotions

Teacher identity

Visual methods

## ABSTRACT

The process of envisioning the future is central to teachers' identity construction, but different environments create distinct sociocultural conditions for the process. This qualitative study drawing on visual-textual methods compares Finnish and Brazilian student teachers' desired and feared professional futures. Two different perspectives on future identities were detected: a desire for status and a desire for meaningfulness. The results revealed the radically different social status of teaching in the two countries and the role this played in the envisioned identities. The study highlights the importance of awareness of the socio-political nature of identity construction in developing teacher education.

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## 1. Introduction

One of my worries relates to resources. Will the textbooks and technical equipment enable the kind of learning that is expected from students? In the year 2026 technology will definitely be more developed than it is now but working with equipment always has its own challenges. Collegial support, which I also consider important, will help in this; sharing ideas and a good working atmosphere will increase well-being at work. (translation from Finnish)

In the quote above, one of the participants in this study, a

student teacher from Finland, describes her view of teaching in 2026 (10 years after the data collection). Her description reflects the contextual nature of envisioning one's future profession. It reflects both the social and physical conditions of work as well as personal values, hopes and ideals, and reveals "a desire for recognition, affiliation, security, and safety", which are key dimensions of personal and professional identities (Kalaja et al., 2016, p. 18). The process of envisioning the future has been found to be central to teachers' identity development (Barkhuizen, 2017), but different physical and social environments create different conditions for student teachers' identity construction. A range of material conditions, societal discourses and ideologies related to the teaching profession create a frame within which teachers can perceive themselves as professional actors and assess how far and how their desire for recognition, affiliation and safety can be satisfied (Kalaja et al., 2016, p. 18). In recent years, several studies on student teachers have provided insights into the conditions for teacher

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development and the resources that help student teachers build their narratives of professional identity (Barcelos, 2016; Barkhuizen, 2009; Kalaja, 2016; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Trent, 2013). A process of identifying with and distancing oneself from the available discourses of teaching has proven to be typical of the process (Kalaja, 2016; Trent, 2013). However, despite the various examples of student teacher identity development in different contexts, there has been little research particularly contrasting different environments and investigating the contextual and emotional nature of student teachers' identity development and their sense of professional integrity. This may be responsible for an ethnocentric perspective on teacher development, in which particular societal conditions for becoming a teacher are considered universal and therefore suitable for teacher education, wherever it takes place. This study aims to fill this gap in research by examining student teacher identity construction in two different contexts, Finland and Brazil. These two countries form drastically different contexts for teaching in terms of teachers' social status, salary and working conditions (Sahlberg, 2011; Sanches & Gama, 2016) and they therefore form an interesting environment in which to analyse the socio-politically embedded nature of student teachers' identity construction. The study is a result of co-operation between Finnish and Brazilian researchers with a shared interest in teachers' identities and emotions, and teacher education. As part of their co-operation, similar data were collected in both countries. These data were mainly collected in the form of visualisations of the future profession, which created better conditions for analysing and discussing the findings together: the visualisations were understandable to us all, while our languages were not.

## 2. Student teachers' identity construction

The concept of identity has been extensively discussed in the social sciences, including in education and applied linguistics (e.g., Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Norton, 2013), and as a consequence research on identity has drawn on numerous, sometimes contradictory theoretical approaches. The present study draws on post-structuralist approaches to identity construction, which are based on the idea of the centrality of discourse and power in the organisation of social life and the constant interplay between individuals and their context in the construction of subjectivities (Foucault, 1980; Norton & Toohey, 2011; Weedon, 1987/1997). According to this approach, individuals can be simultaneously subjects of a set of relationships and subject to a set of relationships, so social relationships play a crucial role in the ways in which individuals are constructed and construct themselves (Weedon, 1997).

From a post-structuralist perspective, there is, however, no direct and one-way structural power that affects individuals; rather, power is embedded in human interaction in the form of competing discourses, "ways of constituting knowledge in a particular way" (Weedon, 1987/1997, p. 108). In this context, identity construction is understood as a profoundly social and political activity and "identities as multiple, changing and a site of struggle" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 414). In the construction of identities, individuals are constantly affected and limited by their social context, but they are free to oppose the hegemonic discourses surrounding them and can change the contextual conditions in which they live (Foucault, 1980; May 2011). Power relations are thus multiple, and they imply the possibility of resistance and of opposing identities.

Analysis of the ways in which teachers are being constructed and are constructing themselves forms the starting point of this study. We will start by introducing the key characteristics of professional identity, then move on to the specificities of student

teacher development. Finally, we move on to identity in the context of pre-service teacher education, basing our data analysis on Norton's (2013) conceptualisation of professional identity as a *socio-politically situated desire*.

### 2.1. Understanding teacher identity

The concept of professional identity has attracted widespread attention in educational and applied linguistic research in order to draw together the social and personal natures of developing as a teacher. Professional identity has been defined as "a work-history-based constellation of teachers' perceptions of themselves as professional actors ..." (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p. 3). Although individual, these perceptions are of a social nature and are profoundly influenced by context (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Rodgers & Scott, 2008): they are formed and dependent on the array of traditions, practices, discourses, roles and material conditions that are available in a particular context (Coldron & Smith, 1999; Ruohotie-Lyhyt, 2013). Post-structuralist approaches add the idea of struggle to this contextual understanding of identity. As Norton (2013) argues, there are competing narratives of truth and power in relation to specific realities. Conceptualised in this way, identity construction is never determined by existing hegemonic discourses and present institutions alone, but might also draw on discourses of resistance that are embedded in any apparently stable ways of constructing realities (Larsson, 2018). In this sense, identity development can be characterised as a socio-politically situated activity (Norton, 2000). Another key feature of identity construction that is generally agreed upon by identity researchers is the active nature of individuals' relationship with the environment, that is, the agentic character of identity development (Beijaard et al., 2004). Individual teachers are active in their attempts to form identities that allow them to experience recognition, affiliation, security, and safety, as a positive sense of the professional self is a central condition for their job satisfaction and resilience (Day, 2004). Different socio-political contexts form particular conditions for these individual attempts, so the attempts are deeply intertwined with the fluidity of social class, the status of teachers' work and the economic and material conditions surrounding teaching. By constructing certain envisioned identities, individuals can attempt either to associate themselves with structures of social advantage and different forms of capital, such as wealth, education credentials, networks and power (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2014), or to oppose these discourses and the class aspects of identity construction.

### 2.2. Student teacher identity research

Understanding the importance of identity in teacher development and the way different contexts shape its development has drawn research interest to pre-service teacher education as a specific context for identity development (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2016; Golombok & Doran 2014; Kanno & Stuart 2011; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhyt, 2011, 2013). The substantial body of research on the subject has shown that pre-service teacher education is a decisive time for identity development (Golombok & Doran, 2014) and that identities formed during teacher education have a significant role in teachers' continual professional development (Ruohotie-Lyhyt, 2013). Student teachers have been found to be particularly sensitive to context in their development due to their limited experiential resources. Another specific feature of student teacher identity development is the central role of imagination and future-orientation (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015). Although most teacher education programmes aim to provide future teachers with opportunities to engage in practice, these can only provide students

with glimpses of the reality they will face as full-time teachers. Therefore although student teacher identities in the making are always based on individual life history, they are strongly affected by emotional investment in "who they desire to be" (Barkhuizen, 2017, p. 4) in the future. Imagining future roles and communities and anticipating emotionally rewarding experiences work as a powerful impetus for a developing sense of professional identity. Without a dream of a satisfactory professional future, student teachers will not go on studying. When entering teacher education, the images of the profession and the particular conditions that frame it also guide student teachers' agency towards the resources, experiences and skills that they believe to be central to reaching their professional dreams. Because of this, understanding students' starting points is crucial for developing pedagogically sound practices for teacher education. We will now examine in greater detail some of the specific features of the approach to identity of this study.

### 2.3. Identity as imagined and felt

In this study, we want to look at the socio-politically situated professional desires of our students in two very different educational contexts. For us, the idea of identity as a desire connects with both the future-oriented imaginative aspects of identity and its emotional aspects, both of which take shape in a specific socio-political context. First of all, in understanding the imaginative aspect of identity, Norton (2001) connects her idea of identity to the ideas of Anderson (1991), who conceptualised identity in relation to nationalism. According to Anderson, nationalism is always connected to nations as imagined, and so he coined the term *imagined communities*. To Anderson (1991), a nation is a symbolic construct created through the imagination, and different feelings of connectedness emerge through symbolic references to certain imagined communities. For Norton, the identity construction of the language learner or, in this case, of the language teacher also takes place in connection to an imagined community. The concept of imagined communities has been used widely in examining language learners' desires and hopes for the future (e.g., Pitkänen-Huhta & Nikula, 2013; Yashima, 2013): learners "project into the future and imagine a more distant community to which they hope someday to belong" (Murphrey et al., 2005, p. 88). In language teacher research, imagined communities have also been used to understand the options that are available to non-native teachers to conceptualise themselves as legitimate members of the professional community (Pavlenko, 2003). Images of the future can often be quite idealised (Golombok & Doran, 2014). However, an investment in an envisioned professional future is crucial for any agentive action as a student. According to Norton (2013), learners' desires are connected to their commitment to an activity, their changing identity, and how they engage or do not engage in certain learning activities.

The second aspect that can be linked to the idea of identity as a socio-politically situated desire is the emotional involvement that it entails. According to Pavlenko (2013), the sociocultural context may produce certain affective regimes and discourses of affect that in turn impact on our emotional responses to particular identities and the emotional investments we make in them. These lines of inquiry have recently been used in research on language teacher education. According to Song (2016), "the discursive and affective accounts of language teacher identity highlight teachers' emotions as a critical element in self-transformation (Zembylas, 2005) and call for greater attention to context-culture-specific emotional discourses in language teacher education" (p. 632). The author goes on to argue that "without taking a close look at teachers' emotions, beliefs, and desires underneath their self-presentation and projection,

it is impossible to discuss how and why they (re)construct their identity in certain ways and how their identity influences their practice" (Song, 2016, p. 634). Another relevant question here is the link between emotions and self-consciousness in reflective processes of thinking about the teaching process. Self-conscious emotions involve evaluations about the self in the light of believed standards or idealised models (Aragão, 2011; Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000). In this sense, emotions are relational because they involve actions of attraction or aversion. Besides desire, another important emotion to be discussed here is fear. Ahmed (2004, p. 63–64) argues that fear involves relationships of proximity and apartness. These relations tend to involve the repetition of stereotypes. Fear is also historical and dependent on certain narratives and affective discourses.

In this study, we seek to gain a more thorough understanding of the role of different socio-political contexts in pre-service teachers' developing professional identities. To understand the imagined and emotional character of their identity development, we asked our students to describe themselves as language professionals in 10 years' time, and to produce two pictures of their possible future, a desired and a feared professional future. In so doing, we sought to look into the ways the different socio-political contexts of our study feed into teachers' identity development and what emotions in the two contexts are related to their imagined futures. Further, we wanted to explore which emotions can be identified as emotions of *attraction*, and which ones are emotions of *aversion*. Our specific research questions are:

1. What contextual resources do student teachers in Finland and Brazil draw on when envisioning themselves as future professionals?
2. What kinds of emotions are connected to the envisioned professional futures?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Visual methodology in envisioning

Visual methods can be said to have their roots in early anthropological and sociological research into communities and practices, in which photographs taken by the researchers played a major role (see e.g., Pitkänen-Huhta & Pietikäinen, 2017; Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Since then the use of visual methods has spread to other fields of research, and the methodological tools have also widened from photographs to a variety of ways of visual expression. In this study, we principally draw on the visual research methodology used in research on language learning and teaching, and in educational research more broadly.

In language studies, visual methods have been used to study literacy practices (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Hodge & Jones, 2000), multilingual practices (e.g., Busch, 2010; Pietikäinen & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2013), and subjective experiences of language learning and teaching and language use (see Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta 2018; Kalaja & Melo-Pfeiffer, 2019). In these kinds of studies, visuals have offered participants an alternative means – in addition to verbal accounts – by which to express their experiences and emotions about, for example, identities, and learning and teaching processes. Similarly, in teacher education, visual methods have a long history both as a research method and as a pedagogical tool (Weber & Mitchell, 1996) to give (pre-service) teachers an alternative way of self-expression. As Gavaldon and McGarr (2019) point out, visual methods "can unearth perspectives that traditional verbal and text-based approaches cannot" (p. 100).

In addition to offering research participants an alternative

means of self-expression, visual methods provide a space for reflective practice and for telling stories visually (e.g., Johnson, 2002). Kugelmass (2000) used autobiographical storytelling, personal myths and visual imagery to help future teachers to reflect on their practices and thereby to develop their agency. What Kugelmass (2000) noted was that the methods she used "provided the opportunity for students to examine the non-rational elements of their own experiences" (p. 189). What was also notable was that some of the images brought out dichotomies the students had experienced. Similarly, Gavaldon and McGarr (2019), in their study on students' attitudes towards the use of technology, saw dichotomies in the way technology was presented in the comics that pre-service teachers created.

This study uses visual methodology to give student teachers a space for self-expression, reflection and envisioning that moves away from the linearity of verbal expression. An additional benefit of using this type of data in our international collaboration was that it offered researchers from different countries (and different linguistic backgrounds) more direct access to the data.

### 3.2. Context for this study

The two contexts for this study represent very different environments for teachers, and they offer different resources for teachers' identity work. In order to make the results of the study clearer and more understandable, we will describe both contexts in more detail, especially as regards education.

Finland is a small northern European country sharing borders with Russia, Sweden and Norway. It is a Scandinavian country, and a member of the EU (since 1995) and of the eurozone. Finland can be described as a welfare society, which has been steadily built up since the Second World War.

The Finnish educational system is widely admired. The country's success in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assessments since the early 2000s has created a constant stream of education tourists in Finnish schools and municipalities. The education system is especially praised for the high level of teacher education (all teachers have a Master's degree), the lack of extensive national testing, trust in teachers, and teachers' autonomy. The teaching profession is highly respected in Finland, with a salary close to the average Finnish income (about 3000 euros) and with substantial holiday benefits. The data for this study were collected in a medium-sized Finnish university outside the capital region.

Brazil is the largest country in Latin America and the fifth largest in the world. Brazil has had a long history of social inequality, and financial and political crisis. In the twentieth century, Brazil went through two long periods of military dictatorship. It re-established its democracy slowly and unsteadily from 1985 onwards, particularly after the promulgation of the 1988 constitution.

The data collection for this study was carried out in the north-east of the country, in the state of Bahia. This has one of the country's driest and hottest climates and one of the highest rates of poverty. Like other states in the north-east, Bahia has struggled with a range of infrastructural limitations and acute social, racial and economic inequalities. Brazil has striven to improve its educational standards, especially in the last three decades. Primary schooling is supported by limited municipal budgets and secondary schooling is financed by the state budget, which has, however, gradually been cut back. Teachers' salaries are generally low, with an average starting salary of about 400–500 euros a month for a 40-h week. Often teachers have to have two or three jobs each of 20 h a week in order to get an average total income of 700 euros a month.

Although the importance of teaching may be recognised in Brazil, it is a socially and financially undervalued profession with

the prospect of a low salary, social devaluation, poor working conditions, distress and increasing suffering (Barcelos, 2016; Barcelos & Aragão, 2018; Sanches & Gama, 2016). In a profession already associated with heavy emotional demands, the recent increase in physical and verbal violence in classrooms has further increased teachers' dissatisfaction (Igo & Zuin, 2019). As a reaction to these negative developments, some positive signs of civil activism have become visible. In recent years, high school students in different parts of Brazil have been active in protesting against cuts in the education budget and reform proposals that have further undermined the already bad working conditions of teachers and students alike. As part of the Occupy Schools Movement, students have organised committees for different purposes, study groups, debates on topics relevant to today's young people, and media production, and have demanded meetings with government representatives.

### 3.3. Participants

This study is based on co-operation between researchers across continents: the same visual data and accompanying verbal task were collected from student language teachers in two different contexts. In the task, the research participants (61 Finnish and 60 Brazilian) envisioned their desired and feared professional futures visually, and produced an accompanying text describing their pictures.

The research participants decided for themselves what technique to use for their visualisation. Some decided to draw, whereas others used ready-made pictures taken from the internet and, in some cases, modified them. We wanted to give the students a free hand as to the technique, because for example drawing pictures could have been a barrier for some participants if they associated it in some way with artistic talent. The technique itself was not important; our focus was on the content of whatever images they chose to present us with.

### 3.4. Data and analysis

As described above, this study uses visual methodology to give student teachers an alternative to verbal means of self-expression and reflection, following previous research on language learning and teaching (e.g., Kalaja & Melo-Pfeiffer, 2019; Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta 2018) and in education, especially teacher education (Gavaldon & McGarr, 2019; Johnson, 2002; Kugelmass, 2000; Weber & Mitchell, 1996). We extend these studies by a data collection method used in sociological and educational studies in Finland, namely empathy-based stories (MEBS) (Wallin et al., 2015, 2018). In this method, the participants are asked to produce two alternative storylines in which only one central feature of the story is altered, "such as success and failure regarding a phenomenon" (Wallin et al., 2018, p. 4). The method is considered to foreground those elements that are most valued by participants when making sense of a particular phenomenon. In this case, it was used to highlight student teachers' emotional attachment to professionally significant characteristics.

The analysis of the visualisations and accompanying text followed the principles of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). To ensure that sufficient attention is given to issues of credibility and plausibility (Bell, 2011), we describe the analytical process in three steps. When presenting the analysis in Section 4, we try particularly to ensure that we present representative cases and give a detailed contextualisation of the examples, as well as drawing on visual and verbal accounts as mutually complementary. We believe that our focus on dichotomies and tension increased our

understanding of the visual narratives (Clandinin et al., 2010).

In the first round of analysis, the pictures and accompanying texts of the Finnish data were printed out and examined closely by Authors 1 and 3 to identify patterns and prominent themes in the pictures. At this point two different ways of describing teaching were detected in the pictures, namely, a focus on either the status or the nature of the work. On the basis of this initial observation we created two categories.

In the second round of analysis, each of the pictures and the accompanying text was coded in an excel file. In the coding, we followed the principles proposed by Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta (2018), that is, we coded systematically the artefacts, themes, emotions and teacher positions appearing in the pictures. These results formed the basis for identifying patterns in the ways in which imagined socio-political resources and emotions played out in developing professional identities. After coding the pictures, the accompanying texts were also coded in order to look for additional artefacts, themes, emotions and positions that were not present in the pictures, and for elements that would confirm the observations made by the researchers. As a result of this analytical procedure, the two categories were confirmed and named the “status-oriented perspective to the teaching profession” and the “nature-oriented perspective to the teaching profession”. The second category was further divided into three sub-categories. A detailed justification and analysis of this categorisation in terms of the Finnish data has been published (Ruohotie-Lyhyt & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2020) and this paper uses the categorisation as a basis for comparing the contexts.

In the third analytical round, the second author of the study coded the Brazilian data following the method used in the second analytical round of the Finnish data. In this round, the status orientation was divided into three sub-themes that emerged only in the Brazilian data. Finally, in round four, the two data sets were compared and contrasted and a table was created summarizing the results. At this point, the most prominent and typical features of each category were identified and representative samples were chosen to foreground the socio-politically situated resources and emotions that were drawn upon in each category. We also compared the differences between the two countries as regards the themes that were typical of each category.

#### 4. Findings

In the analysis, two different perspectives on future identities were detected, namely status-oriented and nature-oriented perspectives. Table 1 summarises the ways in which desired professional futures were contrasted with feared ones: in the table, the desired professional futures, such as “university teacher”, are presented before the feared ones, such as “manual work”.

Having provided an overall picture of the data, we will now

focus on how socio-political resources and emotions shaped the participants’ imagined professional identities. We will first focus on the status-oriented perspective and then move on to the nature-oriented perspective to professional identity development. Although the two categories were found in both the Finnish and the Brazilian data, the more detailed analysis will show how the specific context shapes what the participants imagine and feel about their professional identities. To illustrate the key contextual resources and emotions connected to these possible futures, we provide examples from both the Finnish and the Brazilian data. Most of the examples appear as part of the printed text. However, to provide representative examples of the variety of our data, we have also analysed pictures that cannot, for copyright reasons, be reproduced as part of this publication. These examples are described in detail in the text.

##### 4.1. Status orientation

The status-oriented category was drawn from visualisations and accompanying texts in which the tension between the desired and feared professional futures was based on the envisioned status of the profession. The professional dream of these students was to achieve a respected position in society, so in their visualisation the class aspects of professional life became evident in the juxtapositions of desired and feared professional futures. In these visualisations, the desired profession was associated with structures of social advantage and different forms of capital such as wealth, education credentials, networks and power (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2014). Most frequently, the nature of the work was minimally and superficially described or not described at all. The data in this category did not reveal how the students would like to go about their work, what possible relations they envisioned to their working environment and what could lead them to effective action in this envisioned context of practice. 24 Brazilian pictures and 16 Finnish pictures were classified in this category. In the Finnish data, the contrast between attraction and aversion was constructed by opposing language teaching and manual work. In the Brazilian data, three different ways of constructing this contrast were detected, namely university teaching versus manual work, university teaching versus school teaching and, finally, prestigious job versus manual work. We will now focus on the themes and emotions evident in these illustrations.

###### 4.1.1. Language teaching as a profession with a high status

In the Finnish data, elementary and secondary school language teaching came out as a profession with high status that would secure the students a respected social position (Bourdieu, 1986; Darvin & Norton, 2014). The status-oriented students in the Finnish data contrasted their dream of becoming a language teacher with

**Table 1**  
Summary of the findings.

Categories	Finland	Brazil
Status orientation	teacher – manual work N= 16	university teacher – manual work N= 7 university teacher – school teacher N= 10 prestigious job – manual work N= 7
Nature-of-work orientation	desired teaching job – feared teaching job N= 18 teaching – s'g else N= 18 s'g else than teaching – s'g else than teaching N= 9	desired teaching job – feared teaching job N= 22 teaching – s'g else N= 9 s'g else than teaching – s'g else than teaching N= 5

the idea of having a manual job or some other job with low prestige, such as a postman, cashier, security guard, cleaner, or factory worker. Typically, teaching was associated with a sense of appreciation, prestige and belonging, whereas manual work was linked with non-recognition, low status and solitude. These participants wanted to occupy a respected position in society and saw language studies as a way of achieving that. [Fig. 1](#) is a drawing by a Finnish student who contrasted the jobs of teacher and security guard.

In [Fig. 1](#), the desired professional future is placed on the left; it represents the student in front of the board with an arrow pointing to himself with the word "I" written on top. He seems to be happily showing his students, who are facing the teacher, what he has written on the board. We can only see two students, sitting side-by-side. The focus is on the teacher himself and in the accompanying text he writes: "I find the future as a teacher quite probable". In contrast, his feared job is that of a private security guard, and in this picture he draws an individual standing on his own, looking unhappy, and he has written the words "security guard". For the student, the way of reaching his dream is to succeed in his studies. Example 1 is a typical example of the status-centred visualisations also in that it constructed teaching stereotypically as being done at the front of the room by the teacher alone. Typically, the student teachers used a pointer and a blackboard as symbols to construct themselves as teachers. The pictures of the dream job also brought to the fore emotions connected to the idea of status, such as success and recognition, in contrast to the emotions aroused by manual work, which was connected with failure, exclusion and disappointment. To illustrate, one of the participants wrote: "My dream might fall through, if I'm unable to work hard enough or if I stop my university studies." Language teaching in a primary or secondary institution was only constructed as a valued profession in the Finnish context.

#### 4.1.2. University language teaching as a reachable dream

In the Brazilian data, 24 students connected their professional dream to the idea of status. These illustrations and accompanying texts resembled the Finnish pictures in that the high-status job was connected with a sense of appreciation, success and belonging, whereas the less prestigious job was associated with non-recognition, failure and low status. Like the Finnish students, the Brazilian students wanted to secure a respected position in the system, and they associated ideas of social recognition, wealth and appreciation with certain professions aligned with the wider discourses of class and social power in society ([Bourdieu, 1986](#); [Darvin & Norton, 2014](#)). In the Brazilian data, the socio-political context was visible in that no participants focusing on professional status considered primary or secondary school language teaching an option. Rather, in the Brazilian context, the students envisioned becoming university teachers or some other high-status professionals. As in the Finnish data, this is contrasted with doing some kind of manual work, but more prominently also with either office



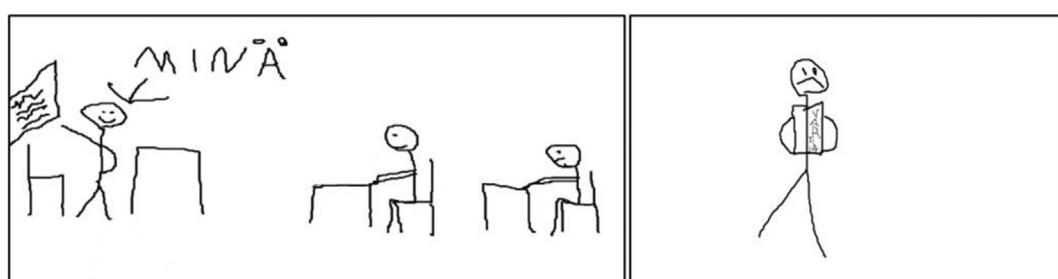
[Fig. 2. Teacher Giving a Lecture in Amphitheatre. Copyright \(Anonymous, 2015\) by iStock. Reprinted with permission.](#)



[Fig. 3. Office Cubicles in Gulf Worldwide Sales & Marketing Team. Copyright \(MarkJaysonAranda, 2012\) by MarkJaysonAranda. Reprinted with permission.](#)

work or working as a teacher in the school system. [Figs. 2 and 3](#) are an example of the seven illustrations that construct a contrast between the jobs of university teacher and office worker:

In the example above, a picture of a university professor in a lecture hall ([Fig. 2](#)) is contrasted with a picture of office work ([Fig. 3](#)). The student also writes that the focus is on "completing a Master's and a doctoral degree, I can only imagine myself doing research and teaching college students". For this student teacher, the problem with the undesirable job was "that a job that leaves me alone or in an office routine would make me frustrated". This is typical of the visualisations of this group of participants, who imagined a big lecture hall and a position in front of a large crowd of students. This position was connected with appreciation, prestige and fulfilment, whereas the lower prestige position was connected with "stresses and headaches, having to do repetitive jobs, getting



[Fig. 1. Becoming a teacher or a security guard.](#)

into a routine", typically a tele-marketing position.

Another way of constructing the contrast of attraction and aversion was by contrasting pictures of university teaching with pictures of other kinds of language teaching jobs. The low status of teaching in the Brazilian context was particularly salient in these illustrations.

To contrast university teaching and public school, one participant uses a pair of pictures with different emotional overtones that have appeared in Brazilian social media memes, and adds her own texts to these pictures to create a tension between her desired and feared professional futures. In the first picture, of a relaxed, laughing young woman, she depicts her envisioned future as a happy, fulfilled university teacher. Above this picture she has put the text, "Finishing my post-doc and teaching at University" In the other picture, of a young woman with a sad expression clutching her forehead with both hands, she portrays herself as a despairing primary school teacher. This picture is accompanied by the text "Just with my degree in language teaching giving classes in primary school".

In these illustrations, university teaching was also often depicted through pictures of lecture halls and happy university professors standing in front of students there, or in a "pleasant classroom", as one student put it. The image of the happy, respected university professor was contrasted with the poor schoolteacher, associated with feelings of mediocrity, failure, disappointment and physical malaise. As one student puts it: "my biggest fear is getting a job in the basic school system and becoming a mediocre professional". Another one uses a picture of a teacher teaching adolescents on the stairs of a gymnasium, and says that his fear is "teaching in improvised places because of the lack of infrastructure in terms of basic resources like chairs, a ventilator, air conditioning and so on, like our schools are". In this sense, teaching in a school in Brazil becomes just as feared as other jobs with low prestige and is in the students' visualisations connected with similar emotions: as mentioned in Section 3.1., in Brazil such jobs might actually earn similar salaries and have a similar social status. The Brazilian participants in this category therefore imagined a different community for themselves, the community of university professors or doctors.

#### 4.2. Nature-of-work orientation

The nature-of-work orientation derived from visualisations and accompanying texts in which the tension between the emotions of attraction and aversion was based on how meaningful the work was for the individual. This orientation was strongly present in the visualisations of both Finnish and Brazilian students: 36 Brazilian pictures and 46 Finnish pictures were placed in this category. In both the Brazilian and Finnish visualisations, three types of juxtaposition were used to construct this tension. In 40 cases (18 Fin, 22 Br), the contrast between desired and feared professional futures was constructed by means of two conflicting representations of a teacher's job. In 27 cases (18 Fin, 9 Br), the students contrasted teaching with another profession that was not experienced as meaningful. Finally, 14 students (9 Fin, 5 Br) used two images of contrasting professional futures not related to teaching.

Although in all these illustrations the main tension between the two possible futures was based on the question of meaningfulness, some differences were evident in the ways in which certain resources, such as physical conditions and values, were highlighted as necessary elements of meaningful work in the two different socio-political contexts. We will now focus on the themes and emotions in these illustrations.

##### 4.2.1. Teaching as an emotionally fulfilling profession

There were some similarities in what Finnish and Brazilian

students who focused on the nature of the work when imagining their future considered to be central features of meaningfulness. In these illustrations and in the accompanying texts, the student teachers typically drew on progressive teaching in describing meaningfulness in teachers' work: a meaningful future was seen in terms of a progressive, creative teacher. The emotions connected with attraction included a sense of community and physical and psychological well-being, as well as the possibility of helping others. The situation illustrated in Fig. 4 is very typical of a pattern found in both data sets. In this pattern, an interactive teacher in a lively classroom is contrasted with an isolated student or teacher in a classroom full of dull, inattentive children.

In Fig. 4, the desired professional future is placed in the upper half of the picture. The participant draws herself holding hands with the pupils in a pleasant, homely place that is "cosy and colourful". In this place, "the ways of learning are versatile ... and the teacher is not a leader, but part of the learning community ... guiding and enabling learning". The participant describes her identity in this environment as "innovative in developing my teaching, trusting my pupils and giving them responsibility". In contrast, in the feared professional future, the learning happens in a traditional classroom and is teacher-centred and mechanical. The atmosphere is illustrated by pictures of unhappy, angry pupils and the teacher. In this environment, the participant describes herself as somebody who has "got into a rut and does not perceive the work as meaningful". By drawing on an idea of progressive language education, the participants showed strong alignment with their teacher education in both Finland and Brazil, highlighting cooperative learning and pupil responsibility. At the same time, the professional ideal of an innovative, agentive and committed language teacher was foregrounded. Emotionally, the participants hoped to experience a sense of belonging and wellbeing at work, not stress or isolation. In this pattern, only minor differences were perceived between the Finnish and Brazilian contexts, and such differences as there were linked to differences in the physical conditions of work, such as air conditioning being more present in the Brazilian pictures.

Another visible pattern, typical of both data sets, was the



Fig. 4. Two different classrooms.

contrast of teaching with another profession, typically office work. In this pattern, the participants constructed the poles of attraction and aversion by drawing on the contrast between working with people and working with machines, and considered the sense of meaningfulness and community from this perspective. Like the pictures contrasting two teaching jobs, the discourses of progressive teacher education, a sense of community, and wellbeing were further drawn on in these visualisations.

In one picture pair, the participant imagines herself at work in an "NGO or teaching needy children or the elderly". This future is depicted with a picture in which small Indian children sitting in rows on the ground are attentively following the teaching. For her, the meaningfulness is constructed through being able to help others. This is contrasted with office work, which is represented with a picture of a tired woman in front of a computer with her head down on her arms on the desk. This kind of work is described as "very stressful" and consuming "a lot of mental effort". Typically, in this kind of visualisation, the students contrasted progressive language education with another job that they could do with their degree. Teaching was understood as a job that is done with others and enables them to make a meaningful contribution to other people's lives. Emotionally they invested in a desired image of themselves as positive, kindly members of society. This idea of teaching was present in both the Finnish and Brazilian visualisations.

#### 4.2.2. Societally engaged professional

In the Finnish context, the meaningfulness of work was based solely on the connected ideals of progressive language education, a sense of community, and wellbeing, whereas in the Brazilian context yet another important set of socio-politically situated conditions emerged: 16 Brazilian participants constructed the tension between desired and feared professional futures by drawing on the image of an active, societally engaged professional. In this category, the participants deliberately positioned themselves in opposition to current language teaching patterns and practices in Brazilian schools and imagined themselves as agents of change.

In one of these illustrations, the participant contrasts two different ways of teaching in the Brazilian context: optimistic and empowered, or a worn-out teacher in a state school who is interested in neither social questions nor her pupils' learning. The optimistic and empowered future is depicted by means of a picture of a little child who is standing on a chair and apparently looking through one of many windows painted on a wall. This picture is accompanied by a Portuguese text meaning "If the student can see possibilities where the whole world has said there aren't any, then the teacher has fulfilled her mission (Lidia Vasconcelos)". In contrast, the worn-out teacher is depicted with a meme in which an angry-looking Woody Woodpecker character is teaching the "verb to be" to students sitting in rows and seen only from behind. This picture is accompanied by a text in Portuguese saying (in translation here) "When you are an English teacher in a public school and realise that you haven't yet taught your students the verb *to be*". The student reports that "I come from a state school" and that her experience there makes her want to revolt against the many patterns of bad teaching that she has seen. The student also explicitly mentions that her "dream job is not to acquire riches or have a higher status", but that she wants to achieve excellence in what she does. Her fear is that she will not succeed in this but will become "that kind of careless teacher who gives meaningless classes just to fill the workload".

Although these pictures are closely related to the previous visualisations drawing on progressive teaching ideology (Fig. 4), they also differ from them in some respects. Unlike the other participants in the nature-oriented group, these participants explicitly

positioned themselves as societally engaged professionals and highlighted their dissatisfaction with current educational practices. Emotionally they invested in the identity of a socially active agent of change. When indicating her desired job, a student teacher said that "I would need a reform in education" and other students said that "my dream job is where the school, the student and society work together breaking barriers and challenging the system" and "I don't want to put students in boxes where only their theories and explanations are valid". There was less emphasis on their own wellbeing or the self-fulfilment that teaching could offer. This emphasis in the Brazilian data can be connected to the wider dissatisfaction of Brazilian students and teachers with the conditions of education in their country. To be able to imagine themselves doing a meaningful job, the students found it necessary to take a critical stance, and change was considered a necessary condition of good teaching.

## 5. Discussion

In this article, we wanted to explore the effect of the sociocultural context on student teachers' identity work in Finland and Brazil, and how emotions are connected to the process of identity construction. To examine this phenomenon, we drew on post-structuralist theories (Norton, 2000, 2013), constructing identity as a site of socio-politically situated struggle for recognition, affiliation and security. More specifically, with student teachers, we see identity as a socio-politically situated desire revolving round an imagined future. Typical of our approach is the idea of identity construction occurring in relation to the array of traditions, practices and discourses that surround it, but using these in sometimes unpredictable and even contradictory ways (Norton, 2013; Foucault, 1980). Methodologically, we chose visual methods, which have been used before in research on language learning and teaching and in educational research to enable subjects' reflection on their practices. In our analysis, we found two desires that were often mentioned in both the Finnish and the Brazilian data: a desire for status and a desire for meaningfulness. The socio-political context was, however, evident in the different ways in which the Finnish and Brazilian participants considered it possible to fulfil their dreams.

Typical in the Finnish socio-political context was the construction of becoming a language teacher as joining a socially valued profession, and becoming a teacher was linked to ideas of success, appreciation and recognition. This gave status-oriented students the possibility of fulfilling their dream simply by completing their studies. For the status-oriented students in the Brazilian group, the pathway to a socially valued position was longer and less direct: the possibility of failure was present even when completing their teaching degree, and to achieve the status of a university professor teaching languages they had to envision going on to post-graduate studies. These results show the radically different social status of teaching in the two countries. In Brazil, the students' views resonated with dominant discourses that construct school teaching as a socially undervalued profession with poor working conditions, distress and suffering (Barcelos, 2016; Barcelos & Aragão, 2018; Sanches & Gama, 2016). When conceptualizing teacher identity in this way, the students needed to find alternative future identities that could meet their desire for a secure position.

Most of the participants built their professional identities on the desire to do meaningful work. In relation to this dream, the emotions that they mentioned most frequently were connected to universal ideas of teaching as a job that requires constant interaction with people and has social impact. In addition, ideas of community, collaboration and progressive teaching were major factors

related to professional ideals in both countries. However, unlike the Finnish students, some Brazilian students also felt it was necessary to take a critical attitude and see teaching as a form of social activism. In light of post-structural theories of identity, this can be interpreted as an act of resistance to some of the negative experiences of practices in Brazilian public-sector education. It is an attempt to construct teaching in another way, and shows that individuals can draw on discourses of resistance that are embedded in any visibly stable ways of constructing realities (Larsson, 2018). This again highlights the significance of the socio-political context for teaching.

In terms of methodology, the use of visual methods in this contrastive study of two contexts proved to be fruitful for two reasons. First of all, they enabled us to overcome the linguistic challenges of analysing and interpreting verbal data produced in two different languages (Finnish and Portuguese), each of which was known only to those whose mother tongue it was. Analysing visual expression together could be done irrespective of the verbal language. Secondly, earlier research (Gavaldon & McGarr, 2019; Kugelmass, 2000) has noted dichotomies in participants' visual accounts; we built on this by offering students right from the start the opportunity to reflect on dichotomies, echoing the method of empathy-based stories with alternative story lines (Wallin et al., 2018).

## 6. Conclusions and implications

In our opinion, this study contributes to the development of teacher education in at least three ways, all of them related to the role of context in teacher identity development.

Firstly, the study showed the widely shared emotional basis for teacher identity development. In accordance with Norton's (2000, 2013) post-structuralist theories of identity construction and other studies on emotions in teacher identity construction (Song, 2016; Zembylas, 2005), the students' imagined identities included a desire for belonging, happiness, participation, security, comfort, success and social recognition. Regardless of the socio-political context, the participants foregrounded emotions linked either with social recognition or with community involvement. Nevertheless, the findings show that at the start of teacher education, student teachers are not a uniform group, and that the resources for investment in developing as teachers differ, whatever the context. This calls teacher educators into a dialogue with their students about their professional goals, and also shows the need for reflection on the emotional basis for teacher development. From a post-structuralist perspective, a condition for freedom is the awareness of the ways in which our situation and identities have been affected by discourses of power (Foucault, 1980; May 2011). Therefore tasks and reflection that raise our students' awareness of their identity construction as a situated practice have the potential to support their development.

Secondly, the study brought to the fore the importance of socio-political context for the dynamics of teachers' identity construction. In the Finnish data, we did not find any clear examples of the construction of alternative identities that was explicitly critical of existing teaching practices or teachers' working conditions. Rather, Finnish teacher students, although highlighting the societal and personal meaningfulness of teachers' work, constructed the societal resources as sufficient for doing a good job as teachers; therefore if the quality of teaching was poor, this was not understood as a social issue but rather as the result of the teacher's lack of motivation or effort. Teaching was constructed by the Finnish student teachers as a profession that offered them a fulfilling career by securing for them either a socially recognised position or a meaningful job if they were personally willing to invest in it. In the

Brazilian data, on the other hand, this pathway was considered less clear, and there was more evidence of societal constraints. In the Brazilian data there was a clear rejection of uninspiring teaching and a desire to change students' lives through public education as "part of a movement of solidarity". What was feared in a job, whether in the classroom or elsewhere, was despair, isolation, frustration, helplessness, sadness, stress and anguish: it was a loaded, feared otherness, which threatened these student teachers' emotional investment in their desired professional identities. This presented them with two alternatives: either they could take action by becoming agents of change and resist the constraints of their environment and their feared selves, or they could seek status and join the imagined community of teachers in a university, where everything is well organised, and people are highly respected and always in the public eye.

The group of student teachers in the Brazilian context who were investing in change in public-sector schools can also be linked to differences in the ways in which teaching as social practice is constructed in the two contexts. In Brazil there is a long history of students and teachers mobilizing against the conditions of education. In these movements, students and teachers have invested in the making of another imagined school where, as Norton (2000) would suggest, they hope to get recognition, affiliation, trust and security. This imagined and desired school could offer them a different future, one where the identities and communities they long for would be recognised. As Costa and Groppo (2018, pp. 7–10) argue in the introduction to their work on the Occupy Schools movement in Brazil, different collective strategies of resistance have been developed against recent political and social setbacks, the result of a series of conservative policies that have had an adverse effect on education as a whole. What happened during this movement was an overlapping of youth cultures, deep affective engagement, and political struggle (Camasmie, 2018; Corbo, 2018; Costa & Groppo, 2018). In this context, student teachers in Brazil can be seen as having more experience than Finnish students of constructing themselves as agents of change. In addition, identity work in the Brazilian context seems to necessitate a critical perspective on teaching which is not found in the Finnish context. However, although the lack of resisting discourses in the Finnish student teachers' envisioned identities might be understandable, given the high status of teaching in Finland, it calls for care in supporting the development of social awareness among Finnish student teachers. In Finland, the socio-political context may present a superficial image of a problem-free education system while hiding away issues of increasing diversity and inequality. These are issues that should be discussed in teacher education using contrasting examples from different socio-political contexts, since teaching is always a societally significant profession that either strengthens the social divisions and dominant discourses in society or fights against them.

Finally, we want to point out the significance of this study for developing teacher education in different educational contexts. This study, along with other research on visual and other forms of narratives (Kalaja et al., 2016; Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018), has shown that visual narratives can be a starting point for student teachers to reflect on their emotions, beliefs and identities. Particularly here we are harnessing their aspirations, desires and fears, a very emotionally loaded domain. Emotions move us. This research encourages the exploration of emotional self-awareness reflectively in relation to contexts, beliefs and identities. Student teachers will become aware of how these phenomena can affect their practices in the present and the future if they are offered a supportive space and tasks in which they can make sense of their emotional experiences (desires/fears) and put them into the socio-

political context and an ideological framework. This could strengthen teacher education programmes, and would have particular impact near the beginning of these courses of study.

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