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# Constructing Teacher Self in a Dialogue between Multiple I-Positions: A Case from Teacher Education

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## ABSTRACT

This study approached preservice teacher identity by drawing on Dialogical Self theory and especially the notion of I-position. The study explored how one preservice subject teacher, Aino, constructed her I-position as a becoming teacher in a dialogue between voices originating from her previous school experiences and voices stemming from her subject teacher pedagogical studies. The results of a dialogically oriented narrative analysis of the interview data showed that Aino constructed her teacher identity in a dialogical process between multiple internal and external I-positions. The pedagogical studies produced both positive and negative boundary experiences that enabled Aino to recognize tensions between internal (e.g., I as a becoming teacher and I as a pupil) and external (e.g., my past teachers) I-positions within her dialogical self. Aino constructed her preservice teacher identity in a critical dialogue and negotiation between different voices and I-positions originating from different times and places. Consequently, teacher education should help students become aware of the dynamics and tensions of the social, cultural, and institutional structures surrounding teachers' work and to develop as agentive teachers who can transform their own thinking and practice in the complex, changing world of teachers' work.



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## Introduction

According to Flores and Day (2006), when entering teacher education, students have a pre-professional identity consisting of images of teachers, initial beliefs and concepts of a good teacher, and implicit theories of teaching and learning. Students have their own subjective experiences of schools, teachers, and teacher–student relationships, which inevitably play a role in negotiating their teacher identity (Marsico et al., 2020). These past experiences are used as a reflective mirror when students evaluate and possibly adapt new ideas from teacher education (Lee & Schallert, 2016). In the context of teacher education, a pivotal question is how student teachers negotiate between their previous views and conceptions of teachers and teaching and those offered in teacher education (Beijaard et al., 2004; Stenberg & Maaranen, 2021). According to

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Grossen and Muller Mirza (2020), “a teaching-learning situation can be defined as a *heterogeneous dialogical space*, where a present situation echoes other situations and where present dialogues echo distant dialogues” (p. 601). Thus, preservice teachers are social actors involved in heterogeneous spaces and times (cf. chronotope; Brown & Renshaw, 2006). When a student teacher is negotiating and reflecting on his or her teacher identity in terms of thinking, being, and acting, different historical layers meet and are put in a dialogue (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020; Matusov, 2007).

This paper takes a dialogical approach to examining the identity construction of a preservice subject teacher, Aino (a pseudonym), in the context of her year-long pedagogical studies for subject teachers. The ideas relate especially to Bakhtinian dialogism (Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020; Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011; Marková, 2003, 2006) and to Dialogical Self theory (DST; Henry & Mollstedt, 2021; Hermans, 2001). In Bakhtinian dialogism, the notion of the dialogicality of the mind stresses the interconnectedness of the I-other relationship in making up one’s self (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011). In DST, the dialogical self is seen to consist of autonomous I-positions, each possessing its own voice, that is, a perspective of the world, functioning within an internal “dialogical space” (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021; Hermans, 2001, 2013). In this space, the individual is constantly involved in the (re)construction of voiced positions, such as I as a person or I as a teacher (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021). These I-positions are formed through social relationships and cultural, historical, and institutional experiences (Leijen & Kullasepp, 2013), not only in external dialogue in interpersonal contacts but also in internal dialogue between different voices (own and others) within the self in a dynamically shifting relationship (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011; Henry & Mollstedt, 2021; Hermans, 2001).

In relation to the theory of the dialogical self, Marsico et al. (2020) introduce the construct of the Educational Self to highlight the role of education in an individual’s lifetime identity definition. The educational self emerges from an individual’s experiences in educational contexts in a dialogical relationship with others. For example, school contexts are full of *suggestions* (e.g., what the student is or should be) for the educational self manifested in the discourse of significant others (usually the teacher; Marsico et al., 2020) and supported by regulators, such as rules, conventions, customs, and school practices (Leijen & Kullasepp, 2013). Responsiveness to others’ voices contributes to students’ identity development in the educational process. These different voices internalized in the student’s educational (/dialogical) self are activated and possibly reflected on when the student enters a new educational context (Marsico et al., 2020), such as teacher education.

Leijen and Kullasepp (2013) argue that preservice teachers need opportunities to explore the relationship and fit between personal I-positions and often socially prescribed professional positions and role expectations. To enact one’s own true voice as a teacher, it is especially important to find a balance between one’s personal and professional I-positions and connected value systems (Arvaja, 2016; Leijen & Kullasepp, 2013). Integrating one’s personal and professional selves is necessary in acting successfully in the teaching profession (Leijen et al., 2010; Leijen & Kullasepp, 2013), as teaching is a profession in which the personal and professional selves are tightly intertwined (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

Geijssel and Meijers (2005) further argue that identity construction should not be seen solely as a rational process but also as a process in which emotions play a key role. Identity learning often involves a boundary experience (cf. critical incident; Monereo, 2019) in which the individual experiences the limits of the existing self-concept, as the current identity configuration seems inadequate in a given context (Geijssel & Meijers, 2005). A boundary experience is an event or situation in which the tension experienced between conflicting I-positions leads to reconfiguration within the dialogical self (Hermans, 2013). Although this can be a positive experience, it often involves feelings of distress, inability, or uncertainty and can be perceived as a turning point for identity learning (Geijssel & Meijers, 2005). It can be expected that when a student teacher enters the new socio-cultural context of teacher education, new suggestions are offered for the creation of a teacher I-position, possibly conflicting with some of the voices internalized in the educational self (Leijen & Kullasepp, 2013; Marsico et al., 2020).

This article explores how a subject student teacher, Aino, constructs her I-position as a becoming teacher in relation to her previous school experiences, activated during her year-long pedagogical studies. In Aino's narrative (interview), the focus of exploration is on the notion of tension and boundary experience, referring to the dialogical negotiation between different voices and I-positions. Dialogical tension is viewed as a constitutive part of change dynamics (Marsico et al., 2020; Monereo & Hermans, 2023), and thus, is essential in professional development and transformation (Sarja & Arvaja, 2023).

## **Dialogical approach to teacher identity**

In this article, teacher identity is approached from the dialogical perspective. In the Bakhtinian framework, dialogical approaches refer to the dialogism of discourse and to the dialogicality of the mind (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011). Bakhtin's dialogical approach highlights the intrinsic relatedness of the self and others (Holquist, 1990). As Bakhtin (1990) states, "the relationship of 'I and the other' is absolutely irreversible and given once and for all" (p. 52). This means that the primary unit of human experience is intrinsically relational (Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020).

From the dialogical perspective, professional identity can be seen as negotiated in interactions with and through others (Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020; Wortham, 2001). However, the other is not reducible to interpersonal relationships and external dialogue; the other is also present in a person's internal dialogue, where (absent) others mediate the voices of institutions, traditions, colleagues, and friends (Linell, 2009; Marková, 2003). This dialogue "in absentia" refers to the indirect participation of absent third parties in every dialogue, whether they take place internally or externally (Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020).

For example, students have certain preconceptions of teachers as well as implicit theories of teaching and learning grounded on their own previous school experiences and practices of school communities developed over a long period of time (Flores & Day, 2006; Uitto et al., 2015). Teacher education, in turn, is based on certain pedagogical perspectives and methods, as well as knowledge developed throughout the history (Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020).

Consequently, in making sense of oneself as a teacher, the voices in one's internal dialogue are situated in the here-and-now discourse and sense-making, as well as in the "tradition of historically developing cultures" (Ritella & Ligorio, 2016). Therefore, the construction of the teacher self can be seen as moving in space–time frames while intertwining here-and-now and previous and anticipated events and meanings therein (Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011; Ritella & Ligorio, 2016). These different space–time frames represent different *chronotopes* populated with different purposes, meanings, values, and authorities (Bloome et al., 2009; Brown & Renshaw, 2006). Accordingly, different identities are associated with different space–time zones. For example, the chronotope of the classroom can be agentive or passive (Bloome et al., 2009). The grounding of participatory pedagogy calls for actors and authors rather than followers and copiers typical of traditional pedagogy (Brown & Renshaw, 2006; Su, 2011). Therefore, chronotopes have different implications for identities and what counts as knowledge and learning as well as what it means to be a human being (Bloome et al., 2009).

While teacher education exposes students to alternative voices stemming from different and new perspectives on the issues of teaching and learning, this can lead, at best, to dialogical tensions, that is, differences, or conflicts between different voices situated in different space–times (Arvaja, 2016; Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020; Stenberg & Maaranen, 2021). In this process, past and new experiences, ideas, and ways of being, thinking, and acting are put in a dialogue and tested (Lee & Schallert, 2016; Matusov, 2007). By engaging in critical dialogue, preservice teachers become conscious of the implicit assumptions behind learning and teaching approaches and can thus outline the kind of teacher they want to be (Matusov, 2007). To promote this idea, Geijssel and Meijers (2005) call for strong learning environments that allow experiential learning and provide communicative structures that enable reflection on experiences and the expression of positive and negative feelings and emotions. For identity learning, students need room to make personal sense of experiences and a platform for discursive meaning-giving to these experiences through various new concepts and views provided.

## Dialogical self

This paper explores the process of identity construction through a sample case of one preservice subject teacher, Aino, and draws on DST, especially the notion of *I-position*. DST has its roots in the Bakhtinian dialogical approach above. According to this theory, identity can be seen as consisting of multiple I-positions with diverse perspectives (Hermans, 2001). The I-position of a person is "a particular voice that has been internalized in one's Self-presentation" (Akkerman et al., 2012, p. 230). Building on Bakhtin's ideas (1984), voice, in turn, can be conceptualized as "a speaking personality bringing forward a particular perspective of the world" (Akkerman et al., 2012, p. 229). The dialogical self cannot be described merely in terms of internal positions, as if they were monologic traits, but should be described in the context of other positions and coalitions of positions (Hermans, 2001). One's dialogical self is bound to a particular position (e.g., I as a teacher and I as a mother) in time and space, but can move from one position to another along with contextual changes (Hermans & Gieser, 2012).

One's dialogical self is social in the sense that "others" occupy inner positions in a multi-voiced self. The self may fluctuate among different or even opposite I-positions (within the self or between the self and perceived or imagined others), and as each position has its own voice, it can give rise to dialogical relations as well as negotiations, (dis)agreements, and integrations within the dialogical self (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). Consequently, the set of I-positions involved includes not only positions that represent aspects of the individual's own identity (internal I-positions) but also positions representing the perspectives of relevant others (external I-positions; Henry & Mollstedt, 2021). According to Henry and Mollstedt (2021), in the context of the dialogical self, an external I-position refers to a person in the social environment who is (potentially) relevant from the perspective of an internal I-position. External I-positions articulate the imagined voices of other people and are involved in the processes of negotiation and interchange with internal positions. External others may also represent the voices of institutions or traditions with their values and ideologies (Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020; Linell, 2009). This other is recognized as "another I," and in the dialogical self, it "is granted a subject position that can be addressed in dialogical discourses with the possibility that this position gives an answer from its own specific point of view" (Hermans, 2019, p. 41). A significant other can exist as an external reality, as an actual other, and as an external position within the self, as an imagined other. The influence of these others may manifest in an actual interpersonal dialogue (external dialogue) or in an inner dialogue through an imaginary exchange between internal and external I-positions (internal dialogue; Henry & Mollstedt, 2021; Hermans, 2008).

Leaning on the ideas from dialogical approaches (e.g., DST and Bakhtin's dialogicality), Marsico et al. (2020) introduce the construct of the Educational Self to emphasize that education is a dialogic process that contributes to "the polyphonic elaboration of the Self during school age, but whose outcomes continue to be relevant throughout people's lives" (p. 57). Marsico and colleagues (Marsico et al., 2020; Marsico & Tateo, 2018) argue that outside the family school can be regarded as the most significant experience of an institution in children's and youth's lives where there is a significant I-other relationship contributing to children's self development. Marsico et al. (2020) emphasize the role of significant adults in the formation of one's educational self. At school, a child's internal I-position, "I as a pupil," is meaningful in relation to the external I-position of the teacher (Hermans, 2008). The socio-cultural context of school (as well as other educational contexts and family) sets various, sometimes contradictory, suggestions and expectations for the pupil/student; what the student is/is not, what the student should be, or should become (Marsico et al., 2020). Adults' explicit discourse about the student ("You are a hardworking girl") and implicit discursive practices in the classroom (e.g., pedagogical arrangements contributing weak/strong student agency; e.g., Brown & Renshaw, 2006) are suggestions for the definition of the self that the student negotiates, makes sense of, and responds to (e.g., accepts, rejects, or ignores). Marsico and others argue (2020) that through these dialogical and semiotic regulatory processes in school social encounters, various values, norms, models of action, emotional experiences, knowledge, and practices are internalized in the form of voices in one's educational self. These voices constitute a set of semiotic resources for a student to draw on throughout his or her lifespan. Therefore, from the

perspective of the present study, a relevant point is to examine what voices originating from previous school experiences are activated in the context of teacher education when a student constructs her I-position as a becoming teacher.

When preservice teachers are given the opportunity to reflect on their past and present experiences that are personally meaningful, they can eventually become aware of their often unconscious sub-identities (i.e., I-positions) and discover which sub-identities are relevant in this specific context (Assen et al., 2018; Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Lengelle, 2016). Exploring the relationship between different I-positions (e.g., “I as myself” and “I as a teacher”) helps overcome ambivalence and supports student teachers in creating a coalition of different positions (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Through dialogues within the self and with others, meaningful experiences are organized into one narrative structure (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). However, the power of self-narratives lies not only in their ability to seek and represent coherent identities (Hermans, 2003) but also in their ability to express and deal with multiple fragmented and partly conflicting selves while providing multiple scenarios for the self (Wortham, 2001).

### Meaning of tensions in identity learning

According to Grossen and Muller Mirza, (2020), the multi-layeredness and -voicedness of every context turns attention to the dialogical tensions between different voices and situations. Marsico et al. (2020) further argue that tension can be seen as a constitutive part of change dynamics in the construction of the dialogical self. In studying the identity construction process, the emphasis has often been on its intellectual or rational side (Geijssel & Meijers, 2005). However, Geijssel and Meijers (2005) argue that emotions play a key role in such a process. For them, identity learning starts with a *boundary experience*. Based originally on Charlotte Buhler’s concept, Geijssel and Meijers (2005) define it as “an experience in which the individual experiences the boundary of existing self-concept” (p. 424). Although this may be a moment for learning and growth coupled with positive emotions, it is usually an experience of conflict or uncertainty coupled with negative emotions.

In a boundary experience (Assen et al., 2018; Geijssel & Meijers, 2005; Henry & Mollstedt, 2022; Hermans, 2013; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012), uncertainty or a challenge faced in the situation can lead to disruptions and reconfiguration within the dialogical self (Henry & Mollstedt, 2022). Boundary experience can trigger decentering movements, which can disrupt the self’s contingent stability (Henry & Mollstedt, 2022; Hermans, 2019). As Hermans (2014) explains, the self can be subjected to decentering movements when a person “enters a new, confusing, or challenging learning situation or has to face disappointment, failure, or misfortune” (p. 136). In these situations, people often experience tensions between different I-positions (both internal and external). It often causes feelings of discomfort and helplessness, a feeling of an inability to cope (Geijssel & Meijers, 2005; Ligorio & Tateo, 2007). When a situation means that “a person’s default response no longer brings positive meaning or direction” (Lengelle & Meijers, 2015, p. 20), a person naturally seeks to restore his or her well-being. The effort to overcome a boundary experience opens a moment for identity negotiation, often leading to a process of re-/de-positioning (Assen et al., 2018) and to centering



movements aimed at restoring continuity, consistency, and harmony in the dialogical self (Henry & Mollstedt, 2022; Hermans, 2019). From the perspective of teacher identity, Monereo and Hermans (2023, p. 454) stress “the importance of manifesting one’s own contradictions and revisiting the positionings that produce tensions, fears and anxieties in order to transcend and harmonize them.”

This study examines how one preservice subject teacher, Aino, constructs her teacher identity in a dialogical process between external and internal I-positions reflected in her narrative (interview). The focus is on dialogical tensions or boundary experiences, where different voices and I-positions originating from different times and spaces are put in a dialogue to determine what kind of teacher Aino wishes to be or become.

## Methods

### *The participant and study context*

This study was conducted during the year-long “Teachers’ pedagogical studies for subject teachers” at a university in Finland. For the purposes of the study, one student, Aino (pseudonym), was selected from among the five preservice teachers participating in the study project (see Arvaja et al., 2022; Arvaja & Sarja, 2021). Aino was selected as a subject because the important focus of this study, dialogical tension, was apparent in her narrative. Aino was a fourth-year university student majoring in languages. In Finland, preservice subject teachers participate in year-long pedagogical education in a teacher education department, in addition to their master-level subject education in their respective university departments. The combination of a three-year bachelor’s degree (180 ECTS) and a two-year master’s degree (120 ECTS) in appropriate subjects plus Teachers’ pedagogical studies for subject teachers (60 ECTS) qualifies graduates to work as subject teachers at various educational levels. The pedagogical studies consist of several courses in education and in-school practice based on dialogical and reflective learning approaches (Kostiainen et al., 2018). The studies comprise basic courses in educational sciences and subject-specific pedagogy and research, together with supervised teaching practice, usually at a teacher training school.

Pedagogical studies are manifested in the form of inquiry- and phenomenon-based learning, consisting of four different courses. In the course “Interaction and Cooperation,” which was the main target of interest in this study, students participated in stimulative lectures (including drama and pair lecturing) instead of attending traditional lectures. In addition to lectures, the student teachers worked in multidisciplinary groups on different theoretically and practically oriented themes and studied the phenomenon interactively through discussions and activities, such as drama and joint problem-solving of practical cases. The focus of learning in the Interaction and Cooperation course was on group processes and skills and knowledge of social interaction, including themes such as social contact as a key sense of belonging, facing challenging situations, and emotions in groups (Kostiainen et al., 2018; Tynjälä et al., 2016).

### *Data collection*

The main data of this study consist of an interview with Aino. The semi-structured interview was conducted shortly after the pedagogical studies ended and was carried

out by the two researchers involved in the project. The themes dealt with topics such as own school history, teachership (e.g., conceptions, meaningful learning experiences, and mission), and an evaluation of the pedagogical education program. The interview lasted 1 h and 9 min and was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The tone or style was mostly conversational, although the interview proceeded according to pre-planned themes and related questions. Accordingly, the researchers and Aino engaged in a sympathetic conversation rather than a data-gathering session (cf. Wortham, 2001). The purpose was to create a safe and confidential environment for sharing emotional experiences and to gain a deeper insight into Aino's thinking, feelings, and value considerations regarding herself as a becoming teacher.

The complementary data include recordings of a multidisciplinary student group's discussions in the Interaction and Cooperation course. Aino was a member of a group of five students. The four other students in the group studied biology, mathematics, history, and languages as their major subjects. Aino attended this five-member group throughout the year-long pedagogical studies for subject teachers in different courses whenever group work was used. Group discussion data were used as an ethnographic background to gain a better understanding of the Interaction and Cooperation course and to interpret Aino's perspectives and thoughts on these issues. The group discussion data were also used to trace Aino's I-positionings connected to those found in the interview data.

### **Data analysis**

The general framework guiding the analysis of the interview data was based on a dialogical approach to narrative self-construction (Arvaja, 2016; Vähäsantanen & Arvaja, 2022; Wortham, 2001). In this approach, identity is understood as taking the form of a narrative, and the self is seen as narratively constructed through positioning different voices from the social world in relation to each other, and by positioning oneself with respect to these voices. In a told narrative, such as an interview, the expressed teacher identity can be seen as resulting from intra/interpersonal dialogues about meaningful experiences (Assen et al., 2018; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). In the interview, Aino was prompted to describe her experiences and to reflect on her activity, thinking, and values as a becoming teacher. Moreover, she was prompted to think back to her own school days as a pupil. Therefore, through narrating her experiences, Aino not only represented her preservice teacher identity but also constructed her teacher self within various time scales, that is, addressing the past, present, and future (Arvaja, 2016; Wortham, 2001) connected to various voices and situations (Brown & Renshaw, 2006; Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020). This made it possible to examine the negotiation between Aino's dialogical/educational self and related I-positionings (Marsico et al., 2020) and her I-position as a becoming teacher embedded in the context of pedagogical studies.

The analysis proceeded through different steps. In the first step, the transcribed interview was read several times to identify and select narrative episodes that dealt with Aino's past, present, or future self- or other-referential teacher/pupil/student/personal characterizations and experiences for further analysis.

In the second step, Aino's internal and external voices were sought from the data selected in the first step (*voicing*; Wortham, 2001). Internal voices were traced through the told events, characterizations, and experiences related to Aino herself, which could

be identified mostly by the use of self-referential linguistic marks, such as first-person pronouns (Aveling et al., 2015). These internal voices were seen to constitute the internal I-positions (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021; Monereo & Caride, 2022). External voices in Aino's narrative were seen as "inner-others" whose voices belonged to other individuals or groups (Aveling et al., 2015). Identifying the others and their respective voices in Aino's narrative was mostly based on the use of third-person pronouns, as well as Aino's quoting and naming of (relevant) individuals, groups, or institutions (Aveling et al., 2015). The voices of the external others represented the external I-positions (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021; Monereo & Caride, 2022).

In the third step, the focus of analysis was on the interconnection of the internal and external I-positions (and related voices) that seemed to be *relevant* to Aino's professional I-positioning as a becoming teacher. The focus of the analysis was on situations in which internal and external I-positions were involved in a dialogical exchange. The analysis sought to determine how different internal I-positions were dialogically related to one another and to external I-positions (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021). Aino's *evaluation* (Wortham, 2001) connected to the voices (I-positions) established the degree of distance from the voices (differentiation/identification; critical/supportive stance) and helped analyze and zoom into the relationships between different (internal/external) I-positions and define their meaning in her preservice teacher identity. Aino's (the narrator's) construction of I as a becoming teacher can be detected through the analysis of voicing and evaluating different characters (relevant others) and her narrated self.

### **Ethical considerations**

The research was conducted according to the good scientific practice stated by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity and the university's Human Sciences Ethics Committee. In compliance with these guidelines, the study followed the modes of action endorsed by the research community and applied ethically sustainable data collection and research methods. Aino and the other students in the multidisciplinary group were informed about the aims and purpose of the studies and their dissemination. They gave their written consent to use the data collected, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the students' real names or other data enabling personal identification are not reported. In addition, Aino read and commented on the final version of the manuscript and gave her written consent to submit the article. The university's Human Sciences Ethics Committee has set clear criteria when an institutional review board statement from the ethics committee is needed. According to these criteria, a statement from the Ethics Committee was not required.

### **Findings**

#### ***Past educational experiences in identity construction as a becoming teacher***

To understand Aino's I-position as a becoming teacher, it is also important to understand the voices originating from past school experiences and internalized in Aino's

educational self, as they form a repertoire of semiotic resources or regulators to be activated and taken under reflection and renegotiation when she participates in pedagogical studies as a becoming teacher (Marsico et al., 2020). Aino reflects on her internal I-positions as a pupil and a child:

I guess I was like a pretty curious child and interested in learning, and I have liked and been keen on doing well at school, so that's what I remember. I have always liked school, or learning, I mean. Actually, for me, languages have always been such [target of interest] so that I recall that when as a child I watched Swedish-speaking children's programs and didn't understand anything about it but found it awfully nice. Perhaps that's why I have somehow ended up there into languages later, as well. I was like a quite shy child, and it has been challenging for me. [The quotes are translated from the Finnish transcript].

In her narrative, Aino voices her I as a pupil as being eager to learn and succeed at school, and languages, her major subject now at the university, as a joy in childhood, and thus perhaps a natural continuum in her study path. Her remark "I have always liked school, or learning, I mean" indicates, however, that she separates her main source of enthusiasm, learning, from school as an institution. Aino describes how her I-position as a shy child had been a challenge in the school context:

I can recall, too, that in the third grade, I was shy, and when I eventually got courage to raise my hand, I answered wrong, and everybody laughed. There were several points to be answered. Then silence for a moment, and then the teacher stated that Aino, all points wrong. It was the end of the world for a third grader. So, one remembers things like that, and the teacher mismanaged the situation and was really amused. It took quite a long time before I dared to say anything at all. Teachers may be unaware of that in a way [...] what you say and do there, so it keeps on living there. The situations you do there in the class, and although they seem quite neutral from your point of view so that even if somebody answered wrong, it's not a big deal, but it may be that the class community keeps reminding about it, so that it still stays in the interaction there. [...] Indeed, it has been really important that in my class, you don't need to be afraid.

In the example above, Aino reflects on her lived experiences and related emotions in the past school context. Aino feels that at school, the teacher's conduct ignored Aino as a shy child. Aino voices her past teacher as insensitive, indifferent, creating a fearful and humiliating atmosphere (external I-position), whereas she voices her I as a pupil reciprocally as being afraid and terrified, having become embarrassed in front of the class community (internal I-position). In Aino's narrative, we can see how different semiotic resources and regulators (Leijen & Kullasepp, 2013; Marsico et al., 2020) are connected to the past time and space of school (cf. chronotope; Brown & Renshaw, 2006). The traditional teacher-led interaction structure (inquiry-response-feedback) Aino describes reflects not only the nature of knowledge as unquestionable but also positions of authority that make pupils passive (indicating weak agency) and the teacher as a distant and authoritative character. These implicit suggestions offered for the educational self, for their part, influence Aino's internal I-position as a pupil and the external I-position of my past teacher (significant other; Henry & Mollstedt, 2021). In her narrative, Aino critically reflects on and evaluates the interactive dynamics and teacher activity of the past there-and-then situation as if from above, from a meta-position (Hermans, 2013). As an external I-position within the self, the teacher's voice frames Aino's experience of teachers more generally. However, in her inner

dialogue, she rejects (evaluation; Wortham, 2001) this unsensitive teacher voice by voicing herself as a sensitive and caring teacher—that is, as one in whose classes pupils do not need to be afraid, as she had been in her schooldays.

In Aino's narrative, the external I-position of my past teachers is repeatedly connected to the authoritative teacher voice, reflecting the traditional chronotope of education:

One teacher and his/her way of checking the homework and everything was always to pick up someone randomly [...] I found it very distressing, and many others found it distressing. The whole lesson went on being afraid, when will it be my turn. [...] We had to give presentations in the front of the classroom. Then I was forced to face an embarrassing situation where I have to act against my personality and be bold even though I'm not.

Aino constantly voices her Self as a pupil as fearful and anguished. This internal I-position seems to result from Aino's past experiences as a shy child in school, whose teachers she now voices as insensitive and authoritative (external I-position). In constructing her I-position as a prospective teacher, Aino reflects on these I-positions from a meta-position:

If some pupil is sensitive and shy, and you put that kind of pupil there at the front of the classroom, s/he is totally stiff with terror, and s/he is not capable of any performance which would correspond to the level of her/his abilities. And in the worst case, it will be evaluated and that is totally unfair. [...] I think that this encouragement works much better. The general atmosphere should be approving, positive, encouraging. I think encouragement is important or really important, and one of the most important. And that feedback, that the pupil gets good feedback even though s/he wasn't terribly capable.

Aino's narrative is double-voiced (Wortham, 2001) in the sense that in her discourse different perspectives—teacher-centered (evaluative) and student-centered (supportive) approaches—are put in a dialogue reflecting different ideologies and values behind these voices. In the narrative, Aino builds her I-position as a becoming teacher by differentiating from teacher-centeredness and identifying with student-centeredness, which seems to be in accordance with her personal voice of and perspective on education.

Another emotional challenge in the past school relates to Aino's experience of being bullied in the class community:

I recall from my school days that I became in a way disconnected from the class, and I was somehow excluded. At some point, I felt that everything I say or do give somehow reason to comment upon it or take a negative stand to it in some way.

The internal I-position of a bullied, fearful, and uncertain pupil dialogically constructed as part of Aino's (educational) self is activated when she enters the training period of her teacher education. The challenging experiences and their critical reflection are meaningful in her identity construction as a becoming teacher:

Those negative experiences have really great significance for the construction of my teacher identity. This [teacher] training year has been personally really challenging for me. Because after the first practice session, I was thinking that how I'm voluntarily going there, which has given me a lot of bad experiences, and I'm here in the school world again, so why on earth? [...] During this year, I became aware that I had known I was annoyed with those

classmates of mine and their ways to treat others. I was not the only one in that class. [...] And I was aware that I was annoyed with my teachers as well because they didn't do anything at all to the situation. Then, I thought that I would never wish to be such a teacher who just ignores these things. Now I have noticed that I am really sensitive to perceive there in the class if there are some tensions. Like at once, I start figuring out how the interaction and dynamics of the class are working.

From Aino's narrative, we can interpret that entering the training school during the practice period was a boundary experience coupled with negative emotions: distress, uncertainty, and an inability to cope (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). Aino's challenging emotional experiences originating from the distant there-and-then situation were seemingly activated in the practice period ("I'm voluntarily going there [...], which has given me a lot of bad experiences"). These memories and emotional experiences of past (yet still acknowledged) situations caused discomfort and pain and led to disequilibrium in Aino's dialogical self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). As was shown, Aino narrated herself as being a bullied, uncertain, frightened pupil (internal I-position(s)) who confronted the teasing and isolation from her peers and insensitivity, indifference, and unsupportiveness from past teachers (external I-positions). These identifications of the dominant teacher/pupil positionings seemed to be in contrast with Aino's identity configuration as a becoming teacher.

As individuals naturally try to recover a sense of well-being and maintain coherence in the dialogical self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), the boundary experience Aino confronted gave room to reflexive consciousness and *intuitive sense-making* through making the situational emotions transparent and giving them personal sense (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). Aino explored and observed her conflicting internal and external I-positions from a meta-position and articulated the feelings that the boundary experience evoked. In her narrative, Aino describes how, during the course of her pedagogical education ("during this year"), she had become aware of the feelings of anger and the sources causing discomfort and pain related to her past educational experiences. Aino rejected the insensitive voice of past teachers and made a conscious decision to act in a different way, which resulted in a reconfiguration within her dialogical self ("Then I thought that I would never wish to be such a teacher who just ignores these things"). Therefore, during the studies, she constructed her I-position as a becoming teacher by critically reflecting on the emotionally challenging past school experiences in relation to her own personal perspective on the teacher's role. Her teacher I-position, with its voiced perspective, was also manifested in her model of action in the practice period, in which Aino describes herself acting as a sensitive and caring teacher observing the classroom climate and dynamics of interaction and relationships, emphasizing the importance of creating a safe learning environment. As the narrative shows, Aino is clearly differentiating her own voice as a becoming teacher from the voices originating from past school experiences.

Aino's emotionally challenging experiences were also discussed in the multidisciplinary group activity, where the students addressed the phenomenon of bullying:

Aino: And bullying and being bullied is always a terribly subjective experience. It must be kept in mind! So, if someone finds him/herself being bullied, then in my opinion, there is always reason to consider that now there's something wrong here. I get a bit excited over this because I personally experienced such exclusion for twelve years. And it has been a

terribly long way. So, this makes me just so [sensitive] that I cannot stand to watch such things at all. So, I then easily intervene in camps and elsewhere as well.

Elisa: But on the other hand, now that you become a teacher, so now you can hopefully turn it like into your strength, as now you perhaps are capable and know what it is like then. That you can better intervene in it.

Aapo: So that at least you will not then be the teacher who is just passively standing by.

Aino: No, but I am also grateful in a sense that it has indeed made me more sensitive to see that wait a sec, there's now something wrong here.

Olli: But it's the greatest thing to have such an experience, which creates the authentic sense of how that person is feeling. So then, one easily intervenes in that, and in my opinion, it is by no means a bad thing that one easily intervenes in it.

In the discussion example above, the other students characterize and position Aino as a certain kind of teacher leaning on Aino's narrated experiences. The multidisciplinary group provides Aino with a platform for personal sense-making (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005), where she is able to articulate her feelings concerning bullying. In the discussion, the peer students support Aino's I-position as a sensitive and caring teacher and find Aino's bullying experiences to be a resource that not only defines but also strengthens this positioning. Her fellow students helped Aino find a positive meaning and a meaningful place in her self-narrative regarding her negative experiences in a distant space and time. As a becoming teacher, Aino could construct new semiotic resources from these experiences: models of (inter)acting as a sensitive and caring teacher and through her own I-position as a bullied pupil able to see the repertoires connected to bullying behavior. In this situation, Aino's I-position as a sensitive and caring teacher is validated in an external dialogue with her fellow students, which represents positive voices of significant (actual) others (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021). She refers to the liberating meaning of the discussion about her bullying experiences with the group:

This year has activated emotions in many ways, and I found this [discussion] as really liberating, and the reaction of others was encouraging and like a good one. I did realize it only afterwards how liberating in a way it was. The group was a safe one, and [...] I was surprised that although we didn't know each other terribly well still at that point of the year, anyway, how I yet started to open up about this issue. Somehow, the group influenced me, I guess.

Aino positions her fellow students in the group as safe and supportive, reciprocally positioning herself as a supported peer student. Her fellow students' supportive stance seemingly helped buffer the tension and challenging emotions arising from Aino's conflicting I-positions.

### ***Dialogue of alternative voices***

Aino renegotiated the dominant teacher model internalized in her educational self during her pedagogical studies. Pedagogical studies with related ideas offered alternative suggestions for Aino's teacher self, which resonated with her own thinking and value system as a becoming teacher, while contradicting the dominant teacher model:

Somehow, it has been highlighted how largely one can solve situations with these [interaction skills]. At least for me, it was a mind-blowing realization then in the first intensive week, the first lecture, which was like so dramatic. So, then I realized that hey, I don't need to be the same kind of a teacher as the teachers I have had. [...] That you can be just like you are as a teacher and that's just fine. And in a way you don't have to adopt some kind of a stereotypical teacher role and take the lead aggressively the first thing when you enter a classroom. Instead, you can proceed like by interaction. It was so liberating.

The narrative demonstrates how attending the “dramatic lecture” (a part of the Interaction and Cooperation course) seemed to be a moment of a positive boundary experience for Aino, after which she was able to observe and explore her (internal and external) I-positions from a meta-position and become aware of the conflicting voices between them (e.g., the external I-position of my past teachers and the internal I-position as a becoming teacher). In Aino's discourse, we can see an inner dialogue between these internal and external I-positions. Aino realized that as a becoming teacher, she does not have to accept the dominant teacher voice originating from past school experiences (“I don't need to be the same kind of a teacher as the teachers I have had”), the voice with which she cannot identify (Wortham, 2001), and the voice that is in conflict with her own value system. Pedagogical studies, representing a voice of the significant (imagined) other (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021), offered an alternative voice stressing the meaning of interaction and being oneself as a teacher. Aino differentiated from the “stereotypic” authoritative teacher voice (“take the lead aggressively”), causing distress and contradiction in her dialogical self. Her “mind-blowing realization” of being able to be her own self and act through interaction as a teacher seemed to be a meaningful and liberating transition point in Aino's process of reconfiguring her I-position as a teacher. In her internal dialogue, pedagogical studies, as an external I-position of the imagined other with its ideas and ideologies (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021), supported her I-position as a caring and sensitive teacher aligned with her (personal and) professional value system, thus minimizing the tension in the dialogical self. Thus, as a student teacher, Aino felt supported by her teacher education (I as a supported student) and accepted (some of) the suggestions offered.

Aino was also able to coordinate and create links between her professional and personal I-positions (“You can be just like you are as a teacher”), thus redefining her I as a teacher as more coherent and dialogically integrated with her I as a person (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). This moment of liberation (“It was so liberating”) reflects a source of emotional relief that minimized the discrepancy in Aino's self-system and created harmony and balance between different I-positions in her dialogical self (Henry & Mollstedt, 2022; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). In her narrative, Aino describes this re-positioning more explicitly:

I would say that one of my realizations of this year was that in a way one somehow thinks that there are so many stereotypes pertaining to teachers [...] so I had this big realization during an interaction course, to do the work through one's own personality. I found it so wonderful. It was really easy to go to the practice lessons and everywhere. In a way, I don't need to change myself or develop any separate teacher role; that's perhaps the point.

A renegotiation of an I-position as a teacher was manifested in an internal dialogue between a collective teacher voice (external I-position) and a personal voice (internal I-position), representing Aino's true subjective feelings—that is, her authentic voice



(Marková, 2006). Aino's dialogical self regarding her I-position as a becoming teacher and I-position as a person moved from the state of decentering (i.e., disharmony; "separate teacher role") to the state of centering (i.e., harmony; "doing the work through one's own personality"; Hermans, 2013), enabling diverse I-positions to achieve integration and "to form adaptive and productive combinations" (Hermans, 2019, p. 37). This negotiation between conflicting I-positions triggered by the interaction course can be seen as a positive boundary experience, a "big realization," leading to a transformation in Aino's professional identity.

The two examples above demonstrate how Aino, in her discursive meaning-making (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005), used shared meanings and concepts available in the pedagogical studies (the Interaction and Cooperation course) in constructing her I-position as a becoming teacher. The focus on interaction and its importance to the teaching-learning process and the notion of being oneself as a teacher, as discussed in pedagogical studies, offered a new frame of reference and new semiotic resources for understanding the teaching-learning process. This voice seemed to resonate with Aino's own voice as a prospective sensitive and caring teacher and was aligned with her personal, authentic voice.

### ***I-position as a becoming teacher***

As has been shown, through critical dialogue involving multiple internal and external I-positions and related voices, Aino found that the suggested teacher-pupil relationships, practices, and models of actions in the pedagogical studies supported her own view, contradicting those originating from her past and internalized in her educational self. During her teacher education, Aino created her own voice as a teacher and adopted new semiotic resources to guide her activities as a teacher. She figured out what kind of teacher she wished to be and acted accordingly without activating past models of action. In her narrative, Aino voices the most important characteristics of a teacher and identifies with these features:

The prime responsibility of a teacher is to be present. Then, I would argue further that this includes everything you do in the classroom. Pupils will certainly notice if you're not around and present or if you're not interested or you are like somewhere else in your thoughts. [...] The kind of basic interestedness and interaction with the pupils. Personally, I find it somehow more important perhaps than always proceeding with the subject matter in front. If the atmosphere is poor, and there's something going on in the classroom, so there is not much hope of learning, either. I hope myself that as a teacher I could be kind of safe and easy to approach. I think that anyway, there's no need to be anything like that a pupil finds it threatening or pressuring and things like that.

Aino feels that her main task as a teacher is to be (emotionally) present. She wishes to be recognized as a safe and approachable teacher interested in her pupils. Creating a good and safe interactive environment is important and is also a prerequisite for learning ("If the atmosphere is poor [...] there is not much hope for learning"). These voiced characteristics and models of action are the opposite of those of past teachers. Differentiating herself from the teacher voice originating from past experiences also shows in Aino's activity as a student teacher in the practice school:

Actually, I noticed at the training school that it is quite easy to go to the pupils and talk with them, and I am happy to talk with them also about other things than the teaching matter about some verbs [...] I still remember what the teaching was like when I was a pupil, namely from the perspective of teaching languages. It was quite much like cramming grammar, and then there are those book chapters, and you proceed according to them. Now this phenomenon-based has focused on something like oral language proficiency and else, and it is not so much bound to the book. Phenomenon-based gives you more room for interaction and for more holistic examination of things and for creativity there in the classroom. Well, in exercises, I have noticed that I tend to use quite a lot of kind of group-works or pair works. Kind of interactive ones because I think that the language is specifically a tool for interaction. I wish to emphasize and stress it in a way. [...] And somehow through practice so that students do themselves. Be it about grammar or anything else. It's the most important point. I am interested in, for example, action-based teaching of grammar. I have tried it in the secondary school, and in fact, it also works well with the high school students. I do some small pieces of paper with words in them, and I ask the students to put the pieces in right order, word order, and yes, they together pondered, and did it, and they were very excited about it.

In the narrative, Aino positions herself as personally close to the students (“I’m happy to talk with them also about things other than the teaching matter”). Regarding teaching the subject, languages, Aino’s models of action manifest in a current chronotope of education (Brown & Renshaw, 2006) supported in teacher studies and stressing phenomenon-based, student-centered, and participatory pedagogy instead of traditional pedagogy (“cramming grammar and then there are those book chapters and you proceed according to them”), the chronotope of education in her past. Groupwork and learning by doing are indicators of strong student agency, while learning languages through interaction highlights the practical and usability aspects of knowledge. Aino’s critical dialogical elaboration of her educational experiences involving alternative (past and new) voices during her pedagogical studies led her, thus, also to *acting through* the reconfigured teacher I-position, demonstrating professional transformation and authorship (Sarja & Arvaja, 2023).

## Discussion and conclusions

This study explored how one preservice subject teacher, Aino, constructed her I-position as a becoming teacher in a dialogue between past school experiences and ideas stemming from her pedagogical studies for subject teachers. The interest was in examining how Aino negotiated her teacher identity in a dialogical process between external and internal I-positions reflected in her narrative (interview). These I-positions were manifested in dialogical tensions or boundary experiences between different voices and I-positions situated in different spaces and times (Geijssel & Meijers, 2005; Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020).

This study used the construct of educational self (Marsico et al., 2020) to highlight the significant role of teacher students’ past educational experiences in negotiating their I-position as a becoming teacher within the dialogical self (Hermans, 2013). Although the role of positive and negative school experiences in constructing teacher identity are acknowledged (Arvaja et al., 2022; Lee & Schallert, 2016), taking these experiences intentionally as a resource for learning and reflection in teacher

education is rare (Kostiainen et al., 2018), but as this study demonstrates, important. As was shown in Aino's narrative, her internal I-position of a pupil voiced as bullied, fearful, and anguished and her external I-position of my past teachers voiced as authoritative and insensitive were in dialogical discourse with her I as a becoming teacher voiced as student-centered and sensitive. In Aino's narrated educational experiences, the emotional and power relationships as well as the epistemological and ontological beliefs of her past school context reflected traditional pedagogy, whereas her experiences in pedagogical studies and her personal perspective reflected more the ideas of participatory pedagogy (Arvaja & Sarja, 2021; Brown & Renshaw, 2006). Thus, Aino's narrative was double-voiced in the sense that different voices were positioned in a dialogue reflecting the different ideologies associated with these voices (Wortham, 2001).

The pedagogical studies created interconnected platforms for personal sense-making and collective meaning-giving (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). The emotional challenge of Aino's past school experiences served as a resource for making personal sense so that she became aware of and critically evaluated her experiences related to her past teacher-pupil relationships and teachers' models of action. In addition, the multi-disciplinary group, for its part, provided a safe platform for personal sense-making, while the pedagogical studies provided a platform for collective meaning-giving by offering new perspectives on education and new meanings for understanding one's personal experiences, enabling identity learning and transformation. Through discursive meaning-making of the new ideas offered in the teacher education program, Aino was able to make a conscious decision to act differently from the dominant teacher model (external I-position) originating from the past and create her own kind of teacher I-position with its pupil-teacher relationships and models of action that would be in line with her own value system and personal I-position. In dialogical interaction with significant others within the pedagogical studies, Aino was provided with new semiotic resources and suggestions for her teacher identity that strengthened her I-position as a teacher (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021; Marsico et al., 2020). As a result, when Aino enters the school world as a teacher, the models of action that she will adopt in her teaching are likely to provide different suggestions for her own pupils' educational selves and identities compared to what she was offered as a pupil.

Pedagogical studies apparently produced positive and negative boundary experiences (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005) that enabled Aino to recognize the dominant internal and external I-positions in her dialogical self and to start a process of interpretation and reinterpretation of these I-positions. Monereo and Hermans (2023, p. 10) stress the importance of supporting dialogue in which (preservice) teachers are able to discuss their "borderline experiences" and articulate I-positions. This stimulates student teachers to reflect on their teaching and learning experiences from a meta-position, enabling them to harmonize their multiple I-positions. During her pedagogical studies, Aino was able to create a teacher I-position where her personal and professional I-positions formed a harmonized and balanced coalition (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Leijen and Kullasepp (2013) argue that rather than being merely introduced to profession-related expectations and prescriptions, student teachers need opportunities to voice their personal I-positions and explore the relationship between their personal

and professional positions. Within teacher education, this necessitates a transition from an epistemological emphasis (knowing) to an ontological one (being and becoming; Su, 2011).

The interview data were analyzed leaning on a dialogically oriented narrative approach (Arvaja, 2016; Vähäsantanen & Arvaja, 2022; Wortham, 2001). The analysis was essentially focused on Aino's intrapersonal dialogues about meaningful experiences in making sense of herself as a becoming teacher (Assen et al., 2018). Interview proved to be a useful tool for capturing the construction of teacher identity as an interplay of the self and others appearing within the utterances of the multi-voiced self (Aveling et al., 2015; Wortham, 2001). Certain internal and external I-positions with related voicing and evaluating occurred repeatedly in Aino's told narrative, indicating the relevance of those I-positions in constructing her teacher identity (Wortham, 2001), although likely much of her inner self and consequent I-positioning as a teacher remained hidden and beyond the scope of these data and analysis. Therefore, one must bear in mind that the told narrative is able to capture only a limited number of experiences and provide only partial information about identities (Vähäsantanen & Arvaja, 2022), although the narrative approach does not even try to reach for "the absolute truth" or "whole" representation of the self (Wortham, 2001). To better understand the dialogical construction of preservice teacher identity, future studies could look more closely at how the teacher self is constructed in the self-narratives and in the dialogical relationships in the preservice teachers' actual learning activities in the context of teacher studies. Furthermore, to capture preservice teacher identity as a developmental trajectory, the focus should be on longer-term data gathering through various means.

To conclude, Aino's preservice teacher identity was a result of a critical dialogue and negotiation between different voices situated in different times and places (Brown & Renshaw, 2006; Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020). When Aino negotiated her thinking, being, and acting as a teacher, different historical layers met in her internal and external dialogue, indicating the polyphony and multi-layeredness of each setting (Grossen & Muller Mirza, 2020). Consequently, teacher education should help students become aware of different voices and, thus, of the dynamics and tensions of the social, cultural, and institutional structures surrounding teacher's work (Ligorio, 2010; Sarja & Arvaja, 2023). This enhances preservice teachers' capacity to assess the contextual and historical relatedness of personal actions, and to develop as agentic teachers who can transform their own thinking and practice in the complex, changing world of teachers' work (Uitto et al., 2015).

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