‘We’re the Ones Who Didn’t Get Spat Out’: Collective Identity among Private Alternative Teachers

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Abstract

Current research shows the importance of teacher identity in understanding the educational process. The aim of our study is to describe the collective identity of teachers in a selected private school. We chose a narrative approach based on an analysis of five in-depth interviews with teachers. The results of this research show five collective teacher identity levels, each of which in some way delimits its relation to mainstream education. The formation and legitimation mechanisms of these identities within the teacher group are also described. The research contributes to the understanding of teachers and private schools, which are discussed not only in terms of social justice but also in terms of change of the whole educational system.

1. Introduction

Current narrative research captures the construction of multiple teacher identities within different contexts, such as professional development stage (Henry & Mollstedt, 2021; Huang et al., 2019; Kauppinen et al., 2020; Schaefer, 2013; Trent, 2017), subject matter (Ahn, 2019; Avalos-Rivera, 2019; Landi, 2018; Lutovac & Kaasila, 2019) or gender and sexual orientation (Bracho & Hayes 2020; Llewellyn & Reynolds, 2021; Smith, 2018). However, although this research emphasizes the social construction of identity, it mainly describes the identity of individual teachers. Our research instead focuses on the identity of an entire team of teachers.

Most of teacher identity research was done in public school systems in different parts of the world. Teacher identity development in private schools stands aside. We start from the assumption that private alternative schools are represented by the teachers who work there. Investigating the formation of the identity of teachers in alternative schools thus appears as a way to understand these schools, which are sometimes understood as elite (Brown & Beckett, 2007). We thus follow the research tradition of Conelly and Clandinin (1988), who came with the irreplaceable importance of the teacher’s experience for the implementation of the educational process. In other influential publications, narrative research makes it possible to examine teacher identity formation as articulated through talk, social interaction, and self-presentation (Zembylas, 2003). Although identity and curriculum research has a historical tradition, Juzwik and Ives (2010) point out that the ways that emergent teacher identity interacts with curricular content – again, at a micro-interactional level – is not well-studied. However, Juzwik and Ives (2010) tried to fill the gap in knowledge by researching small stories of teachers, but they encountered one weakness. Their research is synchronic, rather than diachronic: they capture a snapshot, rather than tracing identification over time. In our research, we focus more on life stories of teachers than on selected small stories. The goal of the presented research is to understand the narrative construction of identities of teachers at a selected private alternative school in the Czech Republic. We focus on construction and reconstruction of teacher’s identity within one discursive space – a space of colleagues within the school.

2. ‘Teacher identity’ in this paper
Although defined in various ways, ‘teacher identity’ is frequently characterized as dynamic, multifaceted, negotiated and co-constructed (Edwards & Burns, 2016). Also in educational context, identity might be seen under negotiation and in the process of becoming (Juzwik and Ives, 2010). This is how we understand identity in our research, and we focus on its construction from two perspectives: narrative and collective.

**Narrative** is both phenomenon and method. As phenomenon, narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied. As method, narrative research represents wide range of methodological approaches (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In our paper, we work with narrative approach connected to identity. In this point of view, identity might be conceptualized as a co-construction of reality (cf. Riessman, 1993) — it demonstrates that ‘teacher identity derives from the sociocultural orientation, emphasizing the multiplicity, discontinuity and social nature of identity’ (Schutz et al., 2018, p. 186). The narrative approach stresses that identity is constructed within interactions, but it is also constructed narratively in a teacher’s speech when referring to these interactions. According to van Manen (1994, p. 157), each teacher may see his or her pedagogical life as a reflection of a personal identity that can only develop in time by living through experiences and telling stories about one’s daily living with children.

Cooper and Olson (1996) formulate identity as a dynamic process that requires an interpretation in relation to the Other. Moreover, narratives may be collaboratively constructed with the Others, but as well, they can also spur confrontation and conflict (De Fina, and Georgakopoulou, 2011, p. 92). **Collective perspective** focuses on the shaping of teacher identity within the school collective. The school is a place where teachers negotiate, construct, reconstruct and share their identities. While there has been an increasing interest within educational research on teachers’ professional identity focus on teacher commitment (Day et al., 2005; Ingersoll, 2001), a few studies have addressed commitment to collective identity (e. g. Worchel; 2009). Group membership determine whether people are able to cope with any stress (Jetten et al., 2009) and thus stay in the profession.

Identity is strongly dependent on the type of environment one lives in, the various meanings people attach to themselves or the meanings attributed by others (Biejaard, 1995). Teacher identity evolves through interaction with the realities of the school or place where the professional is located (Boreham & Gray, 2011). Therefore, this identity is generally recognized as multifaceted and constantly shifting because teachers are influenced by the contexts that surround them (Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006). Personal identities provide an expression of individuality, whereas social identities are associated with norms, behaviours & values ascribed to a group (Richardson & Watt, 2008). Despite this delineation, it is difficult to uncover what constitutes individual difference in personal identity versus what constitutes the collective identity (Worchel, 1998). Sense of self can be determined both by personal and social identity (Haslam, 2001). Haslam (2001) further develops the idea of ‘we-ness’ as a shared model of ‘us’. Watkins (2019) found out that, teachers who displayed a collective identity did not feel that their successes was a result of their personal strengths, but associated it with a collective self-definition.

The concept of identity serves as a pivot point between the social and the individual, and each can be chosen in relation to the other (Wenger, 1998). The construction of Us and Them is an important tool. Collective identity involves firstly a reflexive knowledge of group membership and, secondly, an emotional attachment or specific disposition to this belonging (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 25). To describe this US and Them, we chose concept of collective identity. The notion of collective identity is key to understanding “how teachers come to define their identity in shared ways” (Borg, 2016, p. 131). Although it is difficult to distinguish between levels of identity, this collective level of identity could relate to people defining themselves in terms of we, as opposed to the individual sense of self, using I (Spicksley et al., 2021). Thus, teachers’ collective identity involves We-descriptions (Knez, 2016). This is consistent with our need to belong to a social group (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) "in order to be part of the collective self, the collective story and its memories" (Knez, 2016, p. 3). Consequently, collective identity incorporates behaviours, motivations, attitudes, values, interests, cognitions, and emotions related to the collective (Ybarra & Trafimow, 1998). Teacher identity is co-constructed with different actors from the micro-social level of the classroom to the macro-social level of educational policy, for instance, as represented by educational reform (see Wee Teo, 2013). In terms of
alternative schools, school context forms an important framework for the construction of identity. Brown and Heck (2018) found that teachers working in alternative school contexts construct multiple identities when engaging with the diversity of colleagues and students.

We can thus summarize that the construction of teacher identity takes place in relation to curricular conversations with students as well as in other professional social spaces (e.g., teachers’ staffrooms, lunchroom conversations with colleagues, parents, etc.), macro-social level of educational policy and teachers’ personal life and within the Self (ANONYMISED, 2021). In our research we focus on social interaction and selfpresentation manifested in teacher’s talk. Selfpresentations are the key focus of our research because they carry a whole repertoire of embodied and semiotic resources (habitual practices, desires, fears, commitments, social status, memberships) in which tellers see themselves over time through the stories they tell (Georgakopoulou, 2013). These selfpresentations are being worked out both retrospectively (life history) and prospectively (an idea what an actor will become later) (Bühler-Niederberger & König, 2011).

We focused on how an individual constructs past events and acts into personal narrative units to show a specific identity and the result of creating his or her life (Hiles, ČermákJ Chrz, 2009). From a methodological point of view, the stories themselves are already interpretations (Riessman, 2008). However, it is the teachers’ perspective that is important for us, and the chosen methodological procedure enables us to see it from the inside not only of one teacher, but a group of teachers working together.

3. Private alternative schools

The term ‘alternative school’ can have various connotations internationally. The term alternative schools might be connected with different social groups - marginalised and privileged as well. In terms of marginalised groups, alternative schools may be attended by those who have not been served by mainstream schools in the past: children with special needs, low socioeconomic backgrounds, minorities (Mills et al, 2016; Skattebol and Hayes, 2016; Riddle & Cleaver, 2017). From this point of view, the alternative education sector may be constructed as a dumping ground for students ‘unwanted’ by the education system (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Such stigmatization of pupils in alternative schools has been described, for example, in the US (Kelly, 1993). On the other hand, alternative schools are also the choice of parents who are interested in their children’s learning, so much so that they are willing to pay for their education even when public education is free. Thus, a certain segment of parents accumulates around private alternative schools (educated middle class, habitually oriented towards self-development with liberal views) (Jarkovská, 2018), i.e. rather privileged social groups. This is the case in the Czech Republic, where research was conducted.

Although evolving in different directions in different parts of the world, new alternatives have much in common. They emphasize the development of self-concept, problem-solving, and humanistic approaches (Conley, 2002). Woods and Woods (2009) compared alternative schooling with mainstream schooling in Western countries such as the USA, UK, and Australia. Alternative education makes use of flexible, innovative approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, as well as a diverse range of philosophical traditions, democratic schooling, and student voice. The variability of alternative directions is currently such that the term alternative education is like empty drinking cups into which all manner of beverages may be poured (Nagata, 2007).

The wave of interest in alternative schools in the Czech Republic manifested itself in the mass establishment of private alternative schools after the turn of the millennium. In 1995 Ministry of Education registered 81 private schools, in 2020 it was 239 private schools (msmt.cz). The interest in setting up private alternative schools in recent years has been so significant that the Ministry of Education has limited their registration, provoking a tumultuous debate on social justice in education, argued by both proponents and opponents of private alternative schools (Jarkovska, 2018).

4. Methodology

Our focus in this article is on teachers in one private alternative school in the Czech Republic, with the goal of understanding the narrative construction of identities among teachers within this context. Research ethics was approved by the grant agency of the Czech Republic under no ANONYMISED.
4.1 Narrative research

As Riessman (2008) mentions, this term encompasses a wide range of approaches that differ in data types, theoretical perspectives, epistemological positions, research questions, and even definitions of narrative. To simplify, we can distinguish two dominant paradigms: On the one hand the tradition centered on autobiography, and on the other hand, the conversation analytic tradition. We are based on the autobiography, where the relationship between narrative and identity has been conceived in terms of the relationship between the self and the act of narrating. Identity construction is captured through the concept of ‘positioning’ (de Finna, 2003). Subject positions has been acknowledged in research that uses interactional data (Carranza, 2000). Compare to that, conversation analysis looks at the process of identity construction in itself, constituted in ‘performance’, negotiated and enacted, not internalized in any way (de Finna, 2003).

4.2 Sample

The research examines a private Czech alternative school that is based on the principles of laboratory schools. Laboratory schools were inspired by John Dewey, who started an experimental school at the University of Chicago to test ideas and teach children in 1896. The schools operated in association with a university and were used for prospective teacher training, educational experimentation, educational research and professional development. For our research, we selected a newly formed school (established in 2016) in which the process of identity formation is essential. This makes it possible to follow the emerging identities associated with it. At the same time, this school represents a novel and distinct alternative in terms of curriculum within the Czech Republic and it arouses the interest of parents and public for its dynamic development. Due to its private nature, the school further differs from regular institutions by charging tuition fees. The school characterizes itself as one that cultivates core values as they are the scaffolding for social and emotional competencies and the skills needed for the twenty-first century (website of the school).

The sample consist of teachers from both the primary (ISCED 1) and lower secondary (ISCED 2) education levels of the school. The selection criterion was limited to teachers who had been working at the school for more than a year and worked across subject matters. Thus, five teachers working at the researched school were included in the analysis (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Subject matter</th>
<th>Education level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>Czech language</td>
<td>ISCED 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hana</td>
<td>English language</td>
<td>ISCED 1, ISCED 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia</td>
<td>Czech language</td>
<td>ISCED 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>ISCED 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvestr</td>
<td>School Director</td>
<td>ISCED 1, ISCED 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection was conducted in autumn 2020 and spring 2021 via in-depth interviews inspired by narrative research. We created a scheme of semi-structured interviews covering three areas: the teacher’s story, the teacher’s identity in relation to various actors and the teacher’s relation to mainstream education. The average length of the interview was 90 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and analysed in Atlas.ti, version 7.

4.3 Data analysis

The narrative approach is applicable in the examination of identity because the narrative reflects the identity or self-story of the narrator (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). As Riessman (2008) asserts, the term ‘narrative research’ encompasses a wide range of approaches which differ in data types, theoretical perspectives, epistemological positions, research questions even definitions of ‘narrative’. Our conception of narrative research is based on social constructivism, thus, our research of identity is based on the premise that social realities are constructed, not given (Berger & Luckman 1967). In our research, we understand narrative not only
as stories that have a sequential and temporal ordering, but also as texts that include a kind of rupture or disturbance in the normal course of events, a kind of unexpected action that provokes a reaction and/or an adjustment (De Fina, 2003). The data obtained from the in-depth interviews is narrative in nature, as they organize the teacher’s experiences, give them meaning (Jackson, 2002) and draw selectively from those experiences (Presser, 2009).

The data analysis was inspired by narrative oriented inquiry (NOI) and critical discursive analysis. At the heart of NOI lies the relationship between the story that is being told (fabula), the retelling (sjuzet) of that story and the inevitably obscured person who is the teller (identity position) (Hiles & Čermák, 2008; Hiles, Čermák & Chrz, 2009). The data coding process consisted of three stages: First, the data was coded via open coding to identify the main aspects of each teacher’s story (fabula). The main aspects of fabula were found in collective identity level (see table 2). In the second coding phase, we focused on the linguistic resources discursively employed in these stories (sjuzet). The main aspects of sjuzet were found in dichotomy characterizing the DIFFERENCE of the teachers’ identity compared to the mainstream schools (see table 2). Finally, in the third phase, we combined the findings into categories that involve teacher identity. This created five teacher identity levels (see table 2). Critical discursive analysis practices were used in the second and third phases of coding to uncover discourse patterns that might represent something beyond the words (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2004). We took into account issues of context and influence as well as how power, dominance and inequality are expressed (Brooks, 2016).

5. Results

The collective identity of the teachers at the researched school is constructed between two poles: a negative pole defining oneself against mainstream education or former colleagues and a positive pole contrasting the teachers’ subjectively perceived characteristics in comparison to mainstream education and former colleagues. This creates an identity of DIFFERENCE, which is deeply examined in chapter 5.3.

5.1 Collective identity of teachers—Who are we not in contrast to former school teachers?

The school creates a narrative about teachers who have stayed and about those who have left the school. Thus, in the formation of collective identity, the discursive means that help define who they are and strengthen the described collective identity levels are important. The collective identity of teachers is thus delineated in comparison with other teachers, and not only those from ordinary schools but also former colleagues who left the school:

‘And I felt it, so I will speak for myself. I felt that they did not find common ground with us, like with the team here.’ (Lena)

The reason for leaving is, in this recounting, on the part of those who left. Those who ‘did not find common ground’ with the teachers at the school left. In the words of one informant, ‘It spat some out’: ‘So we are on a similar wavelength like this, and if we are not, we used [this term] last year—that it would spit a person out. They will find out that they really do not belong here.’ (Cecilia)

The metaphor of spitting out teachers who do not integrate depersonalizes the school’s mechanism of simply removing nonconforming components. The responsibility for ‘not finding common ground’ with the teachers who have left is thus absolved and depersonalized. The narrative about those who left is shared among the teachers at the school (We used [it]... that it would spit a person out). It is a discursive practice that becomes part of the sharing and thus helps to define the boundaries of the teachers’ collective identity at the school. For some reason, those who left did not conform to the collective identity construct of the school’s teachers. According to the teachers interviewed, one of the reasons why some teachers leave, are the high demands on the teachers: ‘The reason why I think this happens is actually the terribly high demands on the teachers, that those people can’t stand it—they just leave.’ (Sylvia)

Perhaps surprisingly, the high demands on teachers are not only professional, but also regard personality, as revealed by the director’s narrative that a good teacher is a good person. For the director, the personality characteristics of a prospective teacher is the key to their selection and stands above formal training. The
director thus influences the dynamics of the teachers’ collective identity through its teacher selection criteria, which give preference to young and flexible candidates. The result is a collective identity among teachers. The selected teachers share similar characteristics, and, in their narratives, an adoration of the director can often be found. This teacher selection also significantly eliminates critical voices concerning the director and his procedures. As regards collective identity, it is also important in a homogeneous group to strengthen it through a considerable distinction between Us and Them (those who left, those who teach in a regular school).

The teachers’ collective identity in the school is therefore not just a product of discursive sharing between educational actors but is purposely shaped via the nondiscursive instruments of the director, and particularly through the curriculum and staffing policy: "When I set the standards of quality, so, teachers, for some of them, the quality was actually not unattainable, but they had no desire... to create a similar uniform quality, so they left." (Silvestr)

In the director’s narrative, there is a shift from the typical teacher narrative of Us to Me: ‘What we do here is, of course, like my decision, but we try to explain the decision to everyone around us.’ (Silvestr)

This Me stands in the background of the decisions at the school and also in the formation of the teachers’ collective identity. The director participates in the formation of the collective identity through quality as defined by him, which is his instrument for teacher selection and a filter for the construction of the teachers’ collective identity in the school. From the director’s perspective, the school is emphasized as a community, but at the same time the director acts as a strong leader, shaping this community. Given the director’s role, the fact that decision-making lies within his hands is not surprising. Of note, however, is that, in the teachers’ narratives, the director’s Me becomes Us; thus, the teachers often reconstruct the director’s decisions as the decisions of the teaching staff. The figure of the director is, for the school’s teachers, a role model they look up to:

‘He really is the instigator, and he has, especially, a much bigger vision. He sees further than I see <laughs>. So, he sees more comprehensively than I do, so I think that his advice or,... how to proceed with some things—I will always take his advice rather than being brave and kind of deal with it on my own.’ (Cecilia)

The director is thus portrayed in the teachers’ narratives as a kind of guarantor who creates the sense of DIFFERENCE for the collective identity and puts it into practice. Teachers then find it easier to relate to this collective identity of DIFFERENCE since it is personalized by the director.

5.2 Collective identity of teachers—Who are we not in contrast to mainstream education

The research took place in a private school which is largely opposed to mainstream education. It is therefore interesting that both teachers and the director reject the ‘alternative school’ label.

‘When parents call us an alternative school, we don’t feel completely like an alternative school. Rather, we choose what works one way or another in the twenty-first century, which methods and forms, but not so much that we would stand out. Everyone here teaches in a way that is very natural for them.’ (Cecilia)

Thus, although teachers and the director reject the label ‘alternative’, they report a certain DIFFERENCE that is constructed directly in relation to mainstream education. This DIFFERENCE is constructed particularly through the following dichotomies: IT WORKS (their concept of education) vs IT DOES NOT WORK (mainstream school), UP TO DATE EDUCATION vs LAST CENTURY’S EDUCATION, FREE TEACHING vs RESTRICTED TEACHING, MAXIMUM POSSIBLE vs UNUSED OPPORTUNITIES and OPENNESS vs RIGIDITY.

In the following section on the teachers’ collective identity, we will look into these dichotomies in more detail and thus bring into better focus the picture of DIFFERENCE that the alternative teachers construct in their narratives.

5.3 Collective identity of teachers—Who do we feel we are?
The teacher narratives give voice to their collective identity, one which is characterized by this difference of the teachers in comparison to the image of teachers in mainstream education. The **DIFFERENCE** among alternative teachers is constructed at different levels through which we characterize the collective identity of teachers at this school (table 2). At the most base level, teachers relate to themselves (the **enthusiasts** identity). At the next level, they relate to their colleagues at the school (the **friends** identity). This is followed by a level related to the school pupils (the **guides** identity), parents ( **partners with parents** ) and a level exceeding the school as an institution (the **system influencers** identity) as teachers in the examined alternative school characterize themselves more widely than solely as educators of pupils. These levels demarcate the distinction from teachers in mainstream schools—the dichotomy characterizing the **DIFFERENCE** of the teachers’ identity compared to the mainstream schools.

### Table 2. Collective identity levels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Collective identity level</th>
<th>Dichotomy characterizing the <strong>DIFFERENCE</strong> of the teachers’ identity compared to the mainstream schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasts</td>
<td>In relation to themselves</td>
<td>MAXIMUM POSSIBLE vs UNUSED OPPORTUNITIES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>OPENNESS vs RIGIDITY UP TO DATE EDUCATION vs LAST CENTURY’S EDUCATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>In relation to colleagues at the school</td>
<td>OPENNESS vs RIGIDITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guides</td>
<td>In relation to the pupils</td>
<td>OPENNESS vs RIGIDITY FREE vs RESTRICTED TEACHING WORKS vs DOES NOT WORK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners with parents</td>
<td>In relation to the parent community</td>
<td>OPENNESS vs RIGIDITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System influencers</td>
<td>In relation to society</td>
<td>UP TO DATE EDUCATION vs LAST CENTURY’S EDUCATION WORKS vs DOES NOT WORK</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 5.3.1 Enthusiasts: Devoted professionals

The first layer in the teachers’ collective identity consists of an identity related to themselves. We characterize this as the **enthusiasts** identity. Enthusiasts are dedicated to their profession—a characteristic that the teachers attribute to themselves and to the team of teachers at the school under study.

‘I think the people who come together here really take their jobs as a kind of mission and enjoy it.’ (Cecilia)

Enthusiasts are the ones who do the MAXIMUM POSSIBLE, in other words, that which is not done from their perspective at mainstream schools or is done to a limited extent. Specifically, this not only means constant professional development but also mass reflection and self-reflection as well as a high degree of self-criticism.

Self-reflection in accordance with the individual needs of teachers, there are in-school reflection processes that are collectively adjusted, including unwritten ‘internal rules’. This **mass reflection and self-reflection** is perceived positively, with admiration, by the teachers examined: ‘To me, it seems rather unreal that we regularly reflect on the things we’ve set up.’ At the same time, one teacher Lena perceives this team reflection as something exceptional that cannot be experienced in a mainstream school, that is, something
that WORKS here in comparison to a regular school: ‘We reflect on how it went, what suited us, what did not, how it could be changed. This is a situation which I would absolutely not encounter at a normal school because so much of it was about the fact that we’d been doing it like that for fifteen years..., so we had no reason to change those things.’ (Lena)

Continuous professional development as well as mass reflection and self-reflection however do not lead to satisfaction with a given stage of professional development but to self-criticism: ‘I certainly would not say that I can do it all. I could name you, and I can, an awful lot of things that don’t go the way I want, either in terms of that relationship setting or in terms of that communication setting, and sometimes in terms of the feedback as well, yes.’ (Sylvia)

Enthusiasts are therefore depicted particularly by the dichotomies of MAXIMUM POSSIBLE vs UNUSED OPPORTUNITIES and WORKS vs DOES NOT WORK. The teachers perceive themselves as ‘constantly on a path to a certain ideal’, to which they dedicate maximum effort. This maximum effort is contrasted with mainstream schools where, in their words, teachers are not given the space or support for these efforts and, in the end, the efforts themselves may even seem undesirable. This effort is then associated with the fact that there are things that work in the school that would fail if done at mainstream schools. Therefore, in order to be able to strive for the MAXIMUM POSSIBLE, the teachers also declare OPENNESS to be among their characteristics: ‘So I was actually really relieved that I do not have to convince anybody that what we do makes, like, some kind of sense, because I work with people whose minds are very open. So that’s probably the biggest change.’ (Hana)

OPENNESS is again often contrasted in their narratives with the RIGIDITY associated with mainstream schools. For enthusiasts, OPENNESS is associated with the opportunity to bring new ideas as regards teaching, but also to communicate openly with colleagues at school.

5.3.2 Friends: Informal relationships among the teaching staff

Another level of teacher identity at the school under study relates to their colleagues. The teachers stress the importance of colleagues in school, and the relationships with them are characterized as friendly: ‘And those relationships are just so friendly and supportive that I really take it to be one big family here.’ (Sylvia)

Friendly relations between teachers connected with the OPENNESS vs RIGIDITY dichotomy. The teachers claim that there is a safe ‘family’ environment at the school, one of the conditions for ‘being open’ to others as well as the abovementioned development and self-criticism. ‘So, whenever I can find support for…what, I’m not sure about… I would never have an opportunity such as this anywhere else.’ (Sylvia). The teachers openly say that they can go to anyone’s class asking for help or share their experiences with others. The communication in the staffroom is completely open: ‘I haven’t been able to do this today. I need help with this, I don’t know how to do this. But also, like, this is good.‘

At the same time, this OPENNESS allows teachers to feel good at school: ‘I feel good in this team here and with these people I’m here with. I feel their support—an overall very forthcoming approach. And whenever I need something, I know who to turn to, and I know that those people don’t mind that I turn to them.’ (Hana)

This open environment resonates with a certain degree of intimacy, which is typical of personal rather than professional relationships: ‘I know that here I can really tell the people that I failed at something, that I need help with something, that these are actually very intimate things that you say, that I’m not doing well and you go ask for that help.’

Against the backdrop of professional relations at the school, informal relationships are thus formed, which seem to be important for understanding who the teachers of this school feel themselves to be. A sign of DIFFERENCE here is especially the OPENNESS in relations among colleagues, which can be experienced almost at a level of complete intimacy.

5.3.3 Guides: Being there for every pupil
An equally important level of identity is that which is related to pupils. Alternative teachers take on the role of student guides. Being a guide means abandoning some of the symbols of teacher authority that is typical of mainstream schools, such as, for example, the use of formal language between teachers and pupils. The school director advocates this strategy and applies it in relation to the pupils even in his role:

‘The children are used to coming to me and speaking to me informally’ (Silvestr)

Informalness with pupils is a characteristic of DIFFERENCE related to the OPENNESS vs RIGIDITY dichotomy. The teachers thus show greater openness in relation to pupils and, at the same time, define themselves against traditional education, for which formalness is typical. From the director’s perspective, formalness is associated with strict leadership of pupils by a ‘flawless’ teacher, whereas, through informal language, the teacher is situated instead in a relationship closer to guidance.

Compared to teachers in mainstream schools, guides perceive themselves as OPEN to the specifics of the pupils and their individual development: ‘It means, we know you enjoy this, let’s go, let’s do something more with it, okay? Let you develop in that. The others perhaps don’t have the time, space or appetite right now, but you could, couldn’t you?’ (Hana)

According to teachers, respecting the needs of pupils and an individual approach can also be practiced in ordinary schools. However, as per the teacher Hana, the individual approach to pupils is applied by all teachers at this school—it is part of the school’s vision and philosophy; it is something transparent and well known to everyone. And since the individual approach is reflected in the narratives of all the teachers surveyed, it has become part of the collective identity of the teachers at the school.

Innovative approaches in teaching are another sign of OPENNESS in opposition to the RIGIDITY of ordinary schools. Guides feel more free than regular mainstream teachers. It is noteworthy that although teachers proclaim the use of collective principles in school education, they emphasize that everyone can teach in ways that feel natural to them and try new methods: ‘If we just think up something, we can do it, and the children are used to this.’ (Sylvia)

FREEDOM IN TEACHING is located within the boundaries of sharing, where teachers reflect on not only past teaching but also lesson plans. Sharing among pedagogical staff members thus does not limit the teachers in their free choice of teaching strategies—on the contrary, it gives them legitimacy. The teachers state that they can organize and plan their lessons according to their needs; they can choose teaching methods that suit them and are meaningful. This FREEDOM brings joy to the teachers.

In summary, the guide identity is linked within the teachers’ narratives to what WORKS and is defined in opposition to what DOES NOT WORK in a regular school, where the teachers’ relationships to pupils are perceived as more authoritative and where an individual approach is not fully applied. According to the teachers, FREEDOM IN TEACHING is a necessary precondition to realizing the guide identity, which thus becomes another significant characteristic of the DIFFERENCE among teachers at this school.

5.3.4 Partners of the pupils’ parents: On the same wavelength as the parents

We characterize the identity of teachers in relation to the pupils’ parents as a partners identity. The openness of teachers towards the parents is again contrasted with RIGIDITY in state schools. Openness lies especially in the intensive communication of teachers with parents and in parents’ everyday access to the school. A comparison with a mainstream school can also be brought about via the double role of teacher Hana, who is also the parent of a pupil at a regular school:

‘I think that, for the parent, the school is very open. As a parent myself who has children in a state school, I think it is trying hard as well but I perceive to be much more closed. We really communicate a lot with the parents here; they actually have access to the school, and they can even call me on the weekends’ (Hana)

Teacher Hana describes communication with parents as ‘very receptive and extremely open’.

This OPENNESS in communication with parents is perceived by teachers as rather above-standard compared
to mainstream schools. At the same time, however, teachers view the parents of their pupils as a specific group compared to the parents of pupils in mainstream schools.

‘There are all sorts of different people here—they are from the middle classes, the upper classes; there are academics; there are entrepreneurs—it’s really very, very heterogeneous. Parents lead extracurricular activities. Parents are looking for some quality!’ (Cecilia).

It is therefore a partnership with a group of parents who are ‘on the same wavelength’ as the teachers. Thus, the identity of DIFFERENCE among teachers can resonate with a certain difference among parents. Parents, like teachers, care about a certain quality in education.

5.3.5 Influencers: Transforming the education system

The broadest level in the teachers’ identity is characterized here as influencers of the education system. The researched teachers and especially the director not only focus on the community of pupils and parents they work with, but they understand their school as a means of transforming the entire education system:

‘I always say that our activity is not just about our children being well, but about gradually improving education for all children.’ (Silvestr)

In this macro-social perspective, the teachers and the director seek to transfer what WORKS on to mainstream schools, which they associate with what DOES NOT WORK. The teachers and director first and foremost position themselves as particular role models who can change the education in the examined schools and thus provide an example of good practice for the entire educational system:

‘We have some cooperation with some external partners here, so this also simply goes through a process: we reflect on how it went, what suited us, what didn’t, how it could be changed. These are situations that I absolutely did not experience at a normal school, because there it was a lot about this is how we’ve been doing it for fifteen years, it works, so we have no reason to change these things.’ (Lena)

The school’s functioning as a model is also part of its perceived role as part of an educational network in which the school collaborates with other institutions:

‘And thus a kind of relational network is formed... This is what we do well in the school, this is what I am good at, but this can be done better by the Moravian Gallery, something CEITEC can do, something the university can do, something the scientists we work with can do, something the technology park...’ (Silvestr)

In addition to dispelling the myth of non-reformability in education through the modernization of teaching and working with external actors, the teachers and director are involved in a number of activities that should directly contribute to the transformation of education in other schools. In particular, they organize educational activities for teachers, workshops, inviting to the school those who are interested in their concept of education, and so on. These efforts to extend beyond the institution of the school is important to the teachers: ‘Well, maybe I enjoy the change, right—looking for other ways and actually having the opportunity to improve things.’ (Lena)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis complements the current state of the art with a call for deeper understanding of ways that emergent teacher identity interacts with curricular content at a micro-interactional level (Juzwik & Ives, 2010) within the group dynamics of alternative teachers.

In terms of identity as a multifaceted phenomenon, our research revealed five identity levels. Each identity level is negotiated and constructed in relation to the various actors. The enthusiasts identity level relates to the teachers themselves; the friends identity is in relation to the teaching staff at school; the guides identity relates to the pupils; the partners of parents identity is in regard to pupils’ parents, and the identity as influencers of the education system goes beyond the institution of the school. The teachers at the researched private alternative school negotiate and construct their identities on these levels, particularly in contrast to mainstream education. This thus shapes their DIFFERENCE in relation to mainstream education.
Boreham and Gray (2011) note that teacher identity evolves through interaction with the realities of the school. Our research demonstrates that these interactions not only contribute to building the individual identity of teachers themselves but also to building a collective identity in particular. The collective identity of the teachers in the school is shared; the individual characteristics of the identity are more in the background, and the teachers speak more often about a common Us than an individual Me. The findings support the results of Zembyla’s (2003) research, who found out that emotional affinities with others, in other words, connections or bonding based on coalitions and friendships. The collective identity of teachers is shared and negotiated especially at frequent teacher meetings which concern, for example, curriculum, vision or lesson reflection. This sharing thus become an arena for the construction of collective identity. At the same time, however, it should be noted that the sharing is made possible by the director’s staffing policy. The director selects teachers who are immensely willing to share and reflect, and whose personal characteristics fit the existing teaching team at the school. As a result, there is a ‘spitting out’ of those teachers who do not fit into the constructed collective identity of DIFFERENCE. Dissimilar identities are already eliminated ‘at the entrance’ or are very quickly ‘spat out’. The researched school thus represents an example of an elite education, which is supported through the education culture and the social, cultural and economic capital of the families who choose these schools (Brown & Beckett, 2007).

The teachers’ collective identity is further reinforced by distinguishing themselves against those who have been ‘spat out’, as well as against mainstream education. The collective identity of DIFFERENCE is constructed through discursive means (Us in the narratives of teachers, depersonalization of the school in the ‘spitting out’ metaphor, a good person in the director’s narrative) as well as nondiscursive means (the curriculum and staffing policy).

The importance of the described collective identity lies in the understanding of teachers and their legitimation of their teaching practices. The researched teachers are understood as agents who make sense of themselves (Korthagen, 2001). The teachers’ identity is reflected in the educational process, especially by legitimizing educational practices that connect their identity with what WORKS. At the same time, the educational process also shapes and consolidates the identity of DIFFERENCE among teachers, especially through reflection and sharing.

Our research revealed that teachers who couldn’t find common ground have left (Watkins, 2009). In our research, this common ground is collective identity. As identity is a complex phenomenon, more than binaries between private and mainstream education can be studied.

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