

# PRE-SCHOOL TEACHER PROFESSIONALISATION IN THE WORKPLACE: THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BEGINNING TEACHER WITH TEACHING ASSISTANT EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of this study is to investigate the professionalisation of beginning pre-school teachers in the workplace, focusing on the analysis of their experience gained working as teaching assistants and their life stories.

**Methods.** The research is based on a phenomenological research strategy and adopts a biographical research approach by examining and evaluating the life stories presented as participants' personal experiences and views. The sample consists of homogeneous cases - beginning pre-school teachers with teaching assistant experience (n=8) from different Lithuanian pre-school institutions.

**Results.** The research findings reveal four main meanings of teachers' life stories: (a) reconstruction of the professional identity of beginning pre-school teachers striving for professionalism in the transition from the teaching assistant to the teacher position; (b) workplace learning behaviour of beginning pre-school teachers in terms of cognitive, emotional, motivational and social dimensions; (c) identification and integration of practical knowledge and skills acquired as a teaching assistant; (d) transformation of teaching practice as a result of learning in the workplace.

**Conclusions.** The insights obtained in this study contribute to better understanding of the peculiarities of the pathway of professionalisation in the workplace through transformation of the teaching practice in transition from the teaching assistant to the teacher position. The research-training approach adopted in the present study proves to be a useful tool in teacher continuous learning, which allows the teachers participating in research to engage in individual and collective reflection making the meaning of their experience.

**Keywords:** beginning teacher, pre-school teacher professionalisation, teaching assistant, workplace learning

## INTRODUCTION

The topic of professionalisation remains relevant today not only in the areas of vocational training and continuing education, but also in the areas of work and professional activity. The reasons for interest in professionalisation provided in various sources include the need to continue learning in relation to mastery of professional situations, combining work and learning more closely for continuous professional growth, awareness of and ability to reconstruct professional and personal identity, and development of a wide range of knowledge in constantly changing contexts (Wittorski, 2008). The professionalisation process has therefore been analysed from very different perspectives including a sociological perspective of the construction of new professions or professional activities (Bourdoncle, 2000; Bresnen, 2013), educational perspectives (Guillaumin & Wittorski, 2014; Roquet, 2014), managerial perspectives of socialisation of individuals in their professional space (Jacobs & Bosanac, 2006) capable of ensuring personal and professional development in a competitive context (Wittorski, 2012), and taking different paths to professionalisation, which may be considered as opportunities for professionalisation (Wittorski, 2007, 2008).

According to recent legislation adopted in Lithuania, all mainstream schools and kindergartens are obligated to accept and integrate children with special needs if their parents decide that a particular educational institution is best for the child to attend (Lietuvos Respublikos Švietimo, Mokslo ir Sporto Ministerija, 2024). The availability of teaching assistants is a key element in putting inclusive education principles into practice alongside quality work of both teaching assistants and teachers. Although the title of the teaching assistant job refers to teaching, in Lithuania, teaching assistants are educational support specialists who help special needs children to participate in the educational process. It should be pointed out that teaching assistants are not part of the teaching staff. They may assist the teacher with preparing or adapting educational material for the pupil, but their tasks do not include organising the pupil's educational process.

In Lithuania, there are only minimum qualification requirements for teaching assistants indicating that an upper-secondary education background is sufficient for this job. However, for a teaching assistant who works with children with special educational needs, it is important to have a basic knowledge of developmental disorders, children's health education, and social-emotional development. Currently, due to staff shortages, in many Lithuanian pre-school institutions there may be persons with very different levels of experience employed as teaching assistants - some who started working after graduating from upper-secondary school and have no experience at all, and others who have worked for some years as teaching assistants, having extensive experience and practical knowledge, and planning to qualify as pre-school teachers to realise their ambition of becoming a teacher. While many of the latter enrol at university or college to obtain a teaching qualification, most of their professional development takes place in the workplace, where the experience of a teaching assistant is transformed and integrated into the pre-school teacher practice. This emerging trend in pre-school teacher professional development manifests itself as an alternative route to professionalisation of pre-school teachers in Lithuania; however, it has not been extensively explored yet.

The aim of this study is to investigate the professionalisation of beginning pre-school teachers in the workplace, focusing on the analysis of their experience gained working as teaching assistants and their life stories. The research question is: What meaning do beginning pre-school teachers make of professionalisation, its expression, and the possible path of professionalisation through a combination of university studies and workplace learning, moving from the teaching assistant to the teacher position?

The theoretical framework includes transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), reflective practice theory (Schön, 1983, 1987) and the concept of professionalisation (Wittorski, 2007, 2012).

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Richard Wittorski (2012) provides two aspects of the purposefulness of professionalisation: practice which takes place during on-the-job learning (traineeship, professional activity, internship), and reflexivity arising from theoretical preparation. Reflective practice is a purposeful intellectual activity whereby, drawing on their experience, individuals examine a situation or a problem to gain a new understanding and new knowledge, which will ultimately influence their actions (Tremblay et al., 2014). Combining both aspects of the purpose of professionalisation - practice and reflection - may help reconstruction of the shared social representations. The professionalisation pathways may be used as a means assisting the individual in acquisition of new competences, in better understanding of professional practice and professional identity construction.

Based on the definition of the factors of the purposefulness of professionalisation, Wittorski (2007) proposes a tool to analyse professional development and the dynamics of the professionalisation supply, which allows exploration of the variety of ways for organising professional activities affecting change in the quantity and quality of the tasks, actions and activities, leading to acquisition of new competences and/or new knowledge, and construction/reconstruction of professional behaviour and professional identities.

The process of professionalisation implies a distinction between traditional university training for a profession and acquisition of competences through other means (Roquet, 2014) based on different logics, for example, professionalisation pathways based on the logic of workplace learning, reflection, organisational culture, integration, etc. (Wittorski, 2012). Consequently, if a teaching assistant aspires to become a professional and a teacher, they should look into professionalisation pathways, methods and possibilities irrespective of the gaps in their academic preparation for the profession. The support from the mentor, experienced colleagues or a community of practice may assist in transforming experiences, identities and competences, integrating them into a specific professional situation.

According to Raymond Bourdoncle (1991), the concept of professionalisation highlights a process of two dimensions, which are closely interrelated. The first dimension represents an internal process and is called professionalism, and the second dimension, called “professionism” (Bourdoncle, 1991), represents an external process and denotes a group of individuals becoming a profession. These two dimensions of the professionalisation process not only manifest themselves in a different way, but also complement and enrich each other. First of all, professionalisation represents the idea of the construction and development of specific knowledge and competences needed for professional activity. However, the very process of professionalisation also implies a difference between a traditional university-based preparation for a profession and acquisition of competences through professional practice. Therefore, the meaning of professionalisation as the first dimension of an internal process may manifest itself in different pathways chosen: learning in the workplace, specific mobilisation of professional knowledge, continuous professional training, formalisation of practice-based knowledge, etc. The second dimension – professionism – as an external professionalisation process, reveals another meaning of the professionalisation concept – the requirement of an exceptional social status in an established area of the division of labour. During this process, construction, development and establishment of professional identity take place.

In exploring the opportunities (or pathways) of professionalisation, and also the actors’ professional development processes in the situations of practical professional activity in the workplace, Wittorski (2007) proposes to define professionalisation in three different meanings:

- *professionalisation of activities*, considering social organisation of the activity;

- *professionalisation of individuals (actors)*, constructing and/or acquiring and developing the knowledge, skills, competences and professional identity needed for professional activity;
- *professionalisation of organisations (structures)*, emphasising formalisation of the expertise system of an organisation (or any other structure).

The present study focuses on the professionalisation of individuals - beginning pre-school teachers - in the workplace, which is revealed in the participants' life stories.

## METHODOLOGY

The research is based on a phenomenological research strategy, which aims to describe the overall structure of life experience, the meaning of experience and the meaning that experience gives to the subjects who live it. Phenomenologists do not have a single well-defined method of inquiry: different avenues of inquiry have been presented in phenomenologist scholarship. Our study adopts a biographical research approach which denotes a method of collecting and analysing data that differs from other methods in the way it examines and evaluates the life stories that individuals present on the basis of their personal experiences and views (Josso, 2020). However, the term refers not only to a research method, but also to certain theoretical methodological principles reflecting the search for a synthesis of theories (Kraniauskienė, 2000). The broad foundational theoretical spectrum of the biographical methodology suggests that this methodology, with its single unifying element of the life story, provides a broader, more comprehensive and coherent analysis of social life (e.g., the professionalisation of pre-school teachers in the workplace). We sought to understand the meaning pre-service teachers make of professionalisation, its possible pathways, the transformation of experience and professional identity, the integration of knowledge into new situations, and the way this manifests itself in the transition from the teaching assistant to the teacher position. The results presented here focus on the life stories told and written down during the four research meetings where participants presented their experiences. The aim of this study lies not only in collecting and analysing data, but also in realisation of continuous learning of beginning teachers, when the research participant becomes the subject of the process, stimulating a dialogue with the other research participants in the life story perspective (Josso, 1995). Thus, our study adopts a qualitative biographical research approach of research-training, which is based on the concepts of participatory and dialogic learning and the experience of consensus on all the issues discussed (Josso, 2020). The research-training approach allows integration of the dimensions of research and continuous learning as transformative practice where training becomes part of research through “reflection, verbalisation, perspective, and formalisation” (Monbaron, 2005, p. 373). The research-training ap-

proach (Josso, 1995) encompasses a learning element built into the research process through participants constructing their knowledge and understanding of the object of research and seeking meaning through personal reflection on their own experiences (Pineau & Le Grand, 2019). The research process acquires the dimension of the common knowledge construction by the participants, when the participants transform their experiences into knowledge and understanding. The participation in research enables the participants' conscious learning through discovery of a new perspective and awareness of oneself (Josso, 1995). The formative dimension is explained by the participants (Monbaron, 2005), when the life stories produced in their reflective diaries are interpreted and analysed during the group meetings.

The primary focus of research is on the life story-related professionalisation aspects, which the participants raised in the group meetings to be discussed and reflected upon both personally and collectively, addressing the following questions: How is the beginning pre-school teacher's identity reconstructed in their transition from the teaching assistant to the teacher? What meaning do beginning teachers give to workplace learning? How is the teaching assistant's experience integrated into teaching? How is their teaching practice transformed as a result of workplace learning?

The sample of the study consists of homogeneous cases - the participants of the study are beginning pre-school teachers from different Lithuanian pre-school education institutions, having previously worked as teaching assistants. All the participants graduated from the Pre-School and Pre-primary School Pedagogy study programme at Klaipėdos Valstybinė Kolegija/ Higher Education Institution (Klaipėda State University of Applied Sciences), with a teaching qualification and a professional bachelor's degree. A group of pre-school teachers (n=8) willingly agreed to participate in the four meetings, organised at Klaipėda State University of Applied Sciences. The meetings took place in March to April 2024 fortnightly, according to a pre-agreed schedule. The age range of the participants was from 23 to 39. They had limited experience as teachers, ranging from 1 to 3 years, all of them having previously worked as teaching assistants, with the teaching assistant experience ranging from 2 to 5 years. The information about the research participants is provided in the table below (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Data on the Research Participants*

Participant's pseudonym	Participant's age	Teaching experience (years)	Teaching assistant experience (years)
Asta	24	3	2
Austeja	23	1	3
Gintare	30	1	4
Kornelija	26	2	5
Ramune	39	1	3
Roma	25	2	4

Participant's pseudonym	Participant's age	Teaching experience (years)	Teaching assistant experience (years)
Sigita	32	2	3
Sonata	27	1	3

*Source.* Own research.

Information was collected through direct observation and observation protocols, participant reflection diaries, group discussion, and recorded group interviews. Among other things, at the end of each meeting, the information collected was evaluated and validated: the participants evaluated the meanings created and validated the narratives as agreed at the beginning of the study.

The participants telling their stories became the driving force behind the whole research process. The authors as researchers, also acting as participants and facilitators, tried to ensure the clarity of the framework, and as mediators in telling life stories, they distanced themselves from the expert position and put the knowledge of the life story tellers at the centre of the intervention. Therefore, at the beginning of each meeting, there were thought-provoking questions asked such as:

- How did you feel when starting work as a teaching assistant and what did you consider yourself to be? Did anything change when you became a teacher?
- What does workplace learning mean to you cognitively, emotionally, motivationally, and socially?
- How do you construct and develop new competences in your work?
- Have you successfully integrated your existing knowledge into your personal knowledge system in the context of your professional situations?
- What would it take for workplace learning to fundamentally change your teaching practice?

The questions related to each meaning are also provided in the *Results* section. Table 2 provides a detailed description of the data collection methods and rationale of the research-training-based meetings.

**Table 2**

*Description of data collection through the research-training meetings*

Data collection methods	Aim and description	Data collected
Direct field observation	Aim: observation of participants' interaction during the group meetings. The interaction is documented by means of observation protocols completed by the researchers.	The dynamics of participants' interaction; identification of the meaning-making processes
Reflective diary	Aim: production of/presenting life stories and self-interpretation Life stories are written by the participants in the form of individual journals before the meetings.	Narratives of professional trajectories and individual interpretation of experiences

<b>Data collection methods</b>	<b>Aim and description</b>	<b>Data collected</b>
Group discussion	Aim: providing deeper understanding of one's professionalisation through dialogic reflection, collective interpretation of experiences and co-construction of meaning. The life stories produced in reflective diaries are interpreted through sharing narratives with other participants. It takes place during the group meetings and is recorded.	Data on transforming experience into knowledge and understanding, collective construction of meaning
Group interview	Aim: investigating one's life experience as a learning situation Thought-provoking questions are asked by the researchers to guide the discussion and encourage reflection. The participants' responses are recorded.	Data on professional trajectories, transforming experiences and transition processes
Evaluation and narrative validation	Aim: evaluation of the meanings identified by the participants and validation of narratives. It is carried out at the end of each meeting and recorded by the researchers.	Refinement of the meanings identified by the participants

*Source.* Own research.

The information gathered was systematised on the basis of a meaning analysis which seeks to make sense of lived experience through dialogue with other people. The material collected was divided into the themes of meaning according to the understanding of the phenomenon under study - the professionalisation of beginning pre-school teachers in the workplace. The analytical process included phenomenological bracketing and phenomenological reduction: the researchers adopted a critical reflection on the content of the description of the participants' lived experiences setting aside the theories related to the research phenomenon. The analysis included selecting statements/phrases in the participants' discourses, identifying units of meaning and making phenomenological interpretation to specify the essence of the phenomenon experienced by the subject. The process of analysis included the following stages: (a) *idiographic analysis* - the analysis of individual discourses, when the descriptions of each participant's experiences were analysed separately to identify the units of meaning in each excerpt of the participant's story which answered the research question; (b) *nomothetic analysis* - data convergence based on the units of meaning of each discourse, thematising, categorising and interpreting the convergencies. This analysis revealed convergence of the participants' perspectives, which allowed finding the invariants of the phenomenon. The phenomenological interpretation was completed with specification of the phenomenon, producing a narrative based on the researchers' understanding.

The results of the study reveal four main meanings of the teachers' life stories: (a) reconstruction of the professional identity of beginning pre-school teachers striving for professionalism in the transition from the teaching assistant to the teacher position; (b) workplace learning behaviour of beginning pre-school teachers in terms of cognitive, emotional, motivational and social dimensions; (c) identification and integration of practical knowledge and skills acquired as a teaching assistant; (d) transformation of teaching practice as a result of learning in the workplace.

## RESULTS

The reflections presented in the following text are the result of the meaning analysis of the life stories told by the research participants during the four meetings. Telling a story denotes putting it into words and giving it a meaning. Gaston Pineau and Jean-Louis Le Grand (2019) define life story as "search for and construction of meaning from the personal facts of time" (p. 3). Making sense of one's experience means putting it back into context in terms of time and space, giving it a new meaning here and now, and increasing one's power to act in the future. The participants' names have been changed to ensure anonymity. We will present some of the participants' life stories, which reveal the meaning that the beginning pre-school teachers give to professionalisation, its possible pathways, the transformation of their experience and their professional identity, the integration of their knowledge into new situations, and its manifestation in the transition from the teaching assistant to the teacher position. Our role, as researchers, is to provide theoretical grounding to the narrator's - research participant's - life story, and the narrator's role lies in enriching it with their reflective comments.

### **Reconstruction of the Professional Identity of Beginning Pre-School Teachers Striving for Professionalism in the Transition from the Teaching Assistant to the Teacher Position**

These are excerpts from the participants' stories from the first meeting. During this meeting, the following guiding questions for discussion and reflection were asked: How did you feel when starting work as a teaching assistant and what did you consider yourself to be? Did anything change when you became a teacher? Which group - teaching assistants or teachers - did you want to identify with? How did it happen, if it happened at all? What life lessons did you learn and what advice could you give to others? This is an excerpt from Asta's reflective diary:

I shudder when I think of my first working days in the kindergarten. I was told that I would have to help the teacher. I didn't like it from the very beginning as it was like: "fetch",

“pass”, “pick up”, “collect”. They [teachers] had coffee during the kids’ afternoon sleep, but they never invited me. When they were planning something for the kids, they would only tell me to find some cards on that shelf. When they talked to the parents about the day, I was never there. I felt rejected, unaccepted, worthless. I watched the teachers with envy. I felt like NOTHING compared to them. I knew there were some other teaching assistants in the kindergarten, but I didn’t look for any contacts with them. I felt lonely and outcast. Nine months went by and I decided to enrol at college as I really wanted to become a teacher. My dream came true - I found a part-time teaching job in another town, worked and studied, learned from my colleagues, asked questions, watched their work, asked for help and advice if I didn’t understand something. That was a lesson - not to withdraw into yourself, seek contact, communicate... I believe I’ve reinvented myself and I am happy now. (Asta)

After hearing Asta’s story, other participants commented on it. Roma said:

It hurts me to hear it was so wrong for you, because my experience is different. I tried to communicate with the other teaching assistants from the very beginning. They told me what I was doing well or what I still needed to learn; what the unwritten rules were; how to solve problems. I offered the teacher my help. I asked her if everything was OK. I asked them to help me understand and learn, as I was determined to become a teacher one day. They knew that. That’s why I fitted in so easily. If you, Asta, say that you’ve reinvented yourself, I can say that I created myself in action with others. It all helped me: not only children or colleagues, but also the knowledge I gained through experience, even problems and their solutions. One man is not a warrior in the field... (Roma)

In summary of the excerpts of both life stories, it can be argued that the construction of teacher’s professional identity is multidimensional and depends on a number of psychological and social factors. These passages demonstrate the participants’ search for professional identity through different socialisation processes combining individual and collective perspectives, which allowed them to identify themselves as actors in the field of their professional activity. According to Marie-Christine Josso (2020), in the studies which use life stories as a method, the identity is explored by writing about oneself. Participant Asta confidently tells her story about herself and her relationship with the group, clearly indicating how she thinks the relationship can be made closer and more constructive. It is a story that becomes an educational element for the whole group and an inspiration for reflection and learning.

## **Workplace Learning Behaviour of Beginning Pre-School Teachers in Terms of Cognitive, Emotional, Motivational and Social Dimensions**

Following Wittorski (2007, 2008, 2012) and aiming to elaborate on the main research question, the participants were asked the following questions: What does workplace learning mean to you cognitively, emotionally, motivationally, and socially? How do you see your work helping children with special needs? How do you construct and develop new competences in your work?

Workplace learning is linked to real-life practical activities and mastery of real-life situations and is primarily distinguished by the development of contextualised, specific competences. This is an excerpt from Sonata's reflective diary:

Every morning, I felt bad anxiety. One day I was told I would have to help the teacher prepare for a Christmas performance. In that group there was a boy called Tomas, diagnosed with a hyperactivity disorder. Tomas was restless, distracted, impulsive, intrusive, troubled his parents and teachers, and he was disliked by his peers. He often felt unhappy, had low self-esteem and was reluctant to take part in the Christmas play. So, I had to stay with him while the teacher and the group were rehearsing the performance. I couldn't think of anything else but to sit him on my lap, hug tightly and hold him so he wouldn't disturb the others. He was shouting and calling me a witch...I had a feeling that the whole thing wasn't right, but I didn't know how to deal with the situation. Although the teacher didn't reprimand me, I was very upset about "disciplining" the boy in that way, realising that was inappropriate, like some punishment. Later I asked about that to my professor who taught child health education at college. She explained the syndrome and that the hyperactive boy was not guilty of being agile, forgetful or distracted. Such children cannot explain why they behave this way. Therefore, when they are punished, they feel lost, hurt and helpless. This is the same as punishing a child with one leg shorter than the other for having a limp. (Sonata)

While teaching is a very meaningful profession, it can also pose some difficulties in terms of workplace learning. For some, the transition from a teaching assistant role can cause great anxiety about their lack of competences and knowledge, as illustrated by Sonata's story, facing not only cognitive but also emotional challenges of learning in the workplace. The other participants in the study said that in each pre-school group there were some hyperactive children, so they wondered whether Sonata understood how to help such children and what advice she could give. Sonata said:

Yes, the professor gave me some guidelines for corrective actions. I can email you if you like. My colleagues use them. We have new cards in the classroom with pictorial rules. I was very happy to see the change in the way the teachers and I worked together with the hyperactive children. (Sonata)

These words illustrate what Philippe Perrenoud (2004) calls the educational value of the working environment. Learning alone cannot solve competence problems, but the modes of operation, coordination, leadership styles, or social conditions may become carriers of a competence development strategy. Innovative ways of organising activities help develop staff initiative, responsibility, etc.

However, in addition to emotional and cognitive problems, workplace learning may involve some learning problems of the motivational, psychomotor or psychosocial nature, which may also be interdependent. Sonata's story illustrates the meaning and educational value of sharing one's story on a topic that is relevant to all participants. Sharing stories can also be considered professional didactics - a tool to help achieve the goals of professionalisation through workplace learning, which entails transformation of professional activities into more intellectual ones. The intellectualisation of activities is represented by decrease in closed tasks and the increased need for open-ended tasks. This may be traced in Sonata's story when the teacher asks her to look after a hyperactive boy without explaining how to do it. Professionalism may manifest itself in carrying out a procedure conceived by others as accurately as possible (a closed task), but Sonata had not experienced that before.

## **Identification and Integration of Practical Knowledge and Skills Acquired as a Teaching Assistant**

The participants were asked the following questions: How do you construct and develop new competences in your work? Who and how helps you develop professionally within your organisation? Have you successfully integrated your existing knowledge into your personal knowledge system in the context of your professional situations? Has this knowledge been recognised and shared with others? This is an excerpt from Kornelija's reflective diary:

After graduating from high school, I started working as a teaching assistant. However, I soon realised that I would not be able to do the job well as I had no knowledge of special educational needs. I didn't know what to do when a child with an autistic spectrum disorder was screaming loudly and throwing things and toys at other kids. There were three children with special needs. Luckily, the teacher, Egle, was very understanding. Day after day, I watched her work, and Egle took the time to explain how to recognise and respond to the child's individual needs, find ways of approaching the child, reassure and involve them in the educational process. Egle really helped me a lot, bringing me literature to read, encouraging and chatting with me when the children were sleeping after lunch. Gradually, I gained a certain knowledge, and with it came the motivation to work, help the children, ensure their safety, not stifling their independence. For example, after ten times showing a boy how to fasten the buttons, for the eleventh time, I saw him do the buttons up himself... Then, I studied at college part-time and worked. The knowledge I gained at college was re-

ally useful, and I put it into practice, but some of it evaporated somehow. After three years I qualified as a teacher, and Egle became my colleague. Those skills, experience and learning from Egle wasn't left somewhere behind in that teaching assistant's position. I still have it all with me. I share it with others and apply to my work as a teacher. (Kornelija)

Kornelija's story demonstrates that practical activities in the workplace may be seen as learning and building competences. Yves Laberge (2014), commenting on Freire, states that the presence of the learner is part of the teacher and vice versa. However, the relationship between the teacher and the learner must be harmonious. If this is not the case, the teacher may feel professionally devalued. We can see a clear effort by Kornelija's colleague to create harmonious relationships between all the actors in a professional situation. Experience and professional practice are important elements in the construction of professionalism. When constructing it, the teacher steps back to analyse his/her practice and transform the things experienced into a thoughtful (reflected) experience. The presence of a "facilitator", helping step back and do this analysis, is essential. The ability to step back is the basis not only for mobilising the resources available to the individual, but also for building competence in the form of structuring an operational scheme, modelling an activity, or transferring experience (Le Boterf, 2010).

## **Transformation of Teaching Practice as a Result of Learning in the Workplace**

At the beginning of this meeting, the participants were asked: What would it take for workplace learning to fundamentally change your teaching practice in a positive direction? This is an excerpt from Ramune's reflective diary:

I needed a sense of security to make a positive difference in my teaching practice. After all, one feels shy to ask questions, and it's embarrassing to be criticised in front of the children... Unfortunately, starting as a teaching assistant, I didn't immediately become a member of the team. Maybe I didn't understand my role, or understood it too narrowly. I had to help a child referred to me by the teacher. How to help was often interpreted by colleagues in different ways: somebody thought that I had to do everything for the child; somebody believed that I only had to make sure that the child was engaged in activity; somebody advised me that I should give the child anything to keep them quiet and busy; somebody was convinced that I had to teach the child to behave because "parents don't do it, and the teachers don't care", etc. Therefore, I got a lot of comments and criticism, until one day I said: "Can you agree among yourselves on my role? How do I really need to act?" Then everything changed as if by a wave of a magic wand. The teacher clarified it all including my role in the classroom, and her role, what kind of help the child needed, and when and how help should be given. I also became involved in adapting the general curriculum by individualising it, and took part

in discussions with the child's parents. Every morning, the teacher and I discussed what activities would be held that day; which tasks or activities would require help for the child with special needs and what kind of help; what strategies would be used to deal with behavioural problems. These changes in my work made it rewarding and gave some psychological security, and also fundamentally transformed both my attitude towards the activity and the activity itself. (Ramune)

Ramune's reflective diary highlights a sense of security in the workplace, which is in contrast to the feelings of inferiority that emerge in early childhood as a result of feeling small, unequal, powerless, not belonging to the society, and/or being a disadvantaged person in relation to the world (Adler, 2009). In Ramune's story, we can see a transformation from inferiority towards a sense of security through acquisition of required competences and experience. This is an excerpt from Austeja's reflective diary:

What helped me really in my professional development was it when I realised there was not a single unquestionable opinion, which could be expressed by a university teacher during my studies, but a myriad of attitudes, ideas, experiences, and practices of different people in the search for the best solution to a problem situation. Having realised that, I rediscovered the strength and motivation to think differently, not just in the way it was written, let's say for example, on page 16 of the textbook...Theory is good, but it may not be easy to apply it in practice. You can find your own way to apply theory and get great results. (Austeja)

This story reminds us that we should not lose sight of the fact that there are many and varied manifestations of teaching practices in the world today. Professional practice can be analysed as *a process of making decisions and carrying out activities designed to master situations (completing planned tasks, meeting operational challenges, implementing a project, solving a problem, etc.)*. Professional practice is specific and unique to each individual teacher, and thus there may be a variety of good practices of carrying out a task. Each professional practice or a similar type of practice is based on and organised around an operational schema (rules, hypotheses, basic techniques, reasoning, etc.), which is based on an operational image (Le Boterf, 2007). The operational image plays a key role in problem formulation and problem solving. Using operational images and operational schemas, a professional educator, like any other professional, can orient selection of his/her resources and construct their combination to act professionally and effectively. The operational image enables one to understand the operational situation, move from a vague, non-specific situation to a problem situation, and then formulate the problem itself and plan a solution strategy. This is an excerpt from Sigita's reflective diary:

In the beginning, I sometimes felt like smiling but also a little desperate, because I knew that every afternoon the teacher would ask me three questions: What did you do well today? What didn't go as well as you would have liked? What could have been done better in this situation? Only after half a year I caught myself thinking that I was less and less

able to say what I did not do in the way as I would have liked it. It seems like a very simple question, but the power of reflection is enormous. (Sigita)

Sigita's story demonstrates that a teacher striving for professionalism must know not only how to act, but also understand and be able to explain how and why he/she is acting in a particular way and not in another way, i.e., they must explain how they are acting for the activity to be successful. This is the axis of the formalisation of practice and sources. When stepping back and reflecting, a professional develops the skills needed to manage his/her learning, self-regulation, performance, practice, and transfer from one context to another (Le Boterf, 2008). By stepping back from his/her practice, the teacher can begin to analyse it, get to know it better, and better assess his/her capacity to mobilise it effectively in one or another category of action situations. This turning inwards does not happen spontaneously - it requires learning and the support of those around you (e.g., colleagues, the mentor). Reflection allows you to gain greater confidence in your ability to use your own resources thoughtfully, develop what Bandura (1994) calls "self-efficacy". This is an excerpt from Gintare's reflection diary:

I'm quite cautious about taking risks. When it comes to children, especially helping children with disabilities, I always used to follow rules and guidelines. However, at one point, I found myself tired, getting extremely bored and stuck in a boring routine, and thinking about quitting. What changed my perspective was a film about a man with a disability and his caretaker, who broke rules, but brought much joy to the disabled man's life. I started thinking what I could do to make those children happier, more cheerful, more independent. I attended a training course, read lots of literature, and consulted the kindergarten's special educator. I gained some kind of momentum in applying new ideas and knowledge, kept trying new things, made mistakes, stumbled, was criticised, learned from my mistakes, but I was also growing professionally, and the children in my care were growing, too. (Gintare)

The above excerpts from the participants' stories reveal some key aspects, which can affect transformation of teaching practice: *psychological safety, recognition and appreciation of differences, reflection, and openness to new ideas*, which are influential factors for both successful workplace learning, and teaching practice transformation. The study allowed us to understand the concerns by recalling workplace learning experiences, and acknowledging the teacher's role not as a daily obligation, but as learning, professional development and a meaningful way of life. *Transformation of pedagogical activity/practice as a result of workplace learning* as a unit of meaning helps to better understand the relationship between the transformation of pedagogical activity, i.e. professionalisation, and workplace learning, and justify it as a pathway to professionalisation.

The study demonstrated that the transformation and integration of the on-the-job experience of a teaching assistant into the activity of a pre-school teacher, following

the chosen path of professionalisation, was not without certain difficulties and problems. This can be partly explained by the fact that each participant was looking for a professionalisation path in her own way, chose her own professionalisation tools and adjusted her behaviour. The professionalisation actor determines to what extent this will contribute to their professional growth, and their aspiration to become a professional. All the participants were in one way or another striving to become professional educators.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the study highlight the beginning teacher's search for professional identity as involving different socialisation processes, and its construction as "stable and mobile, individual and collective, subjective and objective, biographical and structural" (Dubar, 2000, p. 109), depending on social reality, various actors and institutions. Professional identity construction is generally characterised by multiplicity and social nature (Ambrazevičiūtė, 2020). The study emphasises professional identification as a socially recognised way allowing the actors in the field of professional activity to identify and distinguish themselves from actors in other fields of activity (Pratt et al., 2006).

In the case of professional identification and professional identity construction, professional culture becomes a very important factor. It can be described as a set of knowledge, skills, behavioural norms and rules that are characteristic of members of the same professional group (Sainsaulieu, 1985). Novice teacher identity transformation is influenced by interaction and identification with a professional community (Lave & Wenger, 1991) through sharing the same experiences, knowledge, and even problems and thus valorising one's self. Renaud Sainsaulieu (1985) described this process as a possibility to be recognised by others and a possibility not to be excluded. Therefore, one's identification with a desired activity group and the adoption of its professional culture should be considered an important factor in the construction of professional identity and also in teacher professionalisation.

The analysis of professional culture can provide considerable information about the mechanism of construction or reconstruction of professional identity and allows us to see the expression of individual and collective identity. Building "a supportive, encouraging and collaborative teacher community" is an important factor in early career teacher identity formation (Hong et al., 2018, p.261). In this study, beginning teachers experienced identity reconstruction challenges in transition from the teacher assistant to the teacher status, in which they sought support from their colleagues. These findings are in line with other research on early career teachers, showing the influence of support on coping with tensions and the teacher's effectiveness (Hong et al., 2018; Martínez-Martínez & Fernández-Larragueta, 2026).

Professional identities of early career teachers may be regarded as “transitional” (Hong et al., 2018), and also express the search for professional “legitimacy” (Colliander, 2018), reconciling the conflicting perspectives of the previously held and current roles. The study underscores understanding of teacher’s professional identity construction as an active continuous process of self-development formed by personal narratives (Ambrazevičiūtė, 2020, p. 141): a research participant’s life story may inspire reflection and learning of other participants. In line with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), and reflective practice theory (Schön, 1983, 1987), the participants in the study experienced transformation of their perspective through critically reflecting on their practices. Questioning their assumptions lead the beginning teachers through the process of transforming their previously held beliefs resulting in “reinventing” themselves as teaching professionals, reconsidering their convictions and changing practices. Some recent empirical studies on beginning teacher identity development (Ambrazevičiūtė, 2020; Beijaard et al., 2022) also demonstrate considerable impact of reflection combined with practical educational experiences on teacher identity construction and reconstruction.

The present study further supports approaching workplace learning as a multidimensional process, a combination of cognitive, emotional, motivational and social processes as conceptually relevant to examining the development of beginning teacher professionalisation. Workplace learning is primarily distinguished by the development of contextualised, specific competences, and is linked to real-life practical activities and mastery of real-life situations, which forms the basis of all learning in the workplace (Fernagu-Oudet, 2004). Competence development is facilitated by social conditions, organisation of activities, and assessment of experience. *The value of organising educational activities* is like an extension of the value of the educational environment, which demonstrates that by influencing the organisation of activities or the assessment of employees’ experience, it is possible to generate learning abilities - organisation of activity and experience influence each other and also become sources of professional practice.

The findings of the study underscore the meaning and educational value of sharing one’s story, which may be considered a tool of professionalisation through workplace learning and transformation of professional activities - intellectualisation of activities. Today, professionalism is primarily associated with developing and implementing operational strategies, decision making, and initiative taking (open task) (Roche, 1999, p. 44). This demonstrates a shift from a rather narrow understanding and execution of the task, following specific prescriptions of a narrow methodology to the construction of performance, allowing the employee to seek and find their own answers to the problems encountered. In addition to the competences required for performance, a professional staff member must also have performance management competences, which ensure not only efficiency, but also creation, use or dissemination of new knowledge, learning from practical situations, and managing

both common, typical and completely new situations. Personal qualities, attitudes and motivation are also very important to a teaching assistant. They must be willing and ready to help, cooperate, and ensure safety. Patience, empathy, communication skills, willingness and ability to cooperate, and a psychological and emotional disposition are also essential (Diab & Green, 2024; Salonen et al., 2025). If these qualities are acquired and developed when working as a teaching assistant, there will be no problem in moving into teaching, as they are all relevant to a teaching profession.

The results of the study underscore an active role of beginning teacher in workplace learning - making use of individual resources (Colliander, 2018) and connecting to colleagues (Martínez-Martínez & Fernández-Larragueta, 2026), which is facilitated by supportive environment (Juma, 2024) combined with the teacher's "pursuit of autonomy, competence, and relatedness" (Diab & Green, 2024, p. 15). Mentoring may play a critical role in the transition path by providing not only professional guidance and a professional social network (Orland-Barak, 2021), but also promoting the beginner teacher's emotional and psychological well-being (Diab & Green, 2024; Martínez-Martínez & Fernández-Larragueta, 2026).

In line with Wittorski's (2012) theory of professionalisation and Schön's (1983, 1987) reflective practice theory, the study demonstrates that the beginning teacher engagement into reflective practice may lead to theoretically informed practice. Reflection on learning experiences gives meaning to experiences and understanding of the required level of competences (Beijaard et al., 2022). In transition to a new teaching environment, the teacher's biography has a considerable influence on the way prior experience is transferred or used as reference in the new landscape of practice (Colliander, 2018). The participants in the study demonstrated their efforts to negotiate the validity of the knowledge and skills they gained as teaching assistants and were selective about drawing on the previous experience. However, the process of integration was facilitated by the present professional practice in a teaching position and informed by the theoretical knowledge they acquired through their university studies. Experience and professional practice are important elements in the construction of professionalism. When constructing it, aided by a "facilitator", the teacher steps back to analyse their practice and transform the things experienced into a thoughtful (reflected) experience. The way beginner teachers reconstruct and integrate their previous experiences may also affect their professional identity reconstruction (Seyri & Nazari, 2023).

In this study, workplace learning is viewed as a teaching practice transforming process (Colliander, 2018), facilitated by collective learning, which reshapes the teaching approaches and enhances teaching (Madden, 2023) and changes in the teacher's implicit pedagogies (Blanuša Trošelj et al., 2020). Contrasting one's experience to that of colleagues and creating experience-generated knowledge may encourage the novice teacher for an innovative practice/approach (Martínez-Martínez & Fernández-Larragueta, 2026).

The study reveals that *psychological safety, recognition and appreciation of differences, reflection, and openness to new ideas* affect transformation of teaching practice and influence successful workplace learning. To develop their self-efficacy, beginning teachers need safe environment, which strengthens their resilience and ensures transition into the professional activity (Mabunda & McKay, 2024). Engagement in reflective practice (Schön, 1987) through workplace learning allows the novice teacher to critically evaluate professional knowledge and link educational intentions to professional practice (Martínez-Martínez & Fernández-Larragueta, 2026).

The participants' life stories told us that the qualification allowed the person to acquire skills and knowledge, in other words, a decontextualised potential to take up a specific job, even providing opportunities for professional integration. However, professionalisation manifested itself as a certain confrontation between theory and practice, and integration of the skills and knowledge acquired during professional training and experience gained when working as a teaching assistant in a particular professional situation. The realisation of the level of performance in achieving the intended goal and outcome allowed the participants to identify their competence/incompetence. The study found that the professionalisation of pre-school teachers is a way of learning in an operational situation: the mistakes made did not have serious consequences, and workplace learning enabled the participants to contextualise the skills acquired in the position of a teaching assistant, realise their professional activities in the position of a teacher, and construct/reconstruct their professional identity. However, there were challenges in making the most of the opportunities for professional integration as the activities were not always tailored to the actor - a beginning teacher or teaching assistant - and the actor was not always supported by a mentor or an experienced colleague. In their life stories, the participants revealed that workplace learning in the transition from the teaching assistant to the teacher allows the person to develop existing competences and construct a professional identity, combining the purposefulness aspects of the different pathways of professionalisation - practice and reflection. This means that professionalisation in the workplace is really meaningful. The participants' life stories highlight a professionalisation pathway in line with the workplace learning model: new professional situations require acquisition of new competences, which were particularly lacking in the case of the teaching assistant job. This problem is common and topical in Lithuania; however, it is not emphasised enough. In the construction and development of professional behaviour and professional identity, the participants were concerned with understanding the activity, the need for theoretical knowledge, the impact of new situations and environments on behaviour and identity, and changes in the latter. The competences needed for action were also acquired by the participants by trial and error, which is a path of action. This usually takes place in a familiar professional situation. However, when the actor is confronted with a new operational situation, he/she often has to unconsciously adjust their behaviour,

and construct/reconstruct their professional identity. In some stories, it was easier, but in some there was safety, understanding and support sought. It is likely, that each time when a new situation arises, the participants will reinforce this behaviour and professional identities.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research participants' life stories were analysed to find answers to the main research question focusing on the meaning beginning pre-school teachers attach to professionalisation, its expression, the pathway of professionalisation combining university studies and learning in the workplace, and the transition from the teaching assistant to the teacher position. Through their stories, the research participants revealed that there may be a different path of professionalisation - one that involves alternating and combining theoretical knowledge in the classroom and workplace learning, which demonstrates the logic of reflection and action. When performing a new task, the individual consciously changes his/her behaviour on the basis of reflection on action. The life stories also highlighted another way of professionalisation - the logic of expressing the organisation's culture in terms of action, when a third party (the colleague, mentor, teacher) supports the activity and contributes by transferring knowledge, while empowering the novice teacher to see the activity in a different light and understand himself/herself better.

It is worth mentioning that the sensitive issue of the relationship between the researcher and the person telling his/her life story did not arise during the research, which is a frequent phenomenon when the biographical method is applied. All the participants in the study knew the researchers in one way or another from their studies, courses, and internships, and therefore their stories were very open. Another strength of this research was the collective storytelling method aimed to make the participants aware of, understand, or reclaim their power to address their problems, difficulties and/or traumas related to their professionalisation challenges, their chosen professionalisation paths, in order to make their voice and their ways heard. The discovery of their own knowledge, stories and life principles became like a gateway to a deeper understanding of themselves, their work, the importance they attach to professionalisation, and learning.

In terms of the knowledge-building impact of the professionalisation of beginning pre-school teachers in the workplace, a biographical research approach is likely to bring about transformations and changes in the research participants and, more broadly, the people around them, the community, or even the wider society. It may be assumed that the biographical research method enabled the participants not only to listen and tell their stories, but also regain their self-esteem, see possible solutions to professional or personal challenges, feel the solidarity of the re-

search group, or see possible forms of collaboration in workplace learning. We can therefore argue that such research adds value to professionalisation by creating individual and collective dynamics of the group of research participants. We are convinced that this study is an excellent tool for teachers' continuing education, as it allowed the participants to have a fresh look at themselves, their workplace learning and professionalisation through different experiences. Creating, sharing and analysing a story cannot be learnt theoretically. In order to gain real experience and to learn, one needs to tell their story in the situation of otherness, a different experience of transitioning from the teaching assistant to the teacher position. We hope that such otherness helped the participants to understand their chosen path of professionalisation, and anticipate current or future challenges of professional activity and possible solutions.

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