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SHAPING AND RESHAPING THE PROFESSIONAL SELF

The article introduces the concept of teacher identity and the variety of factors that influence its construction. Teacher identity covers the characteristics which the society assigns to the teacher profession and those which individual teachers attribute to it. Continuous changes in the education system impel teachers to develop specific competences and reshape their role in the teaching process. A survey carried out in Lithuania among English teachers aims to reveal which competences and roles are internalized without a considerable strain, and which cause more problems and discussions, and why. Although the majority of teachers have a positive attitude towards the repositioning of the professional self, respondents of the survey are quite critical about their minimal involvement in the decision making related to education policy. The survey also tries to define the main reasons for teachers' stress at work, the topic which has been under a close investigation in the recent years. The issues analyzed in this article are illustrated by a review of professional literature devoted to this topic and the findings of a survey. The results prove that the problems discussed in professional literature are of great relevance to the present situation in Lithuanian educational institutions.

KEY WORDS: *teacher identity, formation, reshaping, competences, role, educational context.*

Introduction

Nowadays knowledge of several foreign languages is becoming a necessity for every citizen of a modern European society and language teaching attracts a lot of interest. The language teacher identity is one of the essential segments that have direct impact on the quality of language education. The topic of identity is extremely wide and encompasses a lot of subtopics that require separate investigation. In this paper, the focus will be on just several of them.

The problem of the research. “Identi-

ty is not set in stone” (Yerkes 2001), it is changing with the time as well as with our whole society. Those changes influence our educational system and its policy which modifies the teacher's role and competences time and again. Teachers need to adapt themselves to the changing context. Yet they are more ready to accept some roles rather than the others. The process of reshaping the professional self is often a big challenge. The research focuses on the unstable nature of teacher identity.

The subject-matter of the research. There are certain teacher roles and competences

that are readily approved while others seem to be more demanding or dubious. Their internalization depends on some inner and outer factors that determine teacher identity. The article analyzes those roles and factors in detail.

The aim of the research. This research tries to define what the true language teacher's identity in our schools is and which factors play the most important role in its formation. It aims at approaching the topic from the teacher's point of view.

The tasks of the research:

- 1) to characterize the concept of identity;
- 2) to determine the most influential factors in identity formation;
- 3) to describe teachers' attitude to different changes.

The methods of the research. The methods used in this research are both empirical and analytical. In the first part, there is a short analysis of some scientific works (books, journals) related to the topic of teacher identity. The second part is based on the survey carried out among English teachers in Lithuania, which helps to look at the problems discussed from the Lithuanian perspective.

The concept of identity

Talking about language teacher identity it is necessary to understand the concept of it. Identity is a complex phenomenon consisting of substantial, enduring components and more transient, situational attributes. Therefore, we usually make a distinction between personal identity, which represents our views of self as a physical, spiritual or moral being with some stable personality

attributes, and socio-cultural identity comprising those attributes that we bring into play with an attempt to place ourselves as social objects. Teacher identity is a professional self and considered to be a part of our socio-cultural identity. Educational policies of Lithuania as well as the European Council recommendations help us to realize what is expected from a teacher and what requirements they should meet to be good specialists of this field. The requirements raised by our society are fulfilled through the internalization of particular characteristics that change the professional self and make an inevitable impact on the personal identity. The process of internalization is very individual considering that every person has a unique self that shapes his social identity. Besides, there is a popular belief that teaching is a lonely occupation. Much of what teachers do occurs behind the closed door of the classroom. Therefore, teachers are expected to take on new challenges all by themselves. The way they approach different issues depends on their personal views and their understanding of a teacher's role.

Factors influencing teacher identity

The concept of identity reveals the importance of different inner and outer factors that have influence on the formation of teacher identity. An analysis of the discourse on the identity formation has showed that there are various opinions about the significance of certain components. Various aspects can be grouped into several categories: characteristics gained by birth – race, nationality, class, some personality traits; life processes such as learning, training, personal development boosted by the right

stimuli; and socio-cultural environment. All of them have some degree of influence on the formation of professional identity and their importance depends on how much attention is paid to them at work.

Obviously, educational context in which teachers find themselves is one of the main factors to impact their identity development. Teachers have to transmit to their students not only their knowledge and skills in the subject but also human values and “existential” competences (Boldizsár 2003). A teacher must be endowed with numerous competences: general competences, meta-cultural competences, meta-cognitive competences, methodological competences, etc. Apart from this, he/she should fulfill the roles of a role model, guide, mediator, facilitator of learning. A heavy stress is laid on the cultural aspect of language teaching. Furthermore, a teacher becomes connected with E-learning, which has prospects of becoming future education. He/she is expected to be a leader of the knowledge-based society. “The learning of the members of the society must be equal or higher than the speed of the environmental changes. Not fulfilling this requirement, the society is declining and not being able to adapt to the environmental changes – it dies” (Sabaliauskas 2002, p.141–145). Therefore, teaching and learning processes have to be oriented to the future, to give skills and methods how to deal with the rapidly growing amount of information. In addition, a teacher should develop research skills. “In order for the teacher to realize the mission of the alteration bearer, he has to become a researcher who discovers and implements innovations in pedagogical process” (Samusevica 2002, p. 145–150). The list of requirements is not

complete, but it proves that teachers have an enormous responsibility.

Different reactions to changes

The question arises as to how all these requirements influence teachers work and their self perception. Teachers have different tasks – to teach qualitatively in the classroom as well as to fulfil wide educational functions. It is well proved that the most important social skill of a modern teacher is a skill to get rid of stress in the educational process. For those reasons, some teachers show resistance to different innovations. According to a research carried out among school principals (Cibulskas 2002, p. 32–39), pedagogues mostly resist the changes that are “enforced” from outside (e. g. government, ministry, municipality).

Some researchers (Moore 2004) argue that the public policy is prompting teachers to become increasingly pragmatic and identify two distinct forms of pragmatism: “principled pragmatism” embraced by teachers who feel generally positive towards changes and “contingent pragmatism” adopted by teachers in oppositional orientation to reforms. Representatives of “principled pragmatism” believe that educational reforms increase the effectiveness of the profession and help them to sharpen up a lot in how they teach. They come across as teachers who make their own informed evaluations of and choices from a range of possibilities by seldom completely rejecting or completely accepting any of these but approaching each one critically. The representatives of “contingent pragmatism” are those teachers who feel forced into repositioning with which they are critically uncomfortable.

Their selections are made out of desperation rather than choice. “Whereas the first group navigates their way through a sea of possibilities and around the less welcome rocks and islands that sometimes obstruct their path, however, the second group self-presents as a drowning man not even inclined to clutch at straws” (Moore 2004, p. 559). This is a part of a small but significant section of teachers who perceive change as threatening to invalidate their previous experience, robbing them of the skills they have learned and confusing their purposes.

Some researchers maintain the idea that a lot of teachers nowadays lose emotional connection with the subject they teach and their students, and their professional self is separated from their personal identity. Somebody might say that such a separation is a common practice in our society, yet there are educators (Palmer 1997) who treat it as a great danger. Education is perceived as an exclusively outward enterprise. But if we want to develop the identity and integrity that good teaching requires, we must talk to each other about our “inner lives”. Teaching is all about who you are as a person.

Results of the research

In order to find out how teachers understand their professional identity, a questionnaire was designed and distributed among English teachers in different parts of Lithuania. Respondents were asked to evaluate their role in the teaching process and their professional competences – the components that comprise professional identity. In addition, they had to deal with some questions to analyse the degree of influence of certain factors in identity

formation, e. g. personality traits, stress at work, language teaching policy. Finally, they examined their attitude to changes in professional identity. The answers helped to have a glimpse of the understanding that our teachers develop about their identity. A sample of 40 questionnaires was chosen with the aim to present the answers of respondents of different age, experience, types of schools, and locations. Since the purpose of the article is to give a generalized view of teachers’ opinion about their identity, an analysis of differences in the responses between age groups and teaching locations is not included here. The survey was carried out in 2007.

With the first question, respondents were asked to evaluate some factors that have influence on the formation of identity (*Diagram No. 1*).

According to the results, teachers tend to give preference to personality traits: 50% – great influence. Right stimuli are also important: 42.5% – great influence. Socio-cultural environment is evaluated as fairly important (52.5%), but there are people who state that it does not affect the identity development. It is evident that teachers give priority to personal characteristics and it proves the idea that personality is one of the most important components in teacher profession.

Another question asked to evaluate different components of a general competence of a teacher (*Diagram No. 2*). Each component had to be analyzed separately.

A great number of teachers gave high evaluation to classroom management: 45% – excellent, 42.5% – good. Skills to adapt the ideal to institutional and other

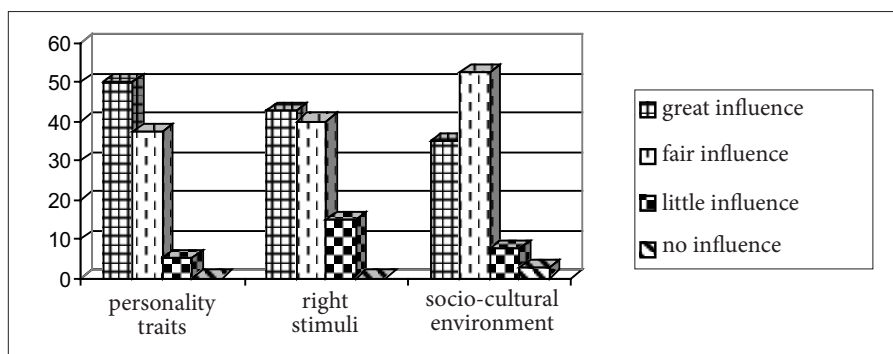


Diagram No. 1. Factors that help in the formation of identity

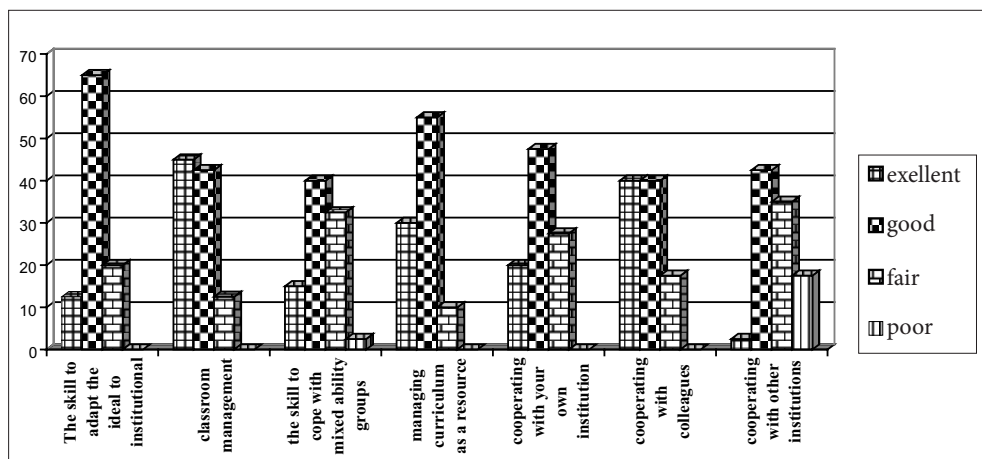


Diagram No. 2. Components of the general competence of a teacher

constraints were also rated as good (65%). Teachers felt positive enough about managing curriculum as a resource, 55% – good. The same can be said about cooperation with colleagues. Nevertheless, they found some difficulties in cooperating with their own institution, 27.5% evaluated their skills as fair. Even more problematic seemed to be cooperation with other institutions: 35% – fair and 17.5% – poor. It seems that teachers do not regard this field of their work as a very important one. The skill to cope with mixed ability groups can not be called a secondary matter. However, teachers feel rather insecure

while working with students of different levels, 32.5% evaluated this skill as fair, and several teachers – poor. Thus considering the fact that teachers are much more confident in dealing with the classroom management than in building relationships with institutions, groups of mixed ability students is still a big challenge to most teachers. One of the explanations could be the amount of duties that most of them have to fulfil and the lack of time for individual work.

Teachers were also asked to reveal personal opinion about their role at school and in society in general (*Diagram No. 3*).

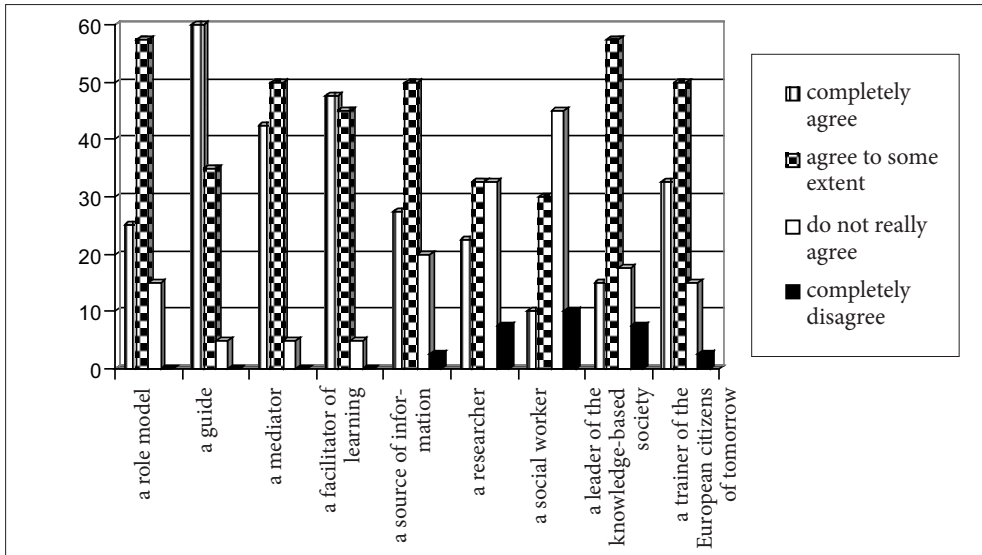


Diagram No. 3. Characterizations of a teacher's role

60% of teachers completely agree with the role of a guide, and this is the only characterization which receives an acceptance from the majority of respondents. 47.5% completely agree with the role of a facilitator of learning. All other roles cause more doubts. Teachers are more cautious in agreeing with the responsibility to be a role model – 57.5% agree to some extent. The same situation is with the statement that a teacher is a trainer of the European citizens of tomorrow. An interesting case is with the description of a teacher as a source of information: 27.5% follow the traditional perception and completely agree, many more (50%) agree with it to some extent and 20% have more doubts. This result might testify of a tendency to shift students' attention to other sources of information and stop pretending to be omniscient. A similar comprehension probably affects the evaluation of a teacher as a leader of the knowledge-based society, 57.5% agree with it to some extent, 17.5% do not really agree and some teachers (7.5%)

completely disagree with it. Teachers do not quite accept the role of a researcher: 32.5% do not really agree and 7.5% completely disagree. This might be related to the lack of time that most of them experience. Obviously, the fulfilment of this role would require major additional resources. Respondents feel even more negative about the role of a social worker, 45% do not really agree, and 10% completely disagree. Summing up, teachers are quite cautious in attributing roles for themselves and choose those which seem to be more neutral, like a facilitator of learning or a guide and avoid such resounding descriptions as a leader of the knowledge-based society.

After analysing various responsibilities, teachers were asked to indicate the reasons of stress at work (*Diagram No. 4*).

A great number of them (77.5%) completely agree that endless duties are the main reason of their stress. Another cause that draws considerable attention (52/5%) is aggression and demands in pupils-teacher

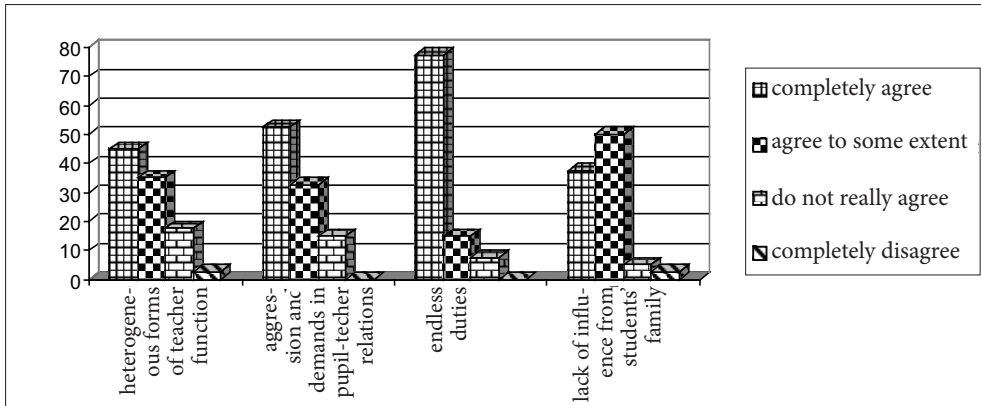


Diagram No. 4. Reasons of teachers' stress at work

relations. Heterogeneous forms of teacher functions also seem to have some impact, 45% completely agree with the statement. Most respondents (50%) agree to some extent with the lack of influence from students' family, but several people do not really agree or completely disagree with this factor. Thus time and again, teachers complain about too many responsibilities and duties that cause a lot of stress at work.

The questionnaire also analysed the extent of influence teachers make on decisions that shape language teaching policy in Lithuania (*Diagram No. 5*). The results are quite disappointing.

Most teachers think that their role is minimal and language teaching policy is a product of the authorities that have little in common with practical work at school. There are no teachers who think that they influence those decisions to a large extent, 27.5% believe that they do it to some extent, 52.5% – do not really influence, and 20% – have no influence at all. This might be the answer why so many teachers are not satisfied with processes in the Lithuanian education. Teachers have to take a more significant part in the formation of the language teaching policy if we expect to achieve better results in our education institutions.

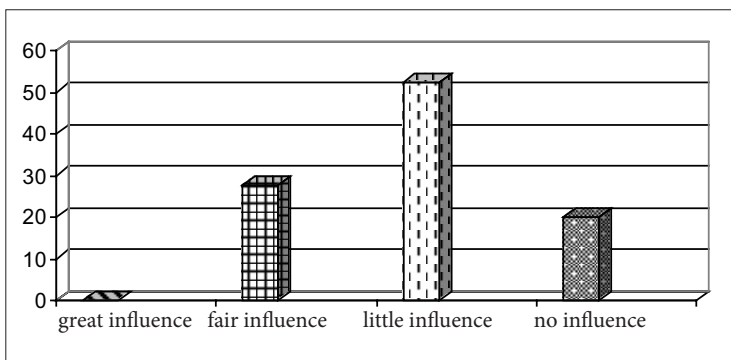


Diagram No. 5. Teachers' influence on the decisions concerning the modern language teaching policy

Despite various drawbacks in our education system, Lithuanian teachers express quite a positive attitude towards the reconstruction of the professional self (*Diagram No. 6*).

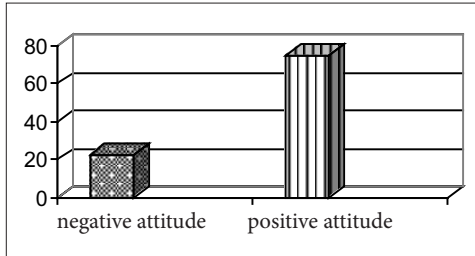


Diagram No. 6. **The repositioning of the professional self**

The majority of them (75%) claim that repositioning of the professional self is a possibility to increase the effectiveness of the profession. Considerably fewer teachers (22.5%) state that it is a stressful and complicated process in which they are forced to take part. These results give us hope that our education system still has a bright future.

Conclusions

Nowadays, in the face of globalization, the concept of identity becomes increasingly popular. Different changes in the education system impel teachers to rethink their role and position in the teaching process. Modern language education policy raises new demands and establishes specific teacher competences that put educators into the reshaping of their professional self. According to the results of the questionnaire, Lithuanian teachers feel rather confident about their competences, yet have some doubts related to their work with mixed

ability groups. Education literature is full of statements about a teacher's role in contemporary education system. Lithuanian teachers are quite cautious in attributing roles for themselves and choose those which seem to be more neutral, like a facilitator of learning, guide, or mediator. Any change always gives rise to two opposite reactions: positive and negative. For some teachers it is a possibility to increase the effectiveness of their profession, while others consider it a big challenge in their career. Some studies show that there is a lack of teacher involvement in the decision making related to education policy. The findings of the research support this belief. There are researchers who pay attention to the endless duties of teachers at work and their low authority in the society. Lithuanian teachers agree that endless duties is one of the main reasons of their stress, but most of them treat repositioning of the professional self as a possibility to increase the effectiveness of the profession. The key factor for helping to reshape professional identity is considered to be personal traits of a teacher.

All things considered, reshaping of teacher's professional identity seems to be a difficult task due to various reasons:

- 1) the ambiguity of the term itself and high degree of personal interpretation involved in implementing the requirements;
- 2) the host of inner and outer factors that shape a teacher's work, especially those of a negative nature (e. g. stress);
- 3) the unstable nature of teacher identity and the necessity to adapt to new demands time and again.

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Moksliniai interesai: mokytojo tapatybės tyrimai, profesinės tapatybės formavimas

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MOKYTOJO PROFESINĖS TAPATYBĖS FORMAVIMAS IR TRANSFORMAVIMAS

Santrauka

Straipsnyje pristatomi moksliniai darbai ir tyrinėjimai susiję su identiteto problema, siekiama pažvelgti į mokytojo profesinio tapatumo pasikeitimus šiuolaikinėje edukacinėje sistemoje. Remiamasi 2007 metais surinktais duomenimis apie Lietuvos anglų kalbos mokytojų požiūrį į jų profesinę tapatybę, jos formavimąsi, bei mokytojų vaidmenį formuojant šiuolaikinę kalbų mokymo politiką. Taip pat parodoma kaip šie mokytojai vertina savo kompetencijas, savo vaidmenį. Viena iš populiariausių identiteto interpretacijų pabrėžia asmeninės ir sociokultūrinės tapatybės dvilypumą. Mokytojo tapatybė yra viena iš sociokultūrinio

SHAPING AND RESHAPING THE PROFESSIONAL SELF

Summary

Nowadays, in the face of globalization, the concept of identity becomes increasingly popular. Modern language education policy raises new demands and establishes specific teacher competences that put educators into the reshaping of their professional self. For some teachers it is a possibility to increase the effectiveness of their profession, while others view it as a big challenge in their career. The survey carried out in Lithuania shows that English teachers have quite a positive attitude towards a reconstruction of professional self. The main factors in shaping the identity are considered to be personal traits.

identiteto dalių, kuri turi tiesioginį ryšį su asmenine tapatybe. Jos formavimui didžiausią įtaką daro socialinė aplinka, profesinio tobulėjimo procesas, bei individo charakterio savybės. Tyrinėtojai pabrėžia didėjančią atotrūkį tarp mokytojo profesinio ir asmeninio tapatumo, kuris lemia šaltesnius mokytojų ir mokinių santykius. Tai yra susiję su per dideliu mokytojų darbo krūviu. Platus mokytojo vaidmenų spektras sukelia daug diskusijų. Mokytojai vengia prisiimti tyrėjo vaidmens, ir yra ypač nepatenkinti dėl jiems primateamų socialinio darbuotojo funkcijų. Be to, mokytojai turi demonstruoti daugybę kompetencijų. Daugiausia svarstymų yra susiję su mokytojų sugebėjimu dirbti su skirtingo lygio studentais. Nagrinėjama mokytojų įtraukimo į europinio ir lietuviško mokymo modelio kūrimą problema. Mokytojai jaučiasi neturintys jokios įtakos mokymo procesą keičiantiems sprendimams. Dauguma mokytojų pozityviai žiūri į profesinį tobulėjimą, kuris įtakoja ir profesinės tapatybės transformaciją. Straipsnyje yra naudojami empirinis ir analitinis metodai. Užsienio pedagogų teiginiai yra papildomi rezultatais iš Lietuvoje atlikto tyrimo.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: mokytojo tapatybė, formavimas, transformavimas, kompetencijos, vaidmuo, edukacinis kontekstas.

However, teachers are convinced that there is a lack of their involvement in the decision making related to education policy. Therefore, teachers are not motivated to follow the prescribed rules, and changes do not gain ground. Some authors point out to the division between teacher's personal identity and professional self. Respondents of the survey indicate endless duties as the main reason of teachers' stress at work. They are also quite cautious in attributing different roles to themselves and choose those that sound more neutral, like a facilitator of learning or a guide. Yet teachers feel rather confident about their competences and have doubts only about their work with mix ability students. All things considered, reshaping of teacher's professional identity seems to be a difficult task and should be analysed in greater detail before making any decisions.

The methods used in this paper are both empirical and analytical. The first part presents some scientific works related to the topic of teacher identity, the second one is an analysis of the results of the survey.

KEY WORDS: teacher identity, formation, reshaping, competences, role, educational context.

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