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Vulnerability as an Emotional Dimension in Student Teachers’ Narrative Identities Told With Self-Portraits

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on what student teachers tell about the emotional dimension of their identities with self-portraits. Narrative interviews with self-portraits were conducted with two student teachers in the final stages of their studies. The interviews were analysed by using narrative analysis, followed by a thematic cross-analysis of the two emploted stories. The findings emphasise the importance of vulnerability as a significant emotional dimension of student teachers’ identities, showing them to be vulnerable in relation to themselves, to others and to cultural teacher stories. From the perspective of student teacher identity construction, it was notable that the student teachers described moments of feeling unsuited to being a teacher, which made them feel vulnerable. The article discusses the meaning of self-portraits for research and for teacher education; telling stories with self-portraits can be used to understand the emotional dimension of student teachers’ narrative identities.

There has been a great deal of research recently on student teacher identities (e.g., Furlong, 2013; Izadinia, 2013; Lutovac & Kaasila, 2018; Pillen et al., 2013) and there has been research interest globally in the emotions of student teachers and beginning teachers (e.g., Kelchtermans & Dekete-laere, 2016; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012; Uitto, Kaunisto, et al., 2015). Emotions are crucial to teachers’ work, being strongly intertwined with teachers’ identity construction and relationships at work, as well as with learning and well-being (Rodgers & Scott, 2008; Shapiro, 2010; Zembylas, 2003; for a review, see Uitto, Jokikokko, et al., 2015). Challenges related to the emotional and relational nature of the teaching profession have also been seen as possible reasons for teachers leaving their work (Clandinin et al., 2015; Kelchermans, 2017). These challenges are intertwined with student teacher identities: If a student teacher has a relatively strong image of who they are, it may be hard to fit in with what is expected of teachers in a particular cultural context (Lindqvist & Nördanger, 2016). For student teachers, negotiating with cultural norms and other contextual expectations about how they should act and be is also an emotionally charged process (Anspal et al., 2019; Beaucamps & Thomas, 2009; Lassila, 2017).

The emotional dimension of student teacher identity construction has often been allocated a marginal role in research, and its relative absence from teacher education connects with the difficulty that student teachers may have in talking about their emotions even when opportunities for it are created (Lassila et al., 2017). In this research, we approach the emotions via a relational perspective, understanding emotions as embedded within relationships and social contexts.
(Uitto, Jokikokko, et al., 2015; Zembylas, 2007). Moreover, previous research has illustrated art's ability to evoke and communicate emotions; words alone may not always be enough to describe emotions, but other ways of telling, e.g., photographs, can help (Harper, 2002; McKay & Barton, 2018; Weiser, 1999). However, until now, research has rarely addressed student teacher identities with the use of photographs (e.g., Notshulwana & De Lange, 2019; for a review, see Izadinia, 2013).

This article contributes to the understanding of the importance of the emotional dimension in student teachers' identity construction. To achieve this, it explores two primary education student teachers' identities as told with self-portraits – photographs that these student teachers had taken of themselves at different phases of their studies. The research is guided by the following question: What do student teachers tell about the emotional dimension of their identities with self-portraits?

**Student Teachers’ Narrative Identity and Its Emotional Dimension**

Teacher identity has been widely examined and theorised from a narrative perspective (e.g., Alsup, 2018; Beijaard et al., 2004; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005). We understand teacher identity to be narrative in nature, i.e., narrative identity, that stretches and changes over time, is formed in relations with others and by the individual's emotions (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Teacher identity is thus an evolving story of who one is and who one is becoming, which aims to answer the question, “Who am I as a teacher?” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005; McAdams, 2017). Who student teachers are cannot be separated from their life histories and is also shaped by what kind of teachers they wish to become (Furlong, 2013). Thus, in constructing teacher identity, personal and professional aspects become intertwined. Diverse possible answers to the above question also indicate that teacher identity is not a fixed attribute, but a relational phenomenon (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004). Interactions with others offer a basis for constructing one's identity.

Emotions have been widely acknowledged as playing a vital role in constructing student teacher identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Rodgers & Scott, 2008): Several authors emphasise becoming a teacher as a highly emotional experience (Kelchtermans & Deketelaere, 2016; Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2012). Emotions are a part of social interaction and constructed via language and culture (Zembylas, 2003). Following Lasky (2005, p. 901), we operationalise teachers’ emotions as “heightened states of being” that change as teachers reflect on past and future teaching practices and interact with their teaching context. These states emerge especially in socio-cultural contexts in which the individual teacher’s visions and ideas of being a teacher come into conflict with those held by others (Lassila, 2017). The latter is a vital part of teacher identity construction, but as the teacher’s “being” is targeted, it also makes them feel vulnerable. To empathise and engage with pupils fully, it is essential that teachers let themselves be vulnerable (Alsup, 2018). In this article, we identify vulnerability as an emotional dimension, guided by Lasky’s (2005) definition: Vulnerability is a multifaceted emotional experience that is understood as not feeling safe enough in an environment to take risks for fear of losing face and experiencing loss or pain. Vulnerability can also be seen as a structural condition of being a teacher that should be embraced, not simply endured (Bullough, 2005; Kelchtermans, 1996, 2017; Lasky, 2005). However, this is not an easy task since people tend to seek security while avoiding uncertainty (Bullough, 2005).

Narrative identities are never just personal because all stories are told and understood within wider cultural, social, familial and institutional stories and are also influenced by them (McAdams, 2017; Spector-Mersel, 2010). Thus, the construction of the student teacher identity is also a culturally conditioned process (Uitto, Kaunisto, et al., 2015). Student teachers tell stories of themselves as future teachers within the frames of cultural teacher stories. These stories include images of a good teacher as well as norms, myths, stereotypes and expectations about being a teacher (Britzman, 1986; Lanas, 2017; Shapiro, 2010). When student teachers construct their teacher identities, they draw from this stock of stories. In Finland, these stories revolve around teachers as highly appreciated and teaching as an autonomous profession. Teachers have traditionally been expected to be examples of morally good behaviour and pillars of the community. In addition, teachers’ work
has been described as a calling and teachers have been typically portrayed as outgoing and social (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015). Not seeing oneself conform to the images of a good teacher arising from these cultural teacher stories can evoke a variety of emotions and pose challenges to student teachers’ construction of their teacher identity (Pillen et al., 2013; Shapiro, 2010). Student teachers can, however, position themselves against these cultural teacher stories (see Bamberg, 2004).

Method

**Narrative Interviews With Self-Portraits**

In Finland, completion of a five-year master’s degree is required to qualify as a primary teacher. The two student teachers whose interviews comprise the research material were in the final stages of their studies. Both were in their twenties. Only two student teachers participated in this research for two reasons. First, the call for participants was specific in that they had to be interested in expressing themselves via self-portraits. Second, these student teachers’ stories provided a thick description that enabled us to formulate a deep understanding of student teachers’ experiences told with self-portraits.

The first author asked Moona and Hanna (pseudonyms) to bring to the interviews self-portrait(s) that best described them as future primary school teachers and currently as student teachers. We understand self-portraits as photographs: They can be old family pictures, selfies taken by phone, or more artistic photographs taken of oneself or by someone else (Bach, 2007). There is no one static presentation of a person’s identity, but fragmented selves that compete to be seen (Martin & Spence, 1986). Self-portraits allow people to construct stories about their identities. Stories told with photographs are not merely drawn from what can be seen in them, but are constructed via the context of the photographs, which activate the process of meaning making (Weiser, 1999).

Moona brought with her one self-portrait, taken as a group assignment in her visual arts class. We call it here *At the Crossroads*. Hanna brought five self-portraits, which she had taken herself. In this article, we present two of them, called *Blind Mary* and *The Leaves*, which were the most crucial from the standpoint of Hanna’s narrative student teacher identity. Both student teachers consented to the inclusion of their self-portraits in the research and written permissions were obtained. To protect their privacy, self-portraits were edited so that the student teachers would not be recognisable. To retain the facial expressions and emotions, main features were drawn digitally in the self-portraits.

In the interviews, the first author applied methods of photo-elicitation (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007; Harper, 2002) and life story interview (Estola et al., 2017). The aim was to produce a situation in which the participant had control in terms of what and how to tell (Estola et al., 2017). The stories told with self-portraits were constructed through the interaction of researcher and participant, in which both explored meanings narratively (Bach, 2007; Spector-Mersel, 2010). The first author began both interviews by asking the participants to talk about the self-portraits, especially from the perspective of becoming a teacher. The participants could speak as freely as possible about the self-portraits, being able to decide on the emphasis of perspective (Clark-Ibáñez, 2007). The first author then asked them to tell about specific phases of their lives. The interviews were held in locations chosen by the interviewees. Moona’s interview lasted 50 min and Hanna’s lasted 90 min.

According to our methodological commitment to a narrative approach, we wanted to give something back to the participants (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005). Moona and Hanna were offered the chance to read the article and share their thoughts about the use of their stories and self-portraits in it. Both read the article and did not suggest any changes.

Analysis of the Research Material

The first author transcribed the interview recordings verbatim, including crucial emotional reactions. Then, the first author analysed the interviews using narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995), which includes the method of emplotment (Lutovac & Kaasila, 2010). The first author
then wrote the transcribed interviews into two individual stories in chronological order, from childhood to future visions. During the narrative analysis, the self-portraits were pivotal to interpreting both stories. The self-portraits were placed in the timeline of the stories in the appropriate places. As a result of this holistic analysis process, the first author identified how the emotional dimension was meaningful for the individual identities described and what Moona and Hanna considered to be most significant to the construction of their student teacher identities.

Next, to find similarities and differences in Hanna’s and Moona’s stories, the writing team conducted an analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995), that is, a thematic cross-analysis of the two emplotted stories. The analysis of narratives focused on finding key themes crucial to the construction of Hanna’s and Moona’s student teacher identities. We identified three key themes regarding the emotional dimension of their identities in relation to (1) themselves, (2) others and (3) cultural teacher stories. These key themes were intertwined in each story. During this analysis of narratives, we interpreted vulnerability as a significant emotional dimension of student teachers’ identities found in the three key themes.

Results

Moona’s Story: At the Crossroads

I have known or thought about wanting to become a teacher ever since I was young. Then, in primary school, it [the thought of becoming a teacher] disappeared.

Moona tells that she had wanted to become a teacher ever since childhood. Her family had a strong “culture of teachers”, although only her grandfather was a teacher. However, her wish to become a teacher disappeared for a while, because she was bullied the entire time in primary school. Despite being bullied, she was an active pupil who was chosen as a class representative. Her school times were emotionally exhausting, filled with fear because of the two conflicting positions, being both a bullied and an active pupil. Later in her life, Moona says, she started to think that maybe becoming a teacher was a possibility, since her bullies were not there anymore. After graduating from upper secondary school, she applied for primary education teacher studies, feeling hopeful: “I got the feeling that I had survived, and maybe I could do something for somebody else.” Here, we can see how relationships are present in Moona’s story in both a supporting and limiting sense from the perspective of her student teacher identity.

Moona recalls that she encountered difficulties at the beginning of her teacher studies. She secured a job as a substitute teacher and left her studies for a while. When she returned to teacher education months later, she no longer had her home group to support her. Moona described how she had a strong sense of not belonging to a group and hence felt unable to be herself: “I was never attached to my home group. I had only a few people who I could call friends.” In Finland, student teachers study intensively together for the first two years, taking classes together as a home group. From the viewpoint of student teacher identity, the fact of not having a home group with its peer-relations played a big role in Moona’s story.

Moona says that whenever she went to a new class with a new group of student teachers, she first observed the dynamics of the group: “In the first lecture, I would go somewhere far away, in the corner, and I would not make any contact, even though I would have lots of thoughts that I would have liked to have shared.” Gradually, Moona was able to get closer to other students, as she tried to determine which groups were friendly. When she found safe people around her, she became more talkative – but at the same time, she was quick to retreat into herself. Moona tells how she became careful in her relations with other student teachers: She got used to staying silent to ensure her safety and did not want to receive criticism from others. This kind of restraint in exposing herself illustrates that she felt vulnerable in relation to other student teachers. She describes how she could be whatever she wanted outside of teacher education: “I feel like I don’t really have the need to get attached to anything. I just want to do what is expected. [My] own...
life starts outside the teacher education, where I can be whatever I want.” This suggests that the pressure arising from the images of a teacher or a good teacher and, accordingly, images of who one should be as a future teacher make Moona feel vulnerable (Figure 1).

Moona’s identity is highlighted by the tensions she feels in relation to other student teachers as well as to cultural expectations she feels towards herself. From that perspective, her self-portrait and the process of making it as a group assignment in her visual arts class play a momentous role in her identity. The self-portrait is a pastiche of the well-known Finnish artist Hugo Simberg’s painting *At the Crossroads* (1886). Moona describes how she ended up being in the photograph, because none of the other student teachers volunteered: “I decided to loosen up and give the reins to others. It was quite difficult at first. In a way, I felt defenceless.” Being photographed presented a possibility for being vulnerable and forming a trusting relationship with the student teachers working on the same assignment. As Moona tells about the process of making the self-portrait, her conflicting emotions surface:

I processed quite a lot in [the self-portrait], and I thought a lot about personal things … like my background and difficulties. Sometimes I feel like I am being torn apart. … I struggle with what [traits] I can and cannot show.

Her vulnerability in relation to herself is revealed in her self-portrait.

*Figure 1. At the Crossroads.*
Moona tells, how the painted hands in her self-portrait resemble the elements of fire and water. The uppermost hand, which is painted to resemble fire, symbolises her enthusiastic attitude and strong emotions, which she had to restrain in school as a child. She says she felt that in her relations with her former teachers, they smothered her fire, her emotions. Moona explains that the water, presented in the form of tears, indicates something that comes to surface when one feels suffocated. She reflects on why it is that expressing strong emotions is so dangerous: “You easily let your inner self disappear. It is easier to suppress it to please others.” Moona describes that she feels she has to change parts of herself in order to meet the expectations towards student teachers:

There is an expectation … [in teacher education] that you have to be a certain kind of [student teacher]. You try to fit yourself into that formula or mould to some extent. And then you try to get rid of those features that are not generally considered, or that you imagine are not considered, to be good features. You try because a teacher is [supposed to be] positive; you emphasise your own positive side.

Highlighting and suppressing some traits can be seen as a way of trying to fit into what teachers are culturally expected to be like (Shapiro, 2010). As Moona tries to meet these expectations, she suffocates her emotions. This makes her feel extremely vulnerable, but she feels a need to be positive in order to fit in: “I might sometimes feel heartbroken all of a sudden because I’m alone here, but then again, it does not matter. I’m really positive anyway.”

From the perspective of student teacher identity, for Moona, a significant reason for becoming a teacher is to be able to protect pupils. Moona draws attention to the fact that the left hand in her self-portrait, formed into a cup, collects falling tears. She says that it reflects the importance of teachers accepting pupils as they are.

I could say that I’m a good teacher … if I could be really sensitive. I think, I have the strength, maybe a little too much, that I sense everything around me, all the changes in emotional states … But it may be that the teacher’s work demands that one is able to hear everything that is not said aloud in the classroom.

As Moona describes her identity, she sees her sensitivity as a significant part of being a good teacher. She does not want to make the same mistakes in her relations with pupils as her own former teachers, who did not see through her façade: “It may be that the pupil who has the greatest distress seems to be that one who is doing well.” At the core of Moona’s identity seems to be her emphasis on the pupils and their well-being, as well as sensitivity to other people’s emotions.

Moona tells in the interview that during the making of the self-portrait she felt good about herself – moreover, she felt good about her group, meaning the other student teachers: “It was like a trust exercise; it really worked. This was something new that lifted my self-esteem immensely.” She says that she wished the situation had arisen earlier in the studies, since she felt empowered.

In the future, Moona sees herself as a teacher. However, her story suggests that she may feel vulnerable in the workplace too: “It is probably the teachers’ lounge that scares me.” She says that she may remain as an observer to begin with in the new environment: “[In the teachers’ lounge] there are also bullies and bullied ones, and I think I will be … prepared to protect myself.” Even though Moona fears being hurt in the future as a teacher, she feels she can be herself in relations with her future pupils.

Maybe here … [I] have grown up or processed everything that has happened. I think [I] can show my “weak” side as a teacher, too. If you think about the children, you can show both sides, which are extremely different from each other, and that is no longer a defect but a strength.

She seems to have turned her vulnerability into a strength that she can use in teacher–pupil relationships.

**Hanna’s Story: Blind Mary and The Leaves**

Hanna’s childhood was coloured by positive experiences of her family and school: “Everything was quite alright.” She went to a small village school and describes herself as a “good girl”. Becoming a
teacher was not at the top of her list in her childhood. In her story, Hanna describes she wondered what she had to offer, growing up in a safe and protected environment. At upper secondary school, Hanna faced new uncertainties because she was in a new environment, far from her safe village school. She dreamed of studying the natural sciences and thus applied to university. She had good grades and studied hard for the entrance exams. However, she did not get in, which made her sad. Hanna’s parents’ strong encouragement to apply for the primary school teacher programme was important for Hanna’s career decision. Her journey to becoming a student teacher was more a story of drift towards teacher education than a longstanding ambition to become a teacher.

Hanna tells that when she started her studies in teacher education, she felt insecure. Moving to a new environment made her feel lonely. In the following extract, she talks about this emotional phase of her life as, metaphorically, like being blind: “That blindness may come into your own life … and towards [becoming a] teacher and all that. When you are a little bit lost, you can be a little blind and not see the good stuff in life.”

Hanna’s first self-portrait, which she called Blind Mary, was taken as part of a visual arts class assignment (Figure 2). The process of taking the self-portrait included a coincidence because the light hitting her eyes made her look blind. Hanna says that the self-portrait mirrors her emotions during the first year of studying: Homesickness and uncertainty as to whether to become a teacher. At the same time, she decided that she would not become a teacher: “It has changed many times: Will I become a teacher or not. One must constantly reflect on oneself in [teacher education] studies.” This felt like a burden to Hanna, who saw herself failing to meet the cultural expectations related to being a teacher.

Hanna tells how she has wondered about these expectations and whether she has the “right” features: “I have wondered a lot if [the teaching profession] is right for me and if this is the thing I want to do. … And am I social enough and things like that; I am fairly introverted.” Hanna says that she finds it difficult to face pupils because she gets lost in her head sometimes.

In addition to her personal traits, Hanna describes how showing emotions can be difficult for her: “You need the courage to cry occasionally. Because you hold it in. You try to … cover up … (Laughs) … the fact that you are sensitive. Sometimes, I do everything with my emotions (laughs
and cries).” From the perspective of identity, Hanna’s sensitivity in relation to herself is important. Accepting insecurity and embracing moments of uncertainty are shown here to be significant parts of the student teacher identity.

Hanna tells she wanted to do everything as well as possible in her studies: “I have always been a kind of pedantic and good girl, doing everything well. A perfectionist.” At some points she felt inadequate in comparison to the other student teachers, however. Being constantly evaluated in teacher education made her feel vulnerable in relation to others, especially when she had to make a presentation as part of the course work: “I have started to cry many times and have run away. It is not nice when someone looks at you and judges you.” Her experiences of the school practice period in the master’s studies were also highly emotional for her: “When the practice began, I felt that I was not ready at all for it. I had a panic attack when others were watching me.”

Hanna had a panic attack again when she was teaching a lesson during the practice and a familiar teacher from her teacher education programme came to observe. Being observed evoked strong emotions in her and it seems that her feeling of being evaluated and feeling herself inadequate made her feel vulnerable. As in Moona’s story, the reason behind Hanna’s strong emotions and feelings of inadequacy could be attributed to the images of a good teacher, as well as expectations about what kind of student teacher may be a fit with that image in the future. Hanna’s worry is that she does not fit that ideal image of a good teacher in the eyes of others.

Hanna says that during teacher education, she felt she had to rein in her emotions constantly. However, as she learned to understand her own emotions, she learned to understand the pupils’ emotions as well: “You know how to recognise [the emotions of the pupils] because you are yourself ‘trapped’ with your emotions sometimes.” According to Hanna, teachers need to have empathy skills. She wants to offer her future pupils a piece of her own safe childhood.

Hanna’s second self-portrait is called The Leaves (Figure 3). At the time, Hanna worked as a personal assistant for special needs children. After one meaningful workday, she went home, assembled the leaves on the ground in a harmonious circle and took the self-portrait. As Hanna started to describe The Leaves in the interview, she started to cry: “In that self-portrait, even though I have my eyes closed … I radiate such harmony that I am here, and I have everything alright.”

Hanna tells, that in her job as an assistant, relations with children with special needs became important for her, especially with one child whom she assisted the most. Hanna worked with
this child for years and they shared similar interests. From the perspective of her student teacher identity, her relationship with these children had great significance, as she learned to accept herself through being accepted by others: “Maybe I am more relaxed with them [children with special needs] … you can easily be yourself, because they will notice if you are acting.” As Hanna worked with them, she learned to let herself be vulnerable. She gradually learned to let go of her self-doubt: “Yes … [I] began to let go … of myself. Even though I am an introvert! (Laughs) When you give to others and are happy about and interested in other people … the beauty radiates from you.”

The core of Hanna’s identity is not whether she becomes a teacher, but rather her path of becoming more comfortable with who she is and accepting her vulnerability, regardless of outer expectations. She tells realising that she could be a teacher if she wanted to: “Maybe I see that I could be a teacher. But then again, I could want to do something else.” Hanna says that it might have been a good thing that she applied for teacher education: “Perhaps the fact that I have been here, and have been searching for myself, maybe it was meant to be … Perhaps here, I have found myself.” She says that if she decides to enter the teaching profession after graduating, she wants to be a brave experimenter, as she identifies herself:

I hope that it stays with me, that joy of learning, that when I step outside of my comfort zone, then pupils might get something out of it. I am just like that; I go towards everything and then I am scared.

However vulnerable she might feel, she sees many opportunities in her future.

**Discussion**

This article explores what student teachers tell about the emotional dimension of their identities with self-portraits. Vulnerability was identified as a recurring emotional dimension, emerging repeatedly throughout the student teachers’ stories. What we identified here was specific to the student teachers’ stories told in the context of Finnish teacher education, and vulnerability may vary in different contexts, e.g., in the context of personal relationships. The findings present vulnerability as a significant emotional dimension in student teachers’ identities, showing them to be vulnerable in relation to (1) themselves, (2) others and (3) cultural teacher stories. These relations were intertwined in the student teachers’ identities, and in order to understand the construction of student teacher identity, all these relations need to be considered. In what follows, we discuss each of these themes of vulnerability and how they were displayed in the student teachers’ identities.

**Being Vulnerable in Relation to Themselves**

With regard to being vulnerable in relation to themselves, the central point in both stories seemed to be the student teachers’ feeling that they were not good enough. Through telling with self-portraits, both participants revealed meaningful, even painful, aspects of their student teacher identities. Moona’s vulnerability showed through in her struggles with the experience of being bullied and her inability to show her true self for fear of being hurt again. Hanna described having felt vulnerable at the beginning of her teacher education studies, experiencing anxiety, uncertainty and fear. She portrayed herself as a good girl who tried to protect herself against being hurt in the new environment. These findings resonate with Lasky’s (2005) work suggesting that people feel vulnerable when they are powerless or helpless, especially in situations that may evoke fear. She illustrated how vulnerable individuals will not take risks, instead withdrawing from the dangerous situation to protect themselves. This was observable in Moona’s and Hanna’s stories: The feeling of not “being good enough” indicates that Moona and Hanna felt vulnerable in relation to their own selves, eliciting a range of emotions, from fear to anxiety. Expressing these emotions appeared to be difficult in certain situations that the student teachers told about, and their stories also revealed that they tried to hide how vulnerable they felt in these situations. Both, however, found a way to open themselves despite their vulnerability.
Being Vulnerable in Relation to Others

For Moona and Hanna, relations with others helped them to see themselves as worthy. In light of her vulnerability, the most important relations to others for Moona were formed with her peers in teacher education. During new lectures, she was always sensitive to the moods of other student teachers and tried to determine which groups could be emotionally safe. She was quick to retreat from situations where she might get hurt emotionally. The process of making the self-portrait *At the Crossroads* was crucial to Moona; she took a leap of faith and allowed herself to be vulnerable around others. The self-portrait and its production were a critical point in her story and promoted a new realisation about herself (Bach, 2007). Although she expressed concern about future relations in teachers’ lounges, she saw her relations with other students from a new empowering perspective. The sense of empowerment was also apparent for Hanna, whose second self-portrait, *The Leaves*, depicted the emotions she related to working as an assistant for children with special needs. One particular child became a significant other for her (Schatz-Oppenheimer & Dvir, 2014) and had great importance for constructing herself as a vulnerable teacher with self-portraits. For both Moona and Hanna, other people were key to discovering that they could be vulnerable, which in turn opened up possibilities of forming deep relationships (Lasky, 2005). A person’s identity is constructed in interaction with others, which “offers a way for the teachers to empower themselves and overcome the feeling of personal inequality” (Burns & Bell, 2011, p. 958).

Being Vulnerable in Relation to Cultural Teacher Stories

Moona and Hanna both described moments when they felt unsuited to being a teacher, which made them feel vulnerable. We identified these cultural teacher stories in their stories. Student teachers’ past experiences of teachers, schools and pupils resonated with their ideas of their (future) work as a teacher. These experiences carry through and form cultural images of teacher identities, constituting a frame of reference for student teachers’ identity construction (Britzman, 1986). Their stories were simultaneously told in line with and against the cultural stories about being a teacher in Finland (e.g., Estola et al., 2003; Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015).

From the beginning of her studies, Hanna wondered about her suitability to be a teacher: She felt she was not sociable enough (see Kelchtermans, 1996). The feeling of being an introvert is important for understanding her student teacher identity. In Finnish educational discourses, teachers are traditionally portrayed as model citizens (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015). Teachers are expected to be outgoing and social, close to what is often referred to as the extrovert type, a role that not everyone feels comfortable with (cf. Smith, 2015). Who Hanna portrayed herself to be was at odds with the cultural story of the appropriate teacher traits, which made her feel vulnerable (Anspal et al., 2019; Pillen et al., 2013). Even though these culturally appropriate teacher traits can be seen as restricting stereotypes, they nonetheless provide a frame for student teacher identity construction.

Similarly, Moona struggled with how she should act and what she should be like as a student teacher in order to conform to the normative expectations in teacher education (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015). In her story, she felt the need to suppress some of her personal traits and simultaneously emphasise her positivity, which made Moona feel extremely vulnerable, as she was sensitive of her own and others’ emotions. It also created tensions and emotional disharmony between her student teacher identity and the expectations she felt she should fulfil. Left unresolved, these tensions and the accompanying emotions explain why some student teachers fail to enter the teaching profession (Pillen et al., 2013). Willingness to shape oneself as a student teacher has been identified as an implicit norm in teacher education (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015). These norms can also restrict the emotions one can express (Shapiro, 2010); with regards to vulnerability, this seems especially difficult for those student teachers who are wondering whether they want to work as teachers in the future.
As the student teachers told their identities with self-portraits, they also constructed their own ideas about the kind of teachers they want to be. They were not only limited to the cultural teacher stories: By telling their stories, they questioned the norms, expectations and stereotypes related to becoming and being a teacher (McAdams, 2017). As Hanna learned to be more comfortable with her vulnerability, she started to see becoming a teacher after graduation as one of many possibilities and was still uncertain about whether to work as a teacher. Moona was able to harness her vulnerability as a tool for use as a future teacher, especially in teacher–pupil relationships. She said she would want to create an emotionally safe environment in her future classroom. Moona’s vision of being a vulnerable teacher gave her a sense of purpose; she felt she could make a positive difference in her pupils’ lives. This moral commitment of wanting to make a difference in pupils’ lives was a significant aspect of Moona’s student teacher identity construction, seen also in previous research (Estola et al., 2003; Rots et al., 2012). Hanna, too, wanted to offer an emotionally safe environment for her possible future pupils, and she explained how her sensitivity to her own emotions could help her notice pupils’ emotions. Thus, being vulnerable can enable teachers to be emotionally available for pupils and to engage with them fully (Alsup, 2018; Cutri & Whiting, 2015), which was important for both student teachers. This kind of cultural teacher story, of a sensitive and empathetic teacher, emphasises the caring nature of the teaching profession (Burns & Bell, 2011). However, there are risks to being a vulnerable teacher: Teachers who value the building of trusting relations with their pupils can end up feeling guilt and personal failure if they do not succeed in their efforts (Kelchtermans, 1996).

**Conclusion and Implications**

Vulnerability and emotions regarding unsuitability need to be addressed in teacher education. Failure to do so may leave student teachers alone with these questions and may lead to other problems. In the worst-case scenario, they may consider leaving the profession soon after graduating. This article shows that some student teachers have doubts about becoming a teacher and are already considering alternative career paths during pre-service teacher education. For various reasons, they are afraid to express their concerns: Because it is difficult in Finland to enter the teacher education programmes, student teachers are generally highly motivated, and they are assumed to have a calling to become a teacher (Lanas, 2017). Therefore, it takes a lot of courage to speak out against this cultural teacher story. This is an important finding because most research concerns teachers who leave the profession after a few years in the field (Lindqvist & Nordänger, 2016; Rots et al., 2012), and we know that some student teachers do not enter the field at all (Kelchtermans, 2017). There are many individual and contextual factors that contribute to teacher attrition (Schaefer et al., 2014). Failure to achieve expectations of being a good teacher may lead to doubting oneself and quitting the work (Kelchtermans, 2017). By focusing on student teachers’ experiences rather than the reasons why some teachers quit, we open up discussion about the connection between teacher attrition and the process of identity construction, which begins long before leaving (Lindqvist & Nordänger, 2016; Rots et al., 2012; Schaefer et al., 2014). Dealing with these issues in pre-service teacher education may help student teachers enhance their understanding of who they are as teachers and thus promote their professional growth.

The findings emphasise the importance of vulnerability as a significant emotional dimension of student teachers’ identities, showing them as vulnerable in relation to themselves, to others and to cultural teacher stories. It can also be asked whether the current environment in teacher education is problematic for some student teachers who struggle to see themselves as good enough, given the expectations related to cultural teacher stories. The discussion about cultural norms and expectations is largely absent from teacher education curricula and research, and student teachers can be somewhat left alone with these issues. Creating safe spaces for telling stories about oneself as a student teacher in a non-traditional way is advisable. Given that the student teachers in this research were open with their emotions, this research setting provided one such venue.
The findings as such cannot be generalised to all Finnish student teachers. However, by connecting the personal concerns in these individual stories to expectations reflected in teacher education and teaching as a profession, we have illustrated the meaningful dynamic between them. Our findings offer a point of reflection for teacher educators and researchers to use when approaching student teachers’ identity construction in their own contexts.

The article illustrates the meaning of self-portraits for research and teacher education; telling stories with self-portraits can be used to understand the emotional dimension of student teachers’ identities. We noticed that the self-portraits and stories were inseparable: As Moona and Hanna told their stories, self-portraits were a part of their lives – the very act of taking the photographs was important for their stories. Bringing photographs into narrative research is still understudied, but it seems to offer interesting possibilities for examining (student) teacher identity.

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