

Freedom and respect: Who are the Montessori school teachers? A teacher identity study in the Czech Republic

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This study investigates the professional identity of Montessori school teachers. The research was conducted using qualitative methodology, specifically in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers in Montessori schools located in Brno, Czech Republic. The study found that the professional identity of Montessori school teachers consists of two main components: (1) professional identity of the creator of the prepared environment and (2) professional identity of the individual guide. These identities are mainly influenced by factors such as respect for the child's development and freedom in the classroom, as well as their own personal beliefs and values. The results highlight the importance of respecting the individuality of each child and creating a supportive environment that allows for freedom and exploration within structure. This research sheds light on the unique characteristics and challenges faced by Montessori teachers, and provides insights into the development of their professional identity.

Introduction

The phenomenon of the professional identity of teachers became the subject of increased research interest at the turn of the millennium (Beijaard et al., 2000, 2004; Gee, 2000). It expands the examination of the identity and own self in the field of professionalisation of the teaching profession. Rodgers and Scott (2008) claimed that teachers should work on the awareness of their identity and the contexts, relationships and emotions that shape it. The current concept of identity is shared by four basic preconditions: (1) that identity depends on several forms creating social, cultural, political and historical forces within it and are created in various contexts; (2) that identity is created in relation to others and encompasses emotions; (3) that identity changes, is unstable and multiple; and (4) that identity also encompasses the construction and reconstruction of its meaning through stories over the course of time. (Rodgers & Scott, 2008, p. 733)

The professional identity of teachers is a fascinating research term the examination of which can provide an answer to a number of questions. Professional identity is closely associated with personal identity and is shaped by the teacher's life events. If we want to examine the professional identity of Montessori school teachers, we need to place it in a broader context based on existing research. A number of authors are engaged in the issue of Montessori schools, their characteristics and description of their educational principles. (Prucha, 2012; Rýdl, 2011)

Phenomenon of teacher professional identities: Social and personal influence

Despite the twenty-year trend of being engaged in the professional identity of teachers, its definition is still highly formative and ambiguous. If there is anything that authors agree

upon then it is the long-term nature and dynamics of shaping professional identity, just as the fact that identity changes continually and depends on different factors.

Švaříček (2009) explained professional identity as a dynamic and complex process of the dialectic reaction of the identity of an individual and profession of teacher. However, he places it in the context of personal and social identities which are closely connected with professional identity and even overlap according to some authors. Identity can be divided into social and individual (Pearce & Morrison, 2011). The social is defined by the working environment of teachers – the school (workplace), colleagues, requirements of management and the climate of the school. However, the individual is not understood as influenced internally but influenced by social and historical concepts or discourse of teaching. According to Beijaard (2000, p. 751) “teacher identity consists of three sub-identities: the teacher as an expert in his subject (focal point in the transmission of knowledge), educational expert (moral, ethical authority) and didactic expert.” Sub-identities are drawn from various contexts and relationships, these individual sub-identities can be interconnected and can create a so-called core professional identity. It is right for individual sub-identities to co-exist in harmony and not in conflict as is happening for example at the start of the professional career of graduates (sub-identities develop according to the context, situation and relationships).

Professional identity as a set of knowledge, competencies, actions, approaches and values which accurately represent what it means being a teacher, as seen by Bolívar et al. (2014). Teacher identity has a subjective dimension based on individual experiences and perception by the environment (Day, 2002). Allen, Rogers and Borowski (2016) support the framework of professional identity, which was also presented earlier by Gee (2000). In their study they relied on four factors of identity: (a) who I am from nature (N-Identity); (b) who I am on the basis of my position in society (S-Identity); (c) who I am based on how I am perceived by others (D-Identity); and (d) who I am thanks to connection with others (A-Identity). The close link between personal and professional identity according to Day (2002) is demonstrated by a series of studies carried out at the end of the last century. Changes in personal identity then influence changes in professional identity. According to Švaříček (2009) some researchers do not distinguish between professional and personal identity. He then expanded Beijaard’s (2000) definition: professional identity is not just the outcome of how a teacher regards him or herself as an educational, didactic and field expert, but particularly the outcome of how others regard a teacher as an expert. According to him identity is defined through self-perception in one’s own behaviour and through perception by others in their narration or behaviour.

In our research process our understanding of professional identity is similar to that of Bolívar et al. (2014, p. 108), i.e. that people shape their own identity by writing (or tell) their own story (life stories, narratives), which is not a collection of memories of the past. It can be said that we shape our own self (our identity) in the way we tell our story. So identity is shaped in interaction with experience through experience. This theory is also supported by Gee (2000): teacher identity is part of a lasting process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences – therefore identity can be conveyed by an answer to the

question: “Who am I at this moment?” Or also: “Who do I want to be?” Identity is not a fixed personal attribute, but a relational phenomenon and develops on the field of internal subjective relationships (Gee, 2000). Professional identity can also be conceptualised by interaction of these personal experiences with the teacher’s social, cultural and institutional environment. (Van den Berg, 2002; Tran & Nguyen, 2013) Identity is not a fixed entity, but more of something fluid, pliable, uncertain and unstable. Day (2002) also demonstrated his conclusions by following the phenomenon described as a *crisis of professional identity* of primary school teachers after the realisation of several reforms in education in the last twenty years in Spain (Bolívar & Domingo, 2016).

Professional identity is crucial in questions of motivation, the feeling of fulfilment, loyalty and confidence of teachers. With regard to the questions of research, we understand identity as something that changes continually and is dynamic (Beijaard, 2004), construed through a life event socially construed.

Montessori schools in the Czech education system

The philosophy of education of Maria Montessori has a strong tradition in some countries. It is different in schools with this program in the USA and different in European countries – the position in society and in state controlled education differs. In the Czech Republic in terms of the number of schools this is still an alternative on the boundary of the spectrum, but is the most established of all alternative schools. It is also the only alternative recognised by the Ministry of Education which is willing to fund Montessori type schools provided that the pupils are taught according to the state approved curriculum.

The ambition of Montessori schools in the Czech Republic is to meet the values of the school of Maria Montessori, i.e.: (a) children are intrinsically motivated, and they will succeed when their learning activities incorporate movement and opportunities for independence; (b) children will become self-disciplined when they are empowered to choose learning activities designed for specific developmental and learning needs; (c) each classroom is a respectful community of mixed-age learners; (d) classrooms and other spaces are learning environments prepared with curriculum and materials; (e) teachers are educated and certified as Montessori teachers; and (f) Parents understand and support the purposes of the school; they are partners. (Seldin & Epstein, 2003, s. 30) All or part of these values are realised in a small number of Czech Montessori schools.

Identity of an alternative school teacher

The professional identity of Montessori school teachers in Sweden has been described by Malm (2004). He saw the specific characteristics at the start of their professional career when teachers described how this method of teaching and organisation of the environment suited them. *“It is precisely what I lacked”*, stated one of the teachers (Malm, 2004, p. 402). The role of the teacher is also different – unlike a teacher at an ordinary school, she is not just committed to carrying out her profession, but must also be

committed to an alternative direction in which she works. The data also shows a feeling of devotion and emotional commitment in relation to her pupils.

Brown and Heck (2018) also attempted to examine the identity of an alternative school teacher. Research was carried out on three participants in education (two teachers and an administrator) at one Australian school, which is part of a network of church schools for "students with problems in life". Although this was not a Montessori school, it displayed a number of similarities: the educational context here was defined as a set of principles leading to the practice of mutual respect, participation in teaching, safety, legality and integrity. Identity was conceptualised here as a communal (community) shaping process, where teachers, other adults and students expressed and communicated their thoughts according to a shared set of principles and practice. Teachers in this school described the core of their perception of professional identity in interpersonal relationships (with pupils, colleagues, etc.) The professional identity of teachers of alternative education is multiple (contains multiple identities), derived from relationships with others in the educational environment (Brown & Heck, 2018). The study did not demonstrate marked differences between the identity of an ordinary school and alternative school teacher, but in the second mentioned school there was greater emphasis on the construction of identity through interpersonal relationships.

Method

The research takes a qualitative approach (Švaříček & Šedřová 2007). This approach was chosen with regard to the nature of the analysed problem and size of the research sample. The interview was used as a research tool to collect data. Data was subsequently coded and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

The aim of the research is to describe the professional identity of Montessori school teachers and determine in what way it is formulated. The research questions for this study were divided into four parts:

1. How does an alternative school teacher perceive his/her professional identity? With the sub-questions:
2. What moments of a professional career are associated with a teacher's professional identity?
3. What moments from personal life are associated with a teacher's professional identity?
4. What is a teacher's professional identity in relation to the social space of a class?

The research sample, research tool and data analysis tool were appropriately chosen in relation to the research questions.

Research sample

The research sample comprised eight teachers in alternative schools in Brno, Czech Republic (public and private), teaching according to the principles of Montessori

education (Průcha, 2012). The criteria for the specification of the research sample were determined as four of the following: (1) a teacher teaching at a Montessori school; (2) number of years of practising teaching not less than 5 and not exceeding 20; (3) the selected teacher is educated in the field of the alternative direction in which he/she works (Montessori AMI or local course); and (4) the school at which the research is taking place is in Brno. Gender, age, and other attained education were not defined as relevant for the needs of the research. Table 1 gives a summary overview of the participants using randomly selected pseudonyms.

Table 1: Research sample (N=8)

Name	Years of practice	School type
Andrea	5	Family
Irena	12	Rural
Kamila	6	City
Lenka	16	City
Milada	7	Family
Soňa	6	Rural
Šárka	16	City
Tamara	12	Housing estate

The selection of teachers was from four types of schools:

City school	A big school in a densely populated city quarter within a residential area based in an extensive complex with another public school. Provides teaching for about 200 pupils from the first to the ninth grade (ages 6 to 15).
Rural school	A smaller private school in a quiet quarter on the outskirts of the city with a big garden plot. It provides teaching for about 100 pupils from the first to the sixth grade (ages 6 to 11).
Housing estate school	A big public school in a quiet housing estate on the outskirts of the city based in an extensive complex with another public school. It has a big garden plot. It provides teaching for about 120 pupils from the first to the ninth grade (ages 6 to 15).
Family school	A smaller private school in a quiet quarter on the outskirts of the city with a garden plot. It provides teaching for about 50 pupils from the first to the sixth grade (ages 6 to 11).

Data collection

Data were collected from November 2020 to June 2021. An in-depth semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant (Švaříček & Šedřová, 2007; Hendl, 2008). This was a semi-structured interview with twenty-four open questions. The first four were directed at establishing a closer relationship with the participant and the remaining twenty were divided to correspond with the research questions. This research tool was firstly piloted. The pilot interview was conducted with a teacher who met the criteria for the

research sample and after this interview some questions were modified to be made clearer for the participant and better reflect the research questions. The pilot teacher is not included in the overall research sample. The data obtained using semi-structured interviews was subsequently transcribed (Hendl, 2008).

All the interviews conducted with the consent of all the participants were audio recorded for later transcription. The interviews were held in Czech language. Interview lasted on average for about 80 minutes. In total over 720 minutes of interview was recorded.

The research sample was compiled in two phases. In the first, schools were selected by the author to meet the criteria described above and a letter was addressed to the gatekeepers, in this case the school headmasters (Hendl, 2008) The letter provided a description of the requirements of the research and a request for the recommendation of some teachers from their schools. Given the inhomogeneity of the research sample and impossibility of simply contacting all the participants, the snowball method for selection was also used. (Miovský, 2003; Parker et al., 2019) The use of snowball sampling is considered by many authors to be the most common method used in qualitative research (Waters, 2015; Noy, 2008). It helps to reveal the hidden, difficult to reach participants (Atkinson & Flint, 2001) and is used in educational research, in sociology and others. The principle of the snowball sampling method is to gain new participants for the research solely through participants who have already enrolled in the research (Noy, 2008).

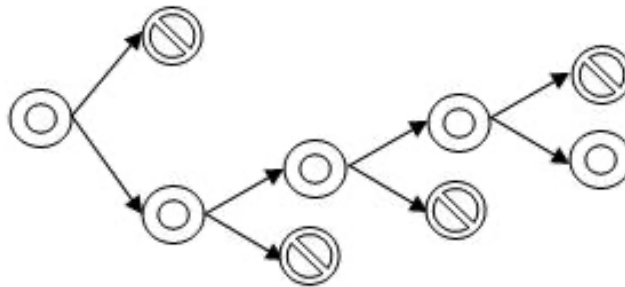


Figure 1: The snowball sampling method

When compiling the research sample the researcher as a teacher had to draw on contacts who were available to him. Teacher 0, who is not included in the list of participants (although she met the given criteria) was used as the pilot research respondent. Teacher 0 had been engaged in alternative education in the past and in the interview with her she mentioned other names of teachers who could agree to participate in the research. The study author always addressed the individual new contacts and asked them to participate in the research. Some agreed while others did not. This procedure corresponds to exponential discriminative sampling (Anieting & Mosugu, 2017) and is illustrated in Figure 1. Unlike linear sampling and exponential non-discriminative sampling, it assumes that during the process the researcher will assess that some participants are not suitable for the research sample or will refuse after being selected to continue to participate in the research. Given the ongoing selection and discussion with every further participant of the selection of the next who must meet certain criteria, in this case there were four cases

(n=4), when participants declined to participate when contacted. The selected method helped to compile the research sample from four different schools. At each school there were teachers who met the predefined criteria and were willing to participate in the research.

The size of the research sample was originally intended to be ten teachers. However, given the continuous data analysis during the interviews with further participants, the expansion of the research sample ended at eight. The reason was the frequency of some recurring themes.

Data analysis

Open coding (Saldaña, 2021; Vanover et al., 2021) in the *MAXQDA* software was used to analyse the interview data. The data were subsequently analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which focuses on a detailed examination of a person's lived experiences. IPA allows as much as possible for the experience to be expressed in the informant's own terms, as this gives it its own meaning (Smith et al. 2009).

Findings

The study describes the processing of shaping the professional identity of a Montessori school teacher on phenomena emerging from data. The product of the shaping process, actual professional identity, is then presented in two main phenomena: the professional identity of the creator of the prepared environment, and professional identity of the individual guide.

Process of creating a Montessori teacher professional identity

The process of creating a teacher identity is a long one and influenced by different factors. Research has shown that a Montessori school teacher professional identity is primarily influenced by several factors: (a) approach to the education of one's own children; (b) personal pupil experience; and (c) definition with regard to the unknown.

a. Education of one's own children

When thinking about the preparation of an educational path for one's own child, a broader need appears in the teacher's professional identity to think about the upbringing of children and the reasoning changes about this issue. Milada recalled how the difficulty of the upbringing one's own children surprised her:

It probably seemed a challenge to me, especially when the children were small, so I said it is impossible for people to be willing to have children when it is such hard work with these children, isn't it!

For teacher Kamila the main thing was to choose an education for her daughter which would make sense to her. When they went to have a look in the Montessori school nearby where her daughter could try out to see what the school was like, she saw that she liked

the environment. She herself learned about the Montessori system so she could apply the same principles and methods in the upbringing that the daughter was accustomed to in nursery school. It seemed to her, as an observer, that the Montessori environment was also good for the other children. She admired the peace and independence with which the three and four-year-old children worked:

Yes, he carries something, spills it, but there is no crying, nothing such as please teacher, I don't know, nothing, just goes for a cloth because he knows exactly which one to take, he wipes and cleans up, and continues with his work, or goes on to do what he wants to do.

Andrea confirmed that she had the same experience with her son, claiming that he introduced her to Montessori education. During his upbringing she looked for ways to explain things to her son, how to communicate with him, and found support at the Montessori school where she initially did not want to enrol him, but the natural way in which he learned new things and the organisation of the environment finally convinced her. Soňa had a similar experience. She had the opportunity of taking a look inside a Montessori school when working in Germany – she looked after small children in a foreign family who attended such a school. The opportunity of taking a look inside such a school – even if not directly thanks to one's own child – showed her the way on a professional level. Lenka was the only one with experience of different alternative trends in education before choosing a school for her children. She finally enrolled them in a Dalton type of school, but she was also familiar with the Waldorf method of education.

b. Personal pupil experience

Part of the process of creating one's own professional identity is a definition with regard to one's own experience from years of being a pupil. Whether this is the method of teaching, communication with pupils, approach to resolving conflicts or the personality traits of the teacher, all are conveyed in the subsequent professional identity of the Montessori teacher. The dominating traits of teachers which the respondents described as being inspirational were respect to a pupil's personality (above all in communication), trust, partnership (knowledge of the pupil's needs), adaptability to individual situations and responding to them, kindness (approach to pupils), admitting mistakes (admitting mistakes and working with an error), consistency (in relation to opinions which she upholds), reliability (if she tells pupils something then she maintains it) or creativity (how to make a teaching class different) and empathy. None of the respondents underlined in their experience as a teacher's virtue the ability to convey knowledge to pupils, all praised the social dimension of the work of teachers. The negative experience which the respondents felt the need to define was dominated by impersonal behaviour of teachers, injustice (in appraisal when testing knowledge, when resolving conflicts among pupils) or physical punishment. This experience was transferred to their professional identity in the form of the way of behaviour which they would not like to repeat in their practice.

c. Definition with regard to the unknown

The specific nature is then brought to the Montessori teacher's professional identity of the tendency of definition with regard to other general types of schools, experienced either

only from the point of view of the pupil, during practice at a university, or in exceptional cases very briefly from the point of view of the teacher. For the purposes of this study we describe this phenomenon collectively as (c) *definition with regard to the unknown*. Although the study does not seek to compare education systems, teachers in their responses did not avoid making a comparison. However, in many ways their responses are distorted by their view of very old experiences. They often used the example of what they experienced as a pupil several decades ago and did not take into account the fact that education develops and many of their examples no longer usually apply to schools (physical punishment, humiliation, etc.). Some of them also created their idea of general public education from experiences taken from practices at the university from which they graduated, with teachers whose work and actions were a deterring example. This was subjective experience from practices which they had during their studies many years before going into teaching. However, this also led to the realisation of choosing the alternative - a Montessori direction.

Professional identity of the creator of the prepared environment

One of the main pillars of the idea of Montessori education is an environment prepared for the education of pupils (Seldin & Epstein, 2003) In theory the prepared environment works like a well organised classroom and the aids in it or a suitably adapted curriculum. However the interviews with teachers speak of a far broader concept of what the prepared environment actually means to them.

Firstly there is the traditional concept of the prepared environment in the true sense of the word, i.e. textbooks and aids. The specific nature of Montessori aids for teaching arithmetic, writing and other subjects (normally in the lower two three years in the environment of the Czech Republic, i.e. the 1st to 6th grades of primary, the age of pupils is about 6-12 years) is evident at first sight in each class. Each aid requires quality didactic preparation by the teacher for work with the children. Andrea, Milada, Soňa, Irena and Tamara would like to work well with aids. They also mentioned quality work with them as a great challenge and also realised their importance and their sense, therefore they constantly tried to improve work with them so that during teaching they could offer pupils the best prepared teaching environment. Certified Montessori educational courses helped them a lot in the preparation for work with the aids. Irena also mentioned the benefits of the prepared environment:

What I still greatly demand of myself is to be prepared for the day. This does not mean spending hours and nights in preparation, because when you have a prepared environment there is no need to sit up at nights. This is what the Montessori environment offers.

Another aspect of a prepared environment as perceived by the teachers in our research is the clear declaration about requirements of the pupils. This is setting long-term and short-term teaching goals arising from the curriculum and support in setting individual goals just as support of the pupils to fulfil them. Pupils are presented with teaching goals in weekly or monthly plans and then they assess their progress and their partial fulfilment. Soňa

added that in setting her own goals with pupils they often begin in cooperation with parents when at personal tripartite meetings pupils sign a binding endeavour to fulfil their goals, like a contract between those being educated and the educator. Irena claimed that a prepared environment and setting of teaching goals makes it possible to implement an education process without external motivation and supports the pupils' interest in learning.

Teachers also regarded the prepared environment as a safe environment. This means setting processes to ensure suitable conditions for the process of education as well as pupil well-being. Irena believed that pupils come from the safety of home to the safety of the school classroom.

It is important to me that they feel good and safe here and there is a lot of talk about safety, a lot is being written and spoken about it – but it really is not a cliché, it is important for these children. Because I know how children behave who feel unsafe, in danger.

Lenka claimed that a secure and safe environment is the basic requirement of the teacher:

I don't just think that there is no bullying, and I think this in the sense of how everyone actually feels safe and good in the classroom or the one that is last on the social ladder in this classroom so this is what the work can then be like. Because the moment that there is something not right there it is projected into the focus on the specific task, on the specific task that they are to concentrate or we are to jointly concentrate on.

Tamara agreed with Lenka: if there is discomfort in the classroom it affects everyone's work. The data show that an integral part of the prepared environment seen as a safe environment is also the teacher's respect for the pupils' needs. Some of the teachers in this research completed courses on nonviolent communication or respectful approaches, others agree with the values of these approaches. The absence of an authoritarian approach by a teacher, unravelling any problems at the level of own needs and support in the description of own needs and emotions is the domain of the identity of the creator of the prepared environment. Irena supported her own pupils in naming her own needs the moment this is necessary.

The final aspect of the prepared environment which corresponds with the setting of Montessori education is work in mixed-age groups. In the Czech environment legislation allows the creation of mixed classes in lower grades (1st to 3rd and 4th to 5th), unfortunately the second level (6th to 9th grade) cannot be conceived this way. However, many schools provide teaching of mixed groups even in older grades, but in terms of administration these must be seen as divided grades. Mixed-age groups make it possible for teachers from the research to organise parallel activities for different levels of pupils and above all allows them the support of tiered teaching, which they like and often utilise. They see the greatest benefit in taking on the competence to resolve problems and communicative competency. More experienced pupils who have already mastered the problems, use their own words and their own thinking to explain a problem to pupils who have no such experience of it as yet. The benefits are clear: a less experienced pupil learns

everything he/she needs through means of communication that are his/her own from a more experienced pupil. The more experienced pupil learns the skill of explaining a mastered subject or problem to somebody using his/her own words.

Professional identity of the individual guide

The approach to pupils at an individual level, respecting their needs in the education process and allowing them sufficient personal freedom at a speed, activity or frequency of their own education processes, is the common domain of all teachers included in the research. They themselves did not think of themselves as teachers, but more as guides along the path of pupil knowledge. *Identity of the individual guide* is represented as (a) individualisation in the teaching process in relation to pupils; and (b) understanding freedom and its position in the education process.

a. Individualisation in the education process

This is described by Šárka who said that during her classes she does not talk to a crowd, she talks individually to individuals and adapts her teaching as such. She tries to understand pupils in a comprehensive way with all their needs, social background and conditions for home learning: *“What the pupil has at home will obviously influence his/her behaviour and the way he/she behaves will influence how much he/she learns.”* She does not even write a test at one time for all the pupils – the moment they reach a certain point and she thinks they know the subject they will then be tested by her. Andrea agreed with her – she tries to be a guide who can assume when the pupil needs to take the next step or when he/she needs to take a step back in his/her education process. Like a feeling that fulfils her is how Lenka described the already similar approach in her practice. However, she saw herself as a teacher and individualisation is something which makes sense to her. Tamara in a dialogue with pupils looks for ways of how to prepare challenges for them in the education process – often individually tied to their merits, hobbies and interests. Irena lets pupils progress at their own speed, because experience shows her that although a pupil does not exactly meet the outputs set by the curriculum at a certain time, he/she will meet them in future. So she leaves it to the pupils to how far they want to develop, she prepares a stimulating environment so that they can meet higher outputs – which is the experience she often has. Soňa then added another important dimension of individualisation – it is not normally common in a Montessori school for pupils to usually perform one activity all at once at the same time. So this is not just individualisation at a level related to the pupil as an individual, but to pupils as a group. So it is individualisation of the education process in relation (a) to an individual and in relation (b) to a group. Likewise Šárka drew attention to the fact that the perception of the heterogeneity of a group is the fundamental precondition to individualisation in relation to an individual. Milada then added that she actively looks for a way to reach children, she does not try to write them off – she looks for new approaches and methods and how to work with them.

b. Understanding and position of freedom in the education process

This is an important part of the identity of the individual guide. It is depicted in relation to the educator and in relation to the educated pupil and is closely associated with his/her understanding of time (when individual things occur), and his/her understanding of the

space of the classroom (where and how individual things occur). All teachers in this research work in schools where a teaching unit does not last a certain limiting time, there is no school bell announcing a break or the start of the next class, and time passes in a different way. Andrea, Milada and Soňa saw great freedom in this. All also agreed that they are not tied in their work by uniform teaching materials or time thematic teaching plans. For Milada it is important that children “*learn things in a time when they are able to*” and she can carry out activities with children when “*they need it and not us (the teachers)*”. She also feels really free in what she can do with pupils – she can adapt the teaching to the current mood of the class and continue working according to this. Soňa described the same experience: she considered it fundamental to have the freedom to classify activities, adapt the different duration of activities according to the current mood of the class atmosphere or perhaps only to the individuals. Freedom in relation to the social space of the classroom was also supported by the teachers in the organisation of individual activities. When working with a mixed-aged group (teaching groups are divided according to age always together by three grades), it is standard practice for them to divide activities of the pupils by groups. While the teacher is devoted to one group, the other pupils know which activities they are to work on individually and from this menu they can freely choose the activity at their discretion. After a certain time the groups are re-organised and the teacher works with different pupils. This is virtually how the whole day passes, there are very few joint activities with the whole class when a pupil would not be able to freely influence with his own participation. Out of interest, there is also the possibility that some pupils from the lower grades will volunteer to participate in activities for the upper grades, just as it is possible to recall and revise a subject with group work with a lower grade.

Discussion and conclusion

The professional identity of teachers became a subject of research inquiry at the turn of the millennium (Beijaard et al., 2000, 2004; Gee, 2000). It extended the exploration of identity and self in the area of professionalisation of the teaching profession. Rodgers and Scott (2008) argued that teachers should work to become aware of their identities and the contexts, relationships and emotions that shape them. For our research, we understand identity as ever-changing, dynamic (Beijaard, 2004), constructed through life events, and socially constructed. All the teachers in our research described their development and the ongoing formation of their professional identity. Research demonstrates certain similarities in the process of forming the professional identity of a regular school teacher and a Montessori school teacher. One of the main ones is the interference of the teacher's personal, social and professional identities. (Day, 2002; Lamote & Engels, 2010; Pearce & Morrison, 2011; Švaříček, 2009, 2011) In our research, it is best demonstrated by the birth of one's own child, looking for an appropriate education for them and defining oneself towards the unknown, i.e. the formation of identity through the experience of the parent and through the experience of the student.

Beijaard's theory (2000, p. 751) of three sub-identities: *teacher expert in his subject, pedagogical expert and didactic expert*, in the case of a Montessori school teacher, is primarily manifested in sub-identities didactic and pedagogical expert. The teachers described working with aids

and the prepared environment, so they were aware of their responsibility as didactics, but they emphasised their sub-identity as a pedagogical expert much more. Based on their own experience, they conveyed moral values and attitudes to pupils through building a safe environment. These survey conclusions can be compared with the studies of Malm (2004) and Brown & Heck (2018), which described the specifics of the professional identity of teachers of alternative schools in placing greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships, a sense of care and emotional commitment in relation to students. Similarity in the conclusions can also be found in the feeling of belonging to the school in which the teacher works and to the philosophy of the alternative direction that is implemented at the school (Malm, 2004, p. 402). New findings are then brought by this study in the specification of phenomena that are connected with the professional identity of a Montessori school teacher. As described above, *the professional identity of the creator of the prepared environment* and *the professional identity of the individual guide* differ in many aspects, but they are united by the axes of respect and freedom that permeate both identities.

The professional identity of the individual guide is marked by respect for pupils as individuals with their own needs, abilities and goals. This identity is characterised by the personal approach to each pupil, which leads to a better understanding of their situation and makes it possible to create a relationship based on trust. For Milada it was important that children “*learn things in a time when they are able to*” and she can carry out activities with children when “*they need it and not us “the teachers”*” This approach results in the teacher being flexible and adapting her teaching to the specific needs and abilities of each pupil.

The professional identity of the prepared environment focuses on creating a safe and pleasant teaching environment. This identity is characterised by respect to pupils and their needs which leads to the creation of an environment, which supports their development and learning. As teacher Lenka claimed:

Because the moment that there is something not right there it is projected into the focus on the specific task, on the specific task that they are to concentrate or we are to jointly concentrate on.

This identity requires the teacher to be able to create an environment, which allows pupils to be free and creative, but also maintain clear rules and expectations.

Within our research approach, we understand professional identity similarly to Bolívar et al. (2014, p. 108), i.e. that people shape their identity by telling a story about themselves that is not just a set of memories from the past. The way a person retells them gives them meaning for his/her life. Based on this approach, the appropriate methodology was chosen - qualitative inquiry, in-depth interviews and data analysis using IPA, where one's own experience and statements play a major role in compiling the results. Certain limits of the approach can be found in a specific way of selecting the research sample. Due to the small number of Montessori schools in the research region, and the selection of the research sample using snowball sampling, those teachers who do not perceive their affiliation with an alternative philosophy (Malm, 2004) as important could have been

excluded from the research sample. Also the large number of semi-structured questions led in some cases to repetitiveness in the responses.

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Appendix: Interview schedule

1. Can you introduce yourself - state your age and education?
2. How long have you been working at this school?
3. What is your previous professional experience?
4. What was your career path to the alternative school?
5. What does teaching at this school mean to you?
6. What makes your school different from other schools for you?
7. What is your answer to the question: What kind of teacher am I right now?
8. What is your answer to the question: What kind of teacher would I like to be?
9. Who is the ideal teacher for me at an alternative/non-mainstream school?
10. How do your colleagues/headmaster perceive you? How would you like to be seen?
11. How do the students perceive you? How would you like to be perceived?
12. How do your parents perceive you? How would you like to be perceived?

13. If you were to draw a picture of yourself at this school (and the previous one), how would the picture be different?. Being a teacher at this school is like... because....
(*metaphor*)
14. What is expected of the teachers at this school? (from the position of parents, pupils, teachers).
15. What is a challenge for you? What changes have you seen since starting this school until now?
16. What (or who) made you decide to become a teacher?
17. When did you become interested in alternative/non-mainstream pedagogy?
18. What made you decide to teach at different (alternative) school? Can you describe the reasons why you went to teach at different/alternative school?
19. How did your previous school influence/shape you?
20. Would you choose a moment from your personal life that influenced you in your future work as a teacher?
21. Would you choose a moment from your pupil/student life that influenced you in your future work as a teacher?
22. Who was your favorite teacher in elementary school? What were his or her virtues?
23. Who was your favorite teacher at secondary school? What were his or her virtues?
24. Which teacher bothered you the most and why?

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