Qualitative Analysis of the Professional Identity of Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

The professional teaching identity is a construct in continuous evolution. The university stage is the period in which pre-service teachers come into contact with the field in which they will later develop their professional practice. This article focuses its analysis on objectives such as the impact of the vocation on the professional teaching identity and the influence that the environment exerts on the professional identity of future teachers. For this, a qualitative investigation has been carried out, in which 23 students of the Infant Education degree have been interviewed. The content analysis and speech analysis have been carried out through the Nvivo 12 Plus software. which provided clues that have allowed examining the professional identity of Early Childhood Education teachers. Results corroborate the incidence of aspects such as experiences in the first years of life and the formation of attitudes in relation to others in the formation of the teaching vocation. As well as other stories such as the student's personality, the stimulation of the environment or the existence of teachers with good practice in the construction of identity in aspiring teachers. The relevance of the university stage in the initial training in the profession is highlighted, especially the realization of practices in schools (practicum) as critical aspects in the identity construction of the participants, impacting on their professional decision, in the construction of their conception of education and teaching in addition to influencing a prospective view of the teacher who wishes to become.

Keywords*: Professional Identity; Early Childhood Teachers; pre-service teachers; vocation; teacher development.*

Introduction

Providing a specific definition of teacher professional identity is a complex task, as it involves a wide variety of issues ranging from initial training to experiences that directly affect teachers' professional development, with their identity undergoing changes throughout their lives (Cantón & Tardif, 2018). Negotiation processes, psychosocial aspects, the need to belong or the context are some of the factors which have to be analysed in this definition (Bjorklund & Daly, 2021). Specifically to the professional teaching identity, the literature has identified a certain degree of agreement in pointing out the

importance of personal and social factors, as well as the context in which one works. This gives rise to the construction of the collective professional identity (Cortés et al., 2015), in which ideological positions on the act of teaching, the instructional designs that are derived and the feedback received from the context in which the professional performance is developed are merged (Santamaría-Cárdaba et al., 2018).

Although the origin of professional identity is shaped before the pre-university stage, a possible definition could be that professional identity is understood as the set of personal and professional experiences and events that make a single person unique and differentiate him/her from the rest (Jaramillo et al., 2020). Professional identity is elaborated with the element of experience as a key factor. In the context of teaching, we find that the professional identity of education teachers is linked to their mission to educate. It takes into account the context, the age of the students and the area of knowledge, which modifies the teacher's work performance as a result of the experiences they have lived (Pereira et al., 2015). Given this, the teachers' professional identity will be nurtured and developed by the number of experiences that teachers may have each year with their colleagues and students.

In the case of early childhood education, the teachers' professional identity assumes the importance that this educational stage has for the development and configuration of pupils. The early education period is a key stage for acquiring learning that will mark the first years and development of the child's education. The teacher's professional identity devoted to the pre-school stage is built by pedagogical practice together with certain actions that enable the educator to feel integrated in the classroom, while feeling a sense of stability in their work.

The vocation of an early childhood teacher becomes a decisive element. Mórtola and Lavalletto (2018) explain that vocation and professional choice are deeply linked in the discourses enunciated by future early childhood teachers when they state their motivations and

reasons why they have entered the early childhood education degree. Therefore, vocation is an element that provides the motivation, responsibility and strength that early childhood teachers need to face all the challenges and experiences they may receive from their profession. Most early childhood teachers are teachers by vocation, choosing early childhood education as their life profession, while this is not the case for teachers from other educational stages (Romero-Sánchez et al., 2020). In contrast to other educational levels, the motivation to pursue other educational fields may emerge later in life.

Another determining aspect in the configuration of identity is the context where the individual experiences their first approaches to their professional practice (García-Martínez & Tadeu, 2018). Depending on what these contexts are like and the educational agents they have interacted with throughout their life history, their professional profile will be shaped. For this reason, it is important to delve into the narratives of those who are starting a professional career in the world of teaching, identifying their motivations, expectations and misconceptions about education, in order to analyse the real impact of their first experiences in the world of education and to assess the influence they exert. To do this, it is necessary to get pre-service teachers to establish a dialogue with themselves, in which they verbalise these turning points. According to Rivas (2014), students tend to focus on four main aspects when they talk about their academic experience (p. 489): "The idealisation of the teacher, school routines, assessment as a continuous practice and some concept of authority, order and discipline".

From these focal points of interest, it is possible to determine the most influential factors in the construction of teachers' identities. There is also a certain relationship between the teaching model received and the epistemological conceptions and vision of teaching of preservice teachers. In some cases, there is a tendency towards replication and modelling in aspects related to assessment, authority or

discipline, while in others, practices contradictory to those inherited are developed.

Bearing all this in mind, the general objective is identified with "Analysing the professional teaching identity of future Early Childhood Education teachers". Similarly, the following research questions are to be answered:

☐ What factors influence the configuration of the professional identity of early childhood teachers?

☐ What is the impact of vocation on professional teaching identity?

Method

This qualitative study aims to analyse in depth the key factors involved in shaping the professional identity of future early childhood teachers through interviews.

Sample

The participants in this study are 23 students enrolled in the final year of the Early Childhood Education degree at the University of Jaén (Spain). Their ages are between 21 and 27 years old. The inclusion criteria applied was that they had undertaken their Practicum I. This is because it is assumed that professional identity is developed and shaped once the person enters the world of work.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was the semi-structured interview. The interview script was based on the literature on teacher professional identity. Specifically, five broad categories were identified to examine the participants' professional identity: vocation, environmental stimulation, modelling, personality and the teacher's influence at compulsory stages. Below is Table 1, which provides a definition of each of the categories.

Table 1. *Categories.*

Category	Definition
Vocation	Personal interest and motivation to become a teacher.
Environmental stimulation	Family, friends and close friends support them in their decision to become a teacher.
Modelling	Someone close to them is involved in teaching.
Personality	Set of characteristics, aptitudes and attitudes that justify their behaviour and their way of interpreting their surroundings.
Teacher's influence at compulsory stages	Person or persons who have taught him/her and have made an impact on him/her, awakening his/her interest in teaching. They can also have the opposite effect.
Social prestige	The value that society places on the Early Childhood Education degree and its profession.
Decision-Making Moment to become a teacher	An important event in the person's life that prompted him/her to decide to become a teacher. It does not only cover a specific stage such as childhood, adolescence or puberty. It may also be an important event.
Influence of university professors	University professor(s) who have taught him/her and have made an impact on him/her, keeping him/her interested in teaching. They can also have the opposite effect.
Evaluation of the Degree + Practicum	Opinion expressed by trainee Early Childhood Education teachers about their degree studies on aspects such as the programme of studies, the subjects and the training received.

Procedure

First, an initial contact was made with all potential research participants. At this meeting, we explained to them what the research consisted of and their role in the research, and whether they wished to participate. After accepting the invitation to participate, they signed the informed consent form. During the interviews and data processing, the ethical criteria established in the Helsinki Convention (WMA, 2009) were taken into account, guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

For the analysis of the in-depth interviews, Nvivo 12 Plus software was used. Based on a content analysis, the main categories and nodes

were identified, establishing relationships between them. Additionally, the discourse analysis is also presented.

Results

The twenty-three interviews with the future Early Childhood teachers shed light on all the aspects and factors that had shaped their professional identity.

Content analysis

After calculating the frequencies of the categories, the main themes of the participants' discourses are delimited. Subsequently, their content is analysed. Firstly, a figure is presented that displays the supremacy of some categories over others in the task of analysing the professional teaching identity of the 23 participants.

As can be seen in Figure 1, there is a predominance of vocation, the teachers' influence in the compulsory stages and the environment's stimulation in the construction of the professional teaching identity of the aspiring Early Childhood Education teachers. According to their perspective, it is their desire to become a teacher from an early age, the fact of having had "good teachers" and the continuous support they have received from their environment, which has most influenced them to become teachers. In turn, the degree and especially the internships have further shaped their views on education and influenced the way they are.
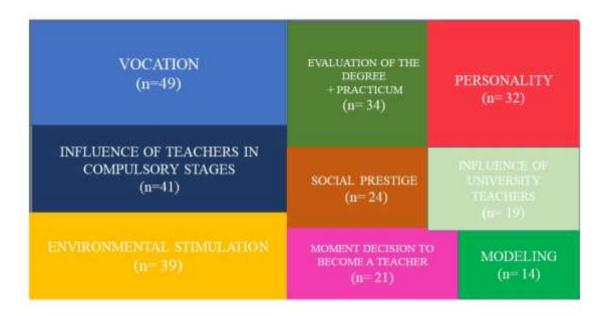

Figure 1. *Hierarchy of the categories analysed according to their frequency.*

It is also observed that university teachers and modelling, i.e. the existence of an education professional in their close circle, do not influence their professional identity so much.

Figure 2 below shows the main themes found in each of the categories, with a view to a more in-depth analysis of the content of the categories.
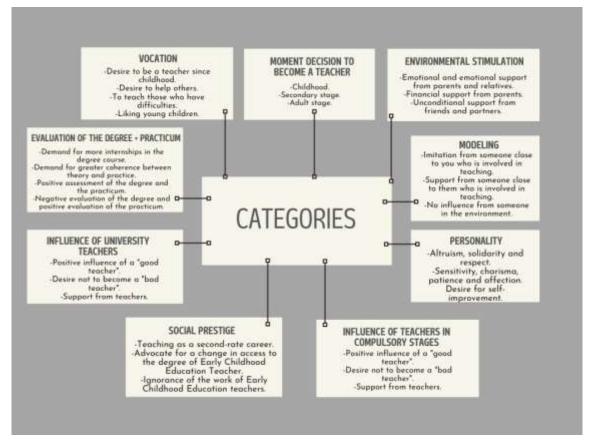
Figure 2. *Main dimensions of the categories analysed.*

Once the main themes of each of the categories identified for examining the professional identity of future Early Childhood Education teachers have been delimited, we proceed to their analysis.

Vocation

With regard to vocation, four clearly delimited themes have been identified. Firstly, the desire to become an early childhood teacher stands out. Most of the participants stated that their vocation arose in their early years, with "being a teacher" with their toys or other children becoming one of their favourite games. Another theme, clearly identified, was their interest to help others, volunteering or giving to others. Teaching is undoubtedly a profession in which helping others to learn constitutes its main essence. Related to this, the topic of helping those in difficulty has also surfaced. Attention to diversity is very apparent in its vocation. It is not only about teaching children who do not show difficulties in their learning, but it is particularly relevant for those who, for different reasons, need more support in order to

learn. The aspect of vocation is fundamental for the Early Childhood teacher. Otherwise, this profession becomes a continuous punishment aimed at psychological wear and tear, which has a negative impact on the profession.

Environmental stimulation

All participants stated that they received the necessary motivation and support from their family and friends. In fact, three clearly delimited themes emerged in this category: Emotional support from parents and relatives, Financial support from parents, and Unconditional support from friends and partners. The pre-service teachers stated that their parents had not only encouraged them to achieve their goal of becoming a teacher, but had also, in many cases, made great financial efforts to help them achieve it. In turn, they acknowledged that parents have been their main support when they felt discouraged. Similarly, friends have become an important agent in both career choice and career development. The fact that many of their friends and, in some cases, partners are in the

field of education, has made them feel supported throughout the whole process.

Modelling

In terms of the modelling dimension, three categories have been identified: "Imitation from someone close to them who is involved in teaching", "Support from someone close to them who is involved in teaching" and "No influence from someone in the environment". Contrary to the pre-established research design, it was found that having a close relative who was involved in teaching did not determine the participants' career choice. Beyond finding a role model in them, the participants acknowledged that their decision was subject to their vocation or to teachers who had a positive or negative influence on them.

Personality

Regarding the Personality dimension, three categories have been identified. Thus, "Altruism", "solidarity" and "respect", "sensitivity", "charisma", "patience" and "desire to improve" stand out. Regarding the first category, they were aware about the importance of respect for differences and attention to diversity as essential elements for any education professional, which reflected the sensitivity they had towards inclusion. In addition, many said that they had worked as monitors, nannies or carers with young family members or other children. This experience had shown them to have high levels of patience and charisma with children. Finally, many of those interviewed acknowledged that another of their most defining characteristics is their desire to improve themselves day by day. They are not conformists; on the contrary, they are clear about the important work (and responsibility) that accompanies early childhood teachers and are willing to accept these challenges.

Influences of teachers from compulsory education stages

Most of the participants say that some of the teachers they have had at lower educational stages have had a positive influence on their choice. In fact, in addition to remembering them with affection, they affirm that the mark they left on them was a determining factor in their choice of degree. Moreover, through these examples, participants affirm that they are clear about what kind of teacher they want to be in the future and they long to become a " teacher remembered and revered" by their pupils. Surprisingly, two of the participants acknowledge that their interest in teaching was sparked when they had bad experiences with teachers in compulsory education and wanted to become good teachers in order not to reproduce patterns of bad teaching practice.

Social prestige

The social prestige inherent in the teaching degree, or rather the lack of it, is another category analysed. All participants reflected feelings of regret when talking about society's generalised conception of teaching. They all affirm that education is the powerhouse of society and that, paradoxically, it is the profession most discredited by society. Testimonies such as "teaching is the only profession that trains the rest" were reiterated by all participants. Despite being clear about the importance of the degree they are studying, all the participants recognised that they had been ridiculed for their choice of profession by their classmates.

However, what really bothered most of them was the access to the degree. For them, the first thing that should be done to put the teaching profession in its rightful place is to raise the cut-off mark to a "remarkable" or "outstanding", putting it on a par with other essential professions such as medicine. In addition, they stress the marked vocational nature of the Early Childhood Education teacher, an aspect that leads them to consider an interview or another type of test in addition to the selectivity test to profile and restrict access to those who enrol in the degree, after not having entered the degree they wanted to study at first.

Decision time to become an early childhood teacher

Three key themes or moments were identified in this category. Thus, childhood, secondary school and adulthood stand out. Precisely, the

vocational nature of the teaching profession has led many of them to state that their decision dates back to childhood. However, students were also interviewed whose interest in teaching came later, specifically in secondary school. Finally, one participant revealed that teaching was an idea that had always been in her head but that she did not have a clear idea until she had been in the world of work for a while and returned to study after a few years. At that point, she enrolled in an advanced infant education course and obtained excellent grades. She had never thought about studying a degree because she did not feel capable of doing it, but, at that moment, she decided to do it and nowadays she says that it is the best decision she has ever made.

Evaluation of the degree and the practicum

This study has identified two categories related to this critical stage: the influence of the university teaching staff and the assessment of the degree and practicum. With regard to the first, there was unanimity in affirming that a large part of the university teaching staff have encouraged students to continue their training, providing them with facilities in the subjects and explaining useful content for their subsequent professional performance. However, all of them say that they have also been unfortunate to encounter unmotivated teachers, who went to give their classes and did not care whether they had understood the subject or not. With regard to the assessment of the degree and the practicum, the participants stated that there is often no clear connection between theory and practice in some subjects. Regarding the assessment of the curriculum, they consider that there are "filler" subjects, while important subjects such as Didactics, Psychology or Disorders should be studied in greater depth. At the same time, there was unanimity in pointing to the practicum as the best subjects of the degree, as all of them consider that this is where they have really learned and have been able to check "their worth as teachers".

Discourse analysis

The discourse analysis was inspired by the logical sequence described by Coulthard (1985). After having examined the main thematic cores contained in each of the pre-established categories, some contributions from the discourses of the research participants should be pointed out.

First of all, the category vocation was supported by four thematic pillars: the desire to be a teacher since childhood, the desire to help others, teaching those who have difficulties and enjoying young children. The following are excerpts from the interviews, which reflect these ideas.

"Since I was a child I have always played at being a teacher, I had my own blackboard in my toy room, it is a vocation" (Ariadna, 25).

"In my future teaching job I would like to be a teacher able to respond to all the needs of my students, that they learn by playing, because we as teachers should not forget that they are children from 3-6 years old, etc" (Alberto, 25).

"I love children and I have known that I wanted to be a teacher since I can remember, I have never changed my mind throughout my life, it has always been the same to become a teacher" (Elvira, 24). (Elvira, 24)

Regarding environmental stimulation, all participants reported feeling supported by their parents, as well as by their friends and partners. Moreover, they continually alluded to the crucial role they played in their career choice, as well as in their professional development and growth throughout their time at university. The following excerpts reinforce these points:

"When my friends and family heard about my career choice they supported me as they knew it was the only thing I liked to do and what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Both of them made me feel very happy, this made me feel more self-confident. (Esperanza, 21)

"My parents have always supported me, and it is something I am very grateful for and always will be, in fact, they have also done a great job

and made a great economic effort to make me be here today. (Fernando, 23)

In terms of modelling, it has been found that the existence of family members dedicated to the field of education is not a determining factor in the choice of the early childhood education degree, as reflected in the following testimonies:

"Currently I can say that my brother, who graduated as a teacher, but not because of him I decided to take this degree, because it is what I have always wanted since I was a little girl". (Lourdes, 25)

"In the field of teaching, I have my cousin who has a degree in Physical Education but my choice was determined by my vocation, not because she studied teaching before" (Vanessa, 22).

Personality is one of the most influential factors in the professional identity of any person, regardless of the field in which they work. Based on the results obtained, it seems that it is possible to establish a professional profile that is likely to be a teacher, whose personal characteristics revolve around solidarity, respect, altruism, charisma, patience, affection and the desire to improve. Below are some fragments that give strength to these statements:

"When I finished the Baccalaureate, I set out on the road to the university entrance exams, where I failed in June and I had a very bad time emotionally, as everyone around me had passed. I didn't give up and I tried again in September, I managed to pass and I continued on my way as a student" (Esperanza, 21).

"From the minute I entered, I went with the clear idea that after this I would have to take a competitive examination, which I would be up against thousands of people who were equally or better equipped than me in their studies and which would make it very difficult for me to work as a teacher, but even so, I knew that this was my job" (Fernando, 23).

Regarding the influence of teachers at compulsory stages, it was found that most of the participants found a role model in one or more of the teachers who taught them at these levels. On the other hand, we also found participants whose "bad experiences with teachers" acted as a driving force for them to become early childhood teachers, as shown below:

"I also think that my Early Childhood Education teachers are one of the reasons why I wanted to become a teacher, as they left their mark on me and made me aware of how important it is to be taught with love at this fundamental stage". (Alberto, 25)

"The atmosphere at the school was similar to a family, the teachers were older, with many years of experience and at any moment of weakness they knew how to motivate you. As I said, since I was little I felt that I had a vocation to be a teacher, but I think it was at that moment when I really decided to become one, when I saw experienced teachers motivating their pupils to become whatever they wanted to be, and this support should be given to pupils from the infant stage onwards". (Lucía, 21)

"I witnessed how classmates with difficulties were isolated academically and how they were treated as worse people. These are some of the many reasons why I said to myself "this is the kind of teacher I DON'T WANT TO BE". (Rocio, 23)

With regard to social prestige, the generalised idea of the social discredit attached to this profession was reaffirmed, with all participants stating that they had "put up with" negative comments about their career and having classmates who are studying it, after not entering the one they wanted to enter. On the other hand, they all point to the easy access to the degree and the low qualification required as the main reasons for this situation. This is reflected in the discourses of the participants:

"Some of my classmates at school told me that how could I study early childhood education with the good marks I had" (Violeta, 25).

"It is one of the most important careers and at the same time one of the least prestigious. Neither doctors nor architects would exist

without teachers, nor would many people have acquired such basic concepts as reading and writing" (Fernando, 23).

"I was once asked why I wanted to be a teacher, and I answered that I believe that education is the basis of everything. A teacher is capable of training future presidents of the country, surgeons, firemen, policemen, teachers, politicians, artists..." (Marina, 21).

"In my opinion, I would raise the cut-off mark for entry to Early Childhood Education. This would avoid unmotivated teachers who choose the career by discarding it" (Violeta, 25).

As for the moment when they decided to become early childhood teachers, most of the participants affirm that this decision was forged in childhood, some in secondary school, while others admit to having decided to do so some time later. This is illustrated by the following fragments:

"I knew I wanted to go into teaching for as long as I can remember, I have never changed my mind throughout my life, it has always been the same to become a teacher" (Ariadna, 25).

"When I finished my internship in the administration module, I started to work. However, I didn't feel motivated and the idea of becoming a teacher was getting stronger and stronger. At that point, I decided to enrol in a baccalaureate in the afternoons. Then I applied for a degree in Early Childhood Education and here I am" (Tania, 25).

The following is part of the testimony of the participants in which their perception of the Degree and the university teaching staff is made clear, starting with the latter:

"Most university lecturers encourage us to work through the new teaching methods of learning and criticise traditional teaching, but then they follow the same model they criticise, explaining the theory to us through a powerpoint, which they read and we have to copy, so I think they should be more coherent and not insist so much on some things when then they don't carry them out" (Pedro, 21).

"The teachers I have had during the degree, in general, have been adequate since they have trained me as an optimistic, dreamer and fighter teacher, they have taught me content and methods that I did not know in my previous years, but this has been overcome with a lot of effort. Normally we work in class with the rest of the classmates" (Esperanza, 21).

"These four years have taught me many things about how to be a good teacher, and I have had the privilege of having teachers with whom it was impossible not to say "I hope that when I work, I can be as good as you are". I'm not just talking about concepts or ways of teaching, I'm talking about how they treated us and the way they taught us" (Maria, 26).

In terms of the evaluation of the teaching degree and the practicum, there is general satisfaction with the degree, especially with the two practicum periods in the third and fourth academic years. However, there are also complaints and demands for a better connection between theory and practice, as well as the incorporation of some experiences or internships in the first two years, as detailed below:

"One change I would make in this degree is to put 3 practices instead of 2, to be able to go through the three age groups, and the three trimesters of the school year. In addition to teaching more about classroom actions, such as how to act with a child who has autism, or TDH etc." (Abigail, 27).

"From my point of view, this career needs more practice, because in theory sometimes everything is very clear, but then in the classroom it is not as clear as it seems" (Macarena, 24).

"When I wanted to help my cousin diagnosed with ADHD with his homework, I didn't know very well what methodologies to use to teach him to read or write (as in the degree course I consider that they don't prepare us for this) and that, in my opinion, is one of the shortcomings" (Alberto, 25).

Discussion and conclusions

This study explored in depth the different factors that affect and determine the construction and development of the teaching professional identity of twenty-three fourth-year Early Childhood Education undergraduates. They were asked questions about their personal and professional lives through semi-structured interviews. Special emphasis was placed on those aspects that the literature considered important in the construction and development of professional identity. To this end, nine categories were defined, whose analysis has made it possible to outline a professional profile of the future Early Childhood Education teachers (table 1) which is reinforced by the results obtained and represented in figure 1. During the development and analysis of the interviews, it has been observed how aspects such as the positive influence of having a family member who is dedicated to the field of teaching have been demystified. In this respect, those participants who had a relative who worked as a teacher stated that this fact had not been decisive; some of them even stated that it had had no influence at all on their choice of career.

In addition, two research questions were formulated which were intended to be answered by this research. These are answered below according to the findings. Regarding the first question, "what factors influence the configuration of the professional identity of early childhood teachers", it was found that there are several factors that have an influence. Internal factors, such as the teacher's vocation for early childhood education or the teacher's personality, are important factors that stimulate teachers to continue developing their professional identity on a daily basis. The moment of career choice is an internal factor. Then there are external factors, which have emerged throughout the teacher's life and which have shaped and developed their professional identity. Some factors may be the influence of teachers in compulsory stages and during their university years, the environment's encouragement in terms of family or economic support to achieve the desire to become an early childhood teacher, the value that their

studies and university practice have given them, the modelling that may have arisen from a close figure dedicated to education or the recognition of social prestige and importance for early childhood education. The configuration of the professional identity has been determined by these internal and external factors which have allowed the development of a professional identity in early childhood teachers.

The vocational character of the teaching profession, a sensitive and altruistic personality (Cologona, 2011), positive environmental stimulation or the existence of teachers (Lutovac, 2020), whose good practice has turned them into role models, have been decisive. The university as a period of initial training for the profession and, especially the internships, have emerged as other major factors that influence the construction and development of the professional identity of Early Childhood Education teachers. In these, the participants have assumed how this period has allowed them to reinforce their professional decision, to reaffirm or not their conception of education and to become aware of the type of practices they want to develop in their subsequent professional performance and, above all, what type of teacher they want to be. Students demand commitment, responsibility and a sense of ethics in order to progress in their professional training and consider the practicum (internship) as a suitable option for validating and putting into practice what they have learnt.

In this framework, what they know, what they learn and what they have experienced is added to the context in which they carry out their professional work, as well as the educational policy that supports it (Ro, 2020). All these issues have an impact on the professional identity of teachers, which is constructed at a very early age and is reshaped with the time and experiences they have (Ball, 2012).

Based on the last question asked in this research, "what is the impact of vocation on teachers' professional identity", vocation is the origin of creating and developing a professional identity in this type of teacher. It has been

found that the internal factor of vocation is the first reason why teachers dedicate themselves to this very important stage in children's lives. The desire to become an early childhood teacher or the interest in helping and supporting children lies in the vocation of this type of teacher. Vocation in early childhood teaching is the basis for these teachers, which becomes the first step for teachers to become good professionals. Therefore, the impact of vocation on early childhood teachers is the most decisive and important factor in creating and developing their professional identity. The internal motivation that constitutes the vocation to teach in early childhood education is what makes the teacher natural to their work, allowing them to fully understand what their work consists of and the influence they can exert on the students who come to them.

Limitations and prospective

The present research has a number of limitations that need to be pointed out. The first limitation is related to the research design. The fact that it is a qualitative research with a small sample makes it difficult to generalise the results obtained in this study. Also, although the interview was elaborated based on the relevant international literature on teacher professional identity, the introduction of other instruments such as the focus group or the questionnaire would provide a triangulation of the findings obtained. Taking these considerations into account, future research will be developed with a mixed approach, where other instruments will be used to complement the information. Likewise, it is intended to carry out a comparison between future early childhood teachers and those of other educational stages, as well as to carry out comparative studies between countries, in order to delimit more clearly the keys involved in the configuration of the teaching professional identity.

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