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Abstract

The article presents an interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) to preservice teachers' experiences of their current secondary teacher education programme (STEP) in Finland. The focus of the study is the millennial generation cohort in which new teachers comprise a key group to be studied because they will contribute to the future of education. Thirteen preservice teachers participated in the study. Their experiences are interpreted through the lenses of generation theory and contemporary teacher education research. The findings include three phenomenological themes that are core elements of STEP: time balance, reciprocal participation and meaningfulness. These themes are discussed and suggestions made for ways to transform teacher education to make it more relevant.

Keywords: Millennial generation, preservice teachers, teacher education, interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA)

Introduction

The 'generation gap' refers to the common assumption that each generation differs significantly in its values, beliefs, outlook on life and other social and cultural norms. It might therefore be argued that, in an educational context, the generation gap is obvious in that there is always an age gap between teachers and students. Perhaps the most widely discussed discrepancy between today's generations is that many experienced teachers could be described as 'digital immigrants', struggling to keep up with the 'digital natives' (Helsper and Eynon, 2010; Prensky 2001) – those born into cultures that speak the language of computers fluently. This disparity has set the stage for a multifaceted discourse around how children of the postmodern generation live, learn and behave today (Chelliah and Clarke 2011; Prensky 2010) and how they should be educated.

Research reflects that characterizing people based on their generation is both complex and contradictory in that it may involve assumptions or characteristics that are generalizations. However, since generation is a widely used concept and in this sense people 'do *have* generational identities' (Purhonen, 2016, 176), generational approach provides an important lens to the relations between the institutional practices and collective study related to preservice teachers. A few literature on higher education students suggests that millennials have expectations that differ from those of previous generations in terms of education, learning styles, work habits and values. These have seen, for example, due to their more constructivist approaches to learning and teaching (Sternberg 2012) and use of Internet-based technology to learn, communicate, work and build relationships (Lichy 2013; Neumann 2016; Nimon 2007).

In this context, despite the fact that most of today's preservice teachers were born after 1980 and are therefore categorised as 'digital natives' and members of the millennial generation (Howe and Strauss 2000), scant attention has been paid to them as a generational cohort, also known as 'Generation Y' or 'Gen Y' (Hurst and Good 2007).

Furthermore, relatively little empirical research has been conducted in this area of teacher education. A few studies (mostly in the US) have discussed millennials in teacher education programmes (TEPs). Boggs and Szabo (2011) approached the phenomenon normatively by developing coursework activities as a means to help preservice teachers understand work habits, attitudes and beliefs from generational perspectives, and learn to work amiably alongside the previous generation's in-service teachers during the student-teaching experience. Bontempo (2010) explored the needs of millennials in school settings by identifying the factors that motivate them to remain in teaching jobs. The study was inspired by the fact that half of all teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Ölçüm and Polat (2016) explored the virtual, behavioral and professional images of teachers belonging to different generations. A generational perspective has also been used to examine preservice teacher's views on globalization, multicultural education and social justice (Castro 2010; Rodriguez and Hallman 2013), particularly in urban school contexts (Bauml et al. 2016). Castro (2010), for example, challenged the common perception of Gen Y preservice teachers towards greater acceptance of and appreciation for multicultural education and teaching in culturally diverse contexts. Specifically, they found that preservice teachers still reflect a lack of understanding related to racism and hold 'deficit' beliefs about culturally diverse students. Hallman (2017) examined how the current era of 'Uncertain Times' within the neoliberal educational policy that have been developed by the policy-makers and stakeholders outside the

academy and education profession has laid controversial expectations for the work and role of millennials as beginning teachers.

The present study contributes to the research on millennials and teacher education programmes (TEPs) by means of a rarely used small-scale phenomenological inquiry into preservice teachers' perspectives in the Finnish context. The study was conducted within a larger research project on student engagement in higher education (HE), financed by the European Social Fund. This sub-study was motivated by the prevailing discrepancy between common perceptions of secondary teacher education programmes (STEPs) in Finland as well-organised and of high quality (e.g. Darling-Hammond 2017; Sahlberg 2011; Tryggvason 2012) and the faculty feedback data from the current preservice teachers, who have begun to challenge traditions of the TEP more intensely. Further to these 'weak signals' of discontent, we have seen a need, like Haines et al. (2017), to collect, from the prospective teachers themselves, data on the processes through which our curriculum and teaching practice experiences occur.

We draw on the research of TEPs, which are considered vital just because they influence prospective teachers' practice, attitudes, competencies and career commitment (Cochran-Smith and Villegas 2014; Darling-Hammond 2006; Zeichner and Conklin 2005). Research also shows that quality programmes are those that are rated highly by graduates or have an extensive pedagogical and methodological orientation (DeAngelis, Wall, and Che 2013; Ingersoll, Merrill, and May 2014). However, while research provides some information to guide TEP improvement, there is still much to be learned about powerful TEPs (e.g. Ronfeldt and Campbell 2016).

This study seeks new ways of programmatic improvement by listening to and understanding the student voice. As Saffold and Longwell-Grice (2008) suggest, 'If teacher educators listen carefully to the students they teach, it is possible that prospective teachers will teach us how to better teach them' (205). Unlike many large-scale studies, the intention here is to carefully examine many-sided stories, which might otherwise be ignored (cf. Flyvbjerg 2006). The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do current preservice teachers from the millennial generation reflect their experiences towards the STEP?
2. What can be concluded about the relations between the themes and the future development of teacher education?

Theoretical approach to the notion of 'generation'

Mannheim (1952) defined a 'generation' as a group of people born and raised in the same general chronological, social and historical context. He emphasised that both generational location and formative experiences during youth are key determinants of a particular generation (Purhonen 2016). 'Generational location' refers to definite modes of behaviour, feelings and thoughts; 'formative experiences' relate to participation in the social and intellectual climate of a time and place (cf. Pilcher 1994).

This idea of sociological generation encompasses both chronological and socio-historical approaches to defining cohorts. The chronological approach helps us to understand the basis of 'belonging' to a generation, because the members of the age cohort in a certain cultural context share common transitions of the life-course at the same time. As such, it is an important starting point in understanding the formation of generations. From the perspective of sociological generation, however, the 'conditions in which generations might emerge and take shape are historically contingent, which means that it is difficult – if not impossible – to say anything universal about the temporal variability of the cycle of generations or about the construction of relationships between distinct generations more generally' (Purhonen 2016, 169). The socio-historical approach is essential in defining generation as a cohort whose members share a 'collective consciousness or memory' (Edmunds and Turner 2005, 117). This means that by encountering social and economic change, a generation has a 'unique shared habitus and culture' (Krahn and Galambos 2014, 93).

By combining the chronological and socio-historical approaches, the sociological generation theory argues that growing up at about the same time and experiencing events at about the same point of development leads to similar value preferences and life expectations for the people within each cohort (Edmunds and Turner 2005; Kupperschmidt 2000). The differences between generations are commonly attributed to the powerful influence of the environment during the years of socialisation, which deeply affects the development of an individual's personality, values and expectations (Macky, Gardner, and Forsyth 2008). Major lifestyle changes, traumatic events, socioeconomic events and advances in technology are most significant in this regard (Cennamo and Gardner 2008).

Although different scholars use different dates, most agree that the millennial generation's birth years fall within the period 1980–1999 (Kupperschmidt 2000; Werth and Werth 2011). The formative experiences of the millennial generation reflect the history, culture and political climate of the 1990s and 2000s. The millennials' formative years saw the rapid evolution of information

and communication technologies (e.g. Chelliah and Clarke 2011), which had major effects on the relations between individuals, society and institutions. However, although many studies have emphasised the role of technology in millennial identity construction (Bennett and Marton 2010), researchers disagree on the existence and the significance of the single 'digital lifestyle'.

Millennials have been referred to as 'Generation Sunshine' and 'Generation Me' (Huntley 2006; Twenge 2009). These descriptions describe a sociocultural shift in which parenthood became a choice. According to Twenge (2009), this generation experienced continuous praise and encouragement, which reinforced their strengths and their self-esteem. Similarly, Broadbridge, Maxwell, and Ogden (2007) suggested that millennials have been raised with dedication, approval and affirmation. This positive disposition may contribute to the generation's tendency to value high achievement, as well as to their strong sense of fairness and equity. Concurrently, divorce and single-parent families have become more common (Cennamo and Gardner 2008), and in every developed nation, children are frequently exposed to drugs, violent video games and sexually-charged advertising.

Mannheim's description has been supported and further developed by several researchers (e.g. Kupperschmidt 2000; Weston 2001), but there has also been much critical debate on the origination, meaning and use of all generation theories (Purhonen 2015; 2016). Two particular issues are of immediate relevance here. First, the orientation, qualities and needs of millennials have mostly been examined and defined from the institutional and cultural perspectives of the previous generations. As Donnison (2007) puts it, the target expectations, goals and interpretations may reflect previous generations' enculturation into the sociocultural context of the 1980s and 1990s more than the generation they purport to describe. Second, generation-based research, especially in the field of education, has been confined to certain (Western) cultures (Donnison 2007).

The critique of generation research often targets the analytic worth of the concept and its problematic explanatory models (e.g. Helsper and Enyon 2010; Parry and Erwin 2011). Admittedly, one of the biggest issues in the study of generations is that the impacts of age, cultural period and generation are logically intertwined and it is therefore extremely difficult to examine any one of these separately (Purhonen 2002). Despite this critique, it can be argued that the concept of generation provides a useful lens for the study of teacher education, as a framework for understanding the meanings of collective experiences and discourses in terms of shared formative experiences. As Corsten (1999, 258) puts it, members of a generation are connected not only by

common factors but also by their feeling of this interconnectedness, the understanding that they are linked.

In this study, the relevance of the generation-oriented background provides the possibility of widening the understanding of preservice teachers' relations and orientations to their studies and the university as an educational institution. Instead of trying to fit our findings into the stereotypes of generational experiences, our aim in the phenomenological analysis is to get in touch with the specified generational experiences related to the TE.

Application of interpretive phenomenology

This study utilises an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) because it places appropriate emphasis on participants' lived experiences. IPA is based on Heidegger's ([1927]1962) and Gadamer's ([1960] 1975) philosophical worldviews and on the idea that people create meaning from life experiences based on perspectives emerging from their relation to a particular time and place. IPA conceptualises the individual as a cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being and connects the things people say with their thoughts and emotional responses (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

IPA therefore provides a foundation for exploring how preservice teachers perceive the components of their teacher education programme. Most of the interpretations here reflect participants' critical assessments, providing an insider's perspective. In accordance with IPA, interpretations were derived from participants' shared life experiences and relationships with their peers, teacher educators and mentors.

Context of the study

The study was conducted at a multi-disciplinary research university within the STEP, which complies with the OECD model (OECD 2005) and European teacher education curricula (European Commission 2007). The STEP aims to educate teachers specialising in particular subjects for secondary and upper secondary schools. Teacher qualification requires a master's degree in the Disciplinary Faculties for one's major subjects.

As in all Finnish teacher education institutions, the STEP is an academic minor (60 ECTS) offered by the Faculty of Education (FE) and Teacher Training School (TTS) in triad cooperation with the Disciplinary Faculties (DF). The STEP is divided into two course modules. The first module, basic

studies in education (25 ECTS), can be completed during one's major studies in the DF. The second module (35 ECTS) includes coursework in disciplinary groups (in FE), according to major subject (DF) and led by a teacher educator who specialises in the didactics of the particular discipline. This module also includes teaching practice, supervised by a mentor and performed at the TTS. The disciplinary groups are divided into school subject areas: mathematics and science, language sciences and social sciences. Teacher qualification requires a master's degree in the DF for one's major subjects.

Participants and data

The present research was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews. Participants were contacted through the email list of current STEP students (64 students). This invitation letter informed students that the purpose of the study was to explore their thoughts, needs and prospects for improving the STEP beyond their general programme feedback. The invitation attracted responses from 13 preservice teachers (ten females and three males); six of these students were from the social sciences, three were from mathematics and science and four were from the language sciences. By confining the focus to this small group of volunteers, it was possible to capture a more nuanced view of their individual realities. The minutiae of their stories and meanings were of particular importance, as the main aim of the study was to understand preservice teachers' experiences in this very specific context.

All participants were born in the 1980s; at the time of interview, they ranged in age from 26 to 32 years old, therefore representing a small generation unit (cf. Mannheim 1952) in terms of their life experience. The interviews lasted from 35 to 60 minutes. To promote a friendly interview environment, an empathetic stance was adopted, displaying interest and openness (cf. Randall and Phoenix 2009). This included interaction with participants in a conversational tone and the use of open-ended questions to encourage them to discuss topics they found interesting.

The interview process comprised two open-ended topics related to each participant's experiences while studying for the STEP: the challenges and resources each student was required to manage, depending on their personal situation; and the implementation of the STEP as they saw it. Subsequent questions addressed coursework issues and engaging or empowering learning experiences. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, yielding 124 single-spaced pages of text for analysis. Interviewees were numbered 1–13.

Ethics

This study complies with the ethical principles of the IPA, including the requirements to inform participants and organisations, to maintain participant anonymity and to protect the confidentiality of interviewees. All participants provided informed consent to participate, and there was no dependent relationship between participants and researchers. Participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time if they so wished, but none did. Our ethical responsibility to the participants was a serious consideration in how data were treated and interpreted and how results were reported. For that reason, interviewees' disciplinary groups and genders are not indicated in any quotes used to substantiate the findings.

Continuous collective reflections and researcher triangulation helped to ensure that no one imposed their own expectations. To further mitigate any possibility that our own assumptions might affect the results, bracketing was used in accordance with Munhall (1994). Bracketing meant that we adopted a stance of 'unknowing' regarding our prior experiences, and continually tried to understand the perspective of the interviewees. One sign of constructive bracketing was that our own understanding of the phenomenon was modified and enriched as the study progressed.

Analysis

Using an inductive research strategy, latent content analysis was used to understand the data (Krippendorff 2004). The findings reported here proceeded through four analytic phases: close reading, organising, categorising and summarising. First, transcripts were examined thoroughly several times to achieve overall familiarity. Second, a basic unit, such as a notional expression, was identified as a complete description of an experience or a shorter perception; each such unit characterised a view adopted by an interviewee. Thereafter, we divided the units into topics, which consisted of repetitive utterances that emerged through several readings of the transcripts, and themes, which were reduced from the topics (Table 1). In the third phase, the topics and themes were mapped and specific pertinent passages, that resembled millennial profiles from earlier research, were selected and classified. Data generation proceeded until thematic saturation was reached.

Table 1. Overview of the topics and units related to the emerged themes

Theme	Topic	Unit

Experience of time	- Clock time as a resource - Expectations for flexibility - Expectations for structure	- No unstructured time in the schedule - Time is limited and possessed by the STEP - Long days and compulsory attendance cause feverish haste - Schedule confusion constrains balance of work and life
Experience of reciprocal participation	- Teaching as interpersonal activity - Expectations for responsibility - Expectations for autonomy - Expectations for support	- Sensitive for recognising a lack of triad interaction and collaboration - Willingness to be treated as a colleague instead of a student - Express frustrated feelings if their effort and experience is ignored - Wait for immediate feedback and personal relationships with the supervisors and mentors
Experience of meaningfulness of studies	- Means and tools for professional development - Expectations for meaningful and worthwhile studying - Expectations for beneficial programme for the future	- Call for means for professional development and hands-on-experience - Individual and worthwhile goals have to be fulfilled - STEP as one of the individual life projects - More recognition of prior teaching experience - Consider pessimistic self-reflection worthless

Finally, three main phenomenological themes emerged to describe millennial generation preservice teachers' experiences of their STEP studies. Despite their differing content, structure and scope, no rigid or well-defined boundaries were found between these themes. The consistency of topics and themes were assessed by rechecking the basic units and quotes in their original contexts by means of researcher triangulation.

Experience of time

The interview data indicated conflicting approaches to time between the participants and the STEP. The themes of possessing, investing, wasting and budgeting time were identified as primary issues in the data. Interviewees tended to consciously allocate time resources to their studies, work,

families, hobbies and other activities and to schedule their lives with high efficacy and flexibility, as follows:

> I have two paid jobs; one is at a rental company, and another is as a substitute teacher in a secondary school. In addition, I try to run with all the studies so that the closer the deadline, the more effort I put into the coursework. I've also tried to have a moment of my own time every day to allow my thoughts to just float away. The most overwhelming part is waking up in the morning because there is so much to do. (1)

> If I am able to schedule all my duties, there isn't such a burden (8).

Time is one key feature in student engagement (in HE), defined by Kuh (2003) as 'the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities'. Participants' descriptions of using time resources portrayed them as multitasking individuals, a feature often attributed to millennials (e.g. Mark, Wang, and Niiya 2014), who were willing to devote their time and energy to many activities. The informants were experienced in organising their lives with calendars and liked to have control and ownership of time, in order to balance time across the different engagements and institutional participation requirements of the STEP.

This time orientation echoes Nowotny's (1994) theory, which distinguishes between the time of individuals and the time of systems. The prominent feature in the data was that the clock time was a resource possessed mainly by the system, which had the authority to demand the students should prioritise according to the STEP. This is illustrated in the following quotes:

> We have an obligation to be available from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day. This is time consuming and stressful. (11)
> We should get rid of the idea of attendance—the idea we have to sit in the chair and start performing. It doesn't go that way in real life. (12)

Student experiences in the STEP were different from their previous studies in the DF where they had more autonomy in planning their curriculum. Time was a major source of negative feelings, and the interviewees interpreted time demands as a form of social control (cf. Adam 1995; Lee and Liebenau 1999). Moreover, the requirement of compulsory attendance and the expectation that assignments should be performed at specific times were in conflict with their understanding of

teacher education ideals. When instructed to study or perform in some special way, they tended to ask 'what for?' and 'why?', which is typical of millennials (e.g. Twenge 2009). The interviewees pointed out that the focus in learning should not be on the amount of time spent engaged in different activities in certain physical places. Instead, they suggested that many things could be learned with fewer hours in the classroom or through alternative formats.

Aligned with the previous notions, Kim and Corcoran (2017) suggest that, in order to enhance preservice teachers' engagement and effective educational experiences, more attention should be paid to the interaction between students and faculty. In preservice teachers' development, not only the quantity, but the quality of interaction with their faculty matters (Kim and Corcoran 2017). The informants in this study seemed to struggle with the expectation that they put their time and energy only into STEP, especially because of its fragmented and unforeseen timeframes. Instead, they expected predictable schedules, as indicated below:

> You cannot have a plan with a friend, like let's go to the movies on Thursday, because you never know if you have to stay longer at the school or if something unexpected will be assigned that we have to do. (6)

> Can one require that we don't have any other life than the STEP studies? (11)

> I need more hours in the day so that I could just somehow get all the mandatory tasks carried out for the STEP. (3)

The quotes illustrate how the unforeseen schedule affected students' personal, social and so-called 'proper time' (cf. Nowotny 1994). These discussions about proper time mostly referred to 'doing nothing', but in some cases, students wanted to spend proper time focusing on other studies and assignments, at their own pace, in their own way and in their place of choice (cf. Nimon 2007). The interviewees claimed that the STEP dominated their private and social time, and they perceived this as intrusive and distracting. This is similar to what Eckleberry-Hunt and Tucciarone (2011) have summarised: millenials rather look at how institutions and work duties fit into their lives, not as how they fit into them. In seeking a participatory role in scheduling, interviewees' thoughts were parallel to Adam's (1995) view of clock time, which positions the timing and intensity of activities in socially and culturally constructed temporal frames and should therefore be flexible and changeable.

In summary, the different life and time spheres of these millennials were intertwined. They challenged the STEP to meet their needs to achieve goals within stable time constraints and to

juggle their studies and personal lives. It seemed paradoxical that they wanted more flexibility but, at the same time, expected structured schedules. However, in an uncertain world, it may be necessary to be comprehensively engaged in the formation not only of understanding but also of curricula at DF, EF and TTS and the formation of other communities, which the participants are part of now and in the future (cf. Ashwin and McVitty 2015). The millennials seemed also to be aware of the work-life balance between personal time and the demands of the institution, which is a positive feature in terms of teacher work engagement (cf. Høigaard, Giske, and Sundsli 2011; XXX 20XX) in the long run.

Experience of reciprocal participation

Participants' prior pedagogical knowledge was affected by their experience of the school as a social environment involving interpersonal relationships. While they expected teaching and learning to be a collaborative enterprise, many of them came into conflict with the locally situated and individualistic working culture around the triad of the STEP.

> TTS and the FE seem somehow to have an antagonistic relationship. I don't know if that's because people don't get along or if it's bureaucracy. (6)

> I have never come across any occasion where mentors show any cooperation. (13)

The participants, furthermore, interpreted unclear assignments and expectations as evidence of a lack of communication, further reflecting their relationship with staff members (teacher educators and mentors). Klemp and Nilsen (2017) have similarly found that triad relationships are difficult due to the lack of clarity of roles and communication problems amongst the members, whilst Bullough and Draper (2004) interpreted the lack of communication as a surface explanation for understanding the tensions. Therefore, as Valencia et al. (2009) suggest, it is necessary to understand the inherent tensions between the multiple roles of each member and the need for each person to balance them while participating in the triad.

Accordingly, interviewees did not hesitate to express negative feelings about the lack of mutual respect within the collaboration, which reflects how preservice teachers use emotional language when describing their experiences or reflecting on their teaching identity (cf. Lindquist et al. 2017). The following quotes illustrate both sides of this concern:

> Our teacher educator is the only one who keeps us up to date by sending emails to let us know what must be done in the near future. (7)
>
> Sometimes, I feel that we are herded like toddlers but that we should then be self-contained. (1)

As the latter quote shows, the preservice teachers were made to feel awkward by staff members' perceptions of them as inexperienced or incompetent. They wanted to be considered as junior colleagues; they desired tangible collaboration and they expected the STEP to prepare them for the collaborative environments in school communities, as indicated below.

> It would have been interesting if there could be, for example, one week when two of us could arrange the school practice as a whole with the mentor or something like that, but we are given only the theory. Oh, I wish we could have had something like that. (13)

As the quote indicates, respondents sought a balance between guidance, autonomy and responsibility that would allow them to experiment and test themselves in multiple learning environments. As well as expressing satisfaction or displeasure about the programme, they suggested multiple ways to boost active learning, such as small-group discussions and peer-to-peer activities. They preferred courses that involved hands-on experience and assignments emphasising interdependence and networking. They also appreciated those instances when their ideas and experience were acknowledged and taken seriously. The findings are consistent with Martin, Snow, and Franklin Torrez (2011) who call for a proactive and conscious effort in the development of collaborative and trusting relationships between the triad.

The views emerging from the data are also consistent with previous studies on millennials. Ng and Gosset (2013) argued that the millennial generation wants to make a positive contribution to the community; Broadbridge, Maxwell, and Ogden (2007) noted that millennials tend to desire recognition for their talents, and that they respond enthusiastically to responsibility. Similarly, Hurst and Good (2007) noted that millennials have been encouraged to develop autonomy and to participate in decision-making from their early years. Broadbridge, Maxwell, and Ogden (2007) further argued that millennials' interpersonal sensitivity and courage in expressing their feelings may relate to their upbringing and schooling because they were raised with an emphasis on child-centered approaches, empowering self-esteem and interacting in group environments. Contrary to our prior expectation, social online activities were only briefly discussed as a matter of course, as in 'being connected by computers' (3) and 'hanging around the computer' (8). Despite being

technologically savvy (e.g. Lichy 2012), participants' desire for open communication was most significant.

In summary, these millennials' remarkably strong desire for participatory orientation was similar to Hedegaard, Chaiklin, and Jensen's (1999) notion of social practice as 'structured human traditions for interaction around specific tasks and goals' (19). Furthermore, they valued the partnership model (Darling-Hammond 2017) to encourage and boost their professional learning paths through close and supportive relationships with staff members. However, while they valued ongoing support in a range of social practices, they also expected the freedom and flexibility that would enable them to take ownership of completing their tasks.

The millennials' experience of meaningfulness

Today there seems to be a consensus that in order to make TEPs more meaningful for preservice teachers, there should be a tighter connection between practical and academic experience (e.g. Amir et al. 2017; Mertler 2014). The interviewees presented themselves as people looking for value in every area of their lives, including their studies. They therefore expected the STEP to reveal the connections between their personal experiences, required tasks and real-life professional competencies. The following excerpt describes this expectation.

> If I'm to complete a lot of work and study, there should be a goal, especially in work as practical as the teaching profession; that way, I know the work I'm doing now will benefit me in the future. (6)

They compared teaching practice to their previous or ongoing school experiences in the field. Many of them already had experience in related fields, were aware of their own prior knowledge and based their judgments on those prior experiences, as in the following instance.

> I have worked as a substitute, and I know what a teacher's daily life is like. I have experience of working with colleagues and parents and of being in contact with various social welfare people. I feel stupid when we don't get a proper chance to try things out concretely. The main thing we get is the experience of standing in front of the class, and we learn how much preparation is needed to master all the content and subjects. (11)

As the quote reveals, the 'pedagogical content knowledge' referred to by Shulman (1987) was emphasised in teaching practice – that is, the preservice teachers were taught how to transform

content knowledge into pedagogy by constructing learning experiences that organised the subject matter according to particular pedagogical practices. This reflects how teacher educators differ from general educationalists in that they are focused on the didactics of one or more school subjects (cf. Tryggvason 2012). However, respondents struggled to interpret this information in light of uncertainty about learning, the heterogeneity of students and their own experiences. Similarly, as they were familiar with holistic and reflective thinking, they disagreed when teaching and learning were theorised without any real-world context. Accordingly, as Yuan and Lee (2015) conclude, preservice teachers' emotional focus tended to be on themselves during initial teaching education, and when the participants reflected on and discussed teaching in university courses, they mainly viewed themselves as students, 'without any involvement in teachers' real life' (486). Because of their work placement education, the preservice teachers' identities were formed through interaction with mentors, other schoolteachers, students and fellow preservice teachers. (cf. Yuan and Lee 2015).

The subsequent call to bridge the gap between theory and practice is a recurrent and global one, and over decades, teacher educators worldwide have tried a variety of approaches to achieve this. Accordingly, the ability of STEP staff members to illuminate the exchange between theory and practice was assessed, and their authority depended on actions rather than on social hierarchy or academic position. Nevertheless, respondents identified traits they admired in teachers or that they considered useful for instructional purposes, and they were able to recognise whether educators 'practised what they preached'. Specifically, they shared a strong desire for experiential learning and observed the instructional methods used by staff members to put theory into practice, as the next quote indicates.

> I have skipped the lectures because I don't learn anything beneficial there. The STEP should be organised so that we learn what is known about how students learn nowadays. This is not currently the case. Maybe the system is not easy to change. (3)

As indicated above, participants had ideas about what types of activities would be useful and how these expectations related to their future as professionals, exemplifying what Twenge and Campbell (2008) referred to as a characteristic overconfidence among millennials. However, the data did not indicate any particular signs of extremely high self-esteem; rather, participants' views reflected their desire for rewards that are more intrinsic than extrinsic and their hopes of leading more purposeful professional lives (cf. Ng and Gosset 2013).

In summary, preservice teachers expected their studies to offer meaning and usefulness in relation to important issues to prepare them for teaching. Their need for significance related to the notion of authenticity – the prerequisite of being true to oneself by critically reflecting on self, others, relationships and contexts (cf. Kreber 2013; Taylor 1991). Previous studies have indicated that millennials have high expectations of finding fulfilment in their work (Twenge and Campbell 2008). The current findings suggest that the meaningfulness tended to involve reaching a balance between millennials' contribution to the community and their pursuit of a professional identity.

Concluding discussion

Through the lens of generation theory, the findings reflect at least three tensions that are useful to note when designing the STEPs. First, the participants' shared focus was a work-life balance between personal time and the demands of the STEP with an inclination towards a thoroughly structured programme that offered flexible alternatives – both individual and collective – for developing teaching professionalism. The participants wanted to be given responsibility to take pedagogical risks while also being given constant support and guidance. Finally, they shared a need for the STEP to fulfil their expectations of meaningfulness and usefulness to prepare them for their teaching career.

Beyond their simultaneous desire for flexibility and stability, the participants were aware of the work engagement perspective in relation to a work-life balance related to teacher well-being (e.g. Høigaard, Giske, and Sundsli 2011; Mäkinen 2013). While they appreciated that study options and instructions were clearly presented, they also felt that their proficiency in self-monitoring, and their desire for a balance between personal and professional time, should be considered.

Alongside the responsibility-support tension, they challenged the authorities to recognise and empower their full potential. Participants both admired and criticised cultural habits within the STEP, and their levels of trust in relationships were in constant flux. This challenges the STEPs to offer preservice teachers answers to the 'why' questions and the approval of 'safe spaces'. To allow questioning could lead them to transform learning insights into new situations and gain pedagogical understanding for unpredictable circumstances in future (cf. Douglas 2017). The 'safe space', in turn, induces a sense of protection and enables forthright professional discussions characterised by openness and mutual trust among participants (cf. Margolin 2011). We argue that conditions for communicative safe spaces need to be created beforehand and systemically administered.

The tensions between meaningfulness and usefulness indicate a need to identify the authenticity (cf. Kreber 2013) in relation to teaching practice, which is considered to be the cornerstone of teacher education (Valencia et al. 2009). While in many countries, the school-based teaching practice is often based on the apprenticeship model (Douglas 2017), the Finnish university-based teaching practice could be named as a theory-practice model. Its strength is that the STEP is tightly built on educational theories, but the risk is that knowledge may not be rooted enough to the pedagogical reality at school level.

Therefore, the tensions between the triad members regarding teaching, mentoring and the overall goals of the teaching practice might hinder the real nexus of theory and practice (cf. Klemp and Nilsen 2017; Valencia et al. 2009) and cause a lack of opportunities for preservice teachers to experience teaching in real-life school settings. As Taylor (1991) stressed, the communal approach to authenticity involves recognising and being open to significant components of society, such as the cultural aspects and ideals by which the school community is surrounded. His view is relevant to the Finnish context due to the teaching practice offered by the strictly controlled triadic cooperation.

The findings indicate a need to identify the authenticity (cf. Kreber 2013) of teaching practices. This perspective stands in profound contrast to the outdated view that has previously been applied to millennials, which associates authenticity with self-centredness. Instead, as in Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006), authenticity is linked to caring and socially responsible practices, which are identified as common values among millennials. Therefore, communal authenticity links the teaching profession to 'horizons of significance' (Taylor 1991), where all university-school actors can connect with something larger than themselves, and its culturally shaped purposes.

These results prompt an interpretation of the cornerstone of teacher education as a matter of reciprocal participation, created through the continuous interaction of preservice teachers and all staff members. Both structure and authenticity should be embedded in participatory orientation (cf. Douglas 2017) and in the organisation of the programme. On that basis, the findings propose that the notion of social practice (Hedegaard, Chaiklin, and Jensen 1999) should be a driving force in the design and implementation of STEPs. The social practice refers to Zeichner's (2010) concept of 'a third space', which serves as building arenas for negotiation and extension of preservice teachers' competencies by linking the discourses of practice with those of academic disciplines. As he states,

'creating third spaces in teacher education involves an equal and more dialectical relationship between academic and practitioner knowledge in support of student teacher learning' (Zeichner 2010, 92).

These findings indicate that this new generation of teachers will challenge education traditions. We suggest that teacher educators, whose methods are commonly based on modernist theories, must acknowledge that most current preservice teachers represent the first postmodern cohort of the era of 'Uncertain Times' (Hallman 2017) in the 'Network Society' (Castells 2000). The programmes should be updated with an understanding that millennial teachers are placed at a crossroads where teaching is becoming more standardized and the boundaries of knowledge and societal changes are increasingly unpredictable (cf. Hallman 2017); the weak signs for that are visible even in Finland (FINEEC 2016). Ergo, teacher educators should be aware and take into account that while millennial teachers are seen as agents of change continual need of re-making of their personal 'self' and professional identity (Alsup 2006) place them in a precarious position. By considering these preservice teachers' voices, teacher educators could better support their professional development within the complex contexts of classroom, schools, communities and society they live. However, additional research is needed to build on these findings through discussion of the results with those from other teacher education contexts.

Disclosure statement

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