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Adult learners' career paths – from IT profession to education within two-year study programme in Finnish university context

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ABSTRACT

Higher education and lifelong learning projects aimed at adults have become more widespread and have sparked a debate on how to restructure higher education policies and support lifelong learning. In Finland, a recent initiative in higher education policy is based on the theme of continuous learning. Different supporting structures and practices at the governmental level are being sought. During the academic year 2017–2018, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland funded a project that provided pedagogical studies in teaching for 16 IT professionals. The aim was to enable the participants to focus on the educational field and find new options for their careers. We utilised a narrative research approach to explore the types of adult learners' storylines and positions that were constructed during these studies, of which we identified three: the storyline of different alternatives, in which participants positioned themselves as a career path builders, the storyline of becoming a teacher, in which participants positioned themselves as a teacherhood reflectors and becoming a teacher was an enriching alternative, and the storyline of looking forward, in which participants positioned themselves as a developers and mainly saw their studies as expanding their ongoing career opportunities.

KEYWORDS

Adult learners; higher education; lifelong and continuous learning; narrative research

Introduction

The objectives of higher education and lifelong learning have recently been linked in many ways to policy discourses on mature students' access to higher education. Higher education (HE) and lifelong learning projects aimed at adults have become more widespread and have sparked a debate on how to restructure HE policies and support lifelong learning (Krüger et al., 2015; Osborne et al., 2015). For example, there has been a long-standing debate across Europe on adult access to HE being a way to develop individuals' employability, economic success and well-being in their lifelong learning careers (e.g. OECD, 2017; Brennan et al., 2008; Boeren, 2011; European Commission, 2019). In Finland, the participation of adults in higher education has taken place mainly through the normal degree routes throughout the early 2000s, particularly due to a strong student support system and tuition-free education that are seen as a guarantee of equal access (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). Therefore, higher education policy in Finland has not had so visible emphasis on widening access issues as elsewhere. In Finland, it has also been possible for adult learners to start university studies at Open University and utilise the so-called Open

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University gateway to many disciplines and degree studies. All this has affected the change in the age structure of university students and the growing share of adults in HE in Finland (Moore, 2006).

Adults have previously been located differently in the HE system: the 'new' applied, teaching-intensive universities (such as former polytechnics in the dual system) have been more open to adults than the 'old' research-intensive universities (traditional universities in the dual system) (Merrill, 2001). In Finland, differences in adult participation have levelled off in this respect, as research-intensive universities offer traditional Master's degrees in many fields and increasingly attract adult learners alongside the increase in the intake of high school graduates. However, it is often stated that learning as an adult is likely to be – to some extent – a part-time experience, whatever the form, level or purpose of the HE studies (Brennan et al., 2008), as adults may have work or other duties alongside their studies. This also describes well the situation of Finnish adult learners who often seem to study and work concurrently (Moore, 2006).

Based on previous research, adult learners' reasons for participating in HE are diverse and related to, for example, to developing competences needed for working life or seeking fulfilment of their personal interests in the studied content (Boeren, 2011). In specifically tailored degree programmes, career advancement reasons may be the dominant motives for participation (Dwyer et al., 2013). Adults usually already have a previous HE degree and intrinsic ambitions for their new engagement in learning. HE institutions have developed increasingly specific adult degree programmes that are either tailored specifically for adult participation, including evening or week-end course options and remote online learning possibilities (e.g. Bergman, 2016), or are integrated into a normal master's degree curriculum and teaching arrangements. In Finland, universities today are active in marketing and offer the latter kind of two-year degree programmes for non-traditional student groups, such as adults and international students.

Opportunities for adults to take part in lifelong and continuous learning in the HE system are increasingly desired in Finland and have actively supported by the latest governmental programmes. A working group with dedicated national funding was established in early 2019 to renew the traditional lifelong learning policy into continuous learning initiative and this group has representatives of several stakeholders, including ministries, labour market organisations, student and teacher unions, and representatives of higher education and VET (e.g. European Commission, 2019; Oosi et al., 2019). This is an example of how HE is expected to contribute to counterbalancing the increasing insecurity in the labour market and economy which Finland, like the other European countries, is facing. In the academic year 2017–2018, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland launched a funding scheme for universities to organise educational programmes aiming specifically to reduce the adverse effects of the restructuring of the IT sector and to support skilled labour retention in Finland. The planned programme would support the reorientation of skills, productization of personal expertise, export development, internationalisation and the emergence of new entrepreneurship. The particular target group for the training was those who had been made redundant in the IT sector and those under threat of redundancy.

We focus on one such two-year programme implemented in a research-intensive university in Finland that received funding for a specific project providing IT professionals the pedagogical studies required for the qualification of a teacher. These pedagogical studies enable those who have been dismissed from their jobs in the IT sector or who are under threat of redundancy to find employment in the educational sector. The studies provide opportunities to work as teachers in schools, coordinators and developers in IT education, producers of digital learning materials, in-service educators, entrepreneurs in their own companies or in international teaching assignments.

Adult learners and their career aspirations within and beyond university studies

In today's rapidly changing world of work, the traditional notion of a career through different stages of development is no longer valid. The increasingly dynamic nature of careers must be taken into account (Nagy et al., 2018). The growing flexibilities and uncertainties of working life and global

economies are increasingly leading to fixed-term and episodic work contracts, and are setting new kinds of frameworks for lifelong learning, in which individuals' senses of self and identity are eroding (see Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Sennett, 1998). The constructivist conception of a career (M. L. Savickas, 2011; M.L. Savickas, 2005) sees it as a personally constructed path, whereby one's career also becomes a very subjective process of self-construction amidst uncertainties. The theory of career construction seeks to interpret such interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals create meaning and direction for their career solutions. Savickas (2005, 43) states that careers are constructed when individuals make meaningful decisions that meet their self-conceptions and support their goals in the social reality of their work roles. From the career construction theory perspective, the career is a composition of past memories, present experiences and future aspirations in this personal meaning-making process (M. L. Savickas, 2011; M.L. Savickas, 2005). This constructivist conception has been influenced by the so-called individualisation thesis (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) according to which institutional and societal transformations are creating a demand for greater biographical decision making by the subjects and impacts of social structural factors are diminishing. It should be noted that this individualisation thesis has also been the subject of much criticism (see, e.g. Dawson, 2012). It would be more precise to speak according to Dawson (2012) on 'disembedding positions' with disappearing meaning of social characteristics in individual decision-making or respectively on 'embedding positions' where awareness of shared preferences is perhaps more internalised in individual decision-making. The latter meaning also emphasises preferences related to person's own sociocultural background which may direct choices.

When the above defined constructivist view is connected to adults' objectives to study in HE, different periods of work and studies may overlap in their life-world and the adult's life structure may include different priorities and relationships between studying and working. It is likely that the way in which studies form part of the adult's broader goals and career aspirations will become important and this is also to some extent a shared experience against the connecting background and starting points, but also a very individual experience of reflection on new possibilities according to own motivation.

The role of an adult learner with longer working life experience is somewhat different to that of younger students, and for the adult, it is impossible to separate the meaning of studies from other areas of life and previous career experiences (Merriam et al., 2007; Merrill, 2001). Adult learners often have a more meaningful oriented and cross-contextual learning orientation, in which learning is based on personal learning agendas and aims to build or renew expertise (Korhonen, 2004). In her narrative study, Kasworm (2010) characterised the mature adult learners' role using positional and relational identity concepts. Positional identities were initially co-constructed through being accepted when responding to demanding academic challenges and facing otherness experiences as an adult learner in a youth-oriented university context. Relational identities in turn were formed in situations in which social interactions between the adult and other individuals were constructed. Paradoxically, the strongest relational and supportive relationships were constructed with other students (especially with other adult learners), and somewhat less with faculty staff (see Kasworm, 2010). Therefore, it seems that adult learners navigate in different in-between states and roles when constructing their identities at university. Many of them have longer professional experience in a certain knowledge area, but at the same time are novices in relation to their current field of study (Korhonen, 2004).

Adult learners already have a career as part of their identity when they re-enter in higher education. Participation into tertiary education may be a strategy for coping with the risks of present-day career development and may provide greater mobility between alternatives. On the other hand, an adult's learner identity may be fractured and consist of antipathies towards education, based on previous experiences (Crossan et al., 2003; Siivonen et al. 2016). Adults' learning careers and identities are not usually constructed in an unbroken, linear manner during engagement in new university studies, and these studies may provide them with a transitional space for

working out and reconstructing their identities (Merrill, 2015). This also challenges the nature of teaching and learning in HE and often calls for the development of traditional pedagogies in the direction of transformational and reflective learning when meeting the needs and expectations of adult learners (Halx, 2010; Light et al., 2009).

Narrative as a practice of constructing career and identity

Narrative orientation refers to a set of qualitative methods in which human activity is examined through narratives, in the form of natural discourse or speech (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narratives are interpretative stories of the self and one's surrounding reality and can be seen as constructs of identity, as in the theory of narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Polkinghorne (1995) defines a story as presented events and activities that are combined by means of a plot into an organised entity. Bruner (2004) remarks that humans construct themselves autobiographically and stories from life events are predisposed to cultural, interpersonal and linguistic influences. This refers to the sociocultural origins of mind.

Narrative identity is the construction of person's past, present and imagined future so that it preserves a degree of unity, purpose, and meaning (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Individuals' identities tie together their whole lives, their full autobiographies (Watson, 2009). Such stories of one's self or of various processes of human life can be examined either directly or indirectly, or by means of the different positions of self in the stories (ibid.). It also involves connections to concepts of dialogical self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) and transactional self (Bruner, 1986), in which the main idea is that people are continuously involved in a process of positioning and repositioning, not only in relation to others in social transactions but also in relation to themselves.

Positions in narratives and positioning theory are especially connected to Harre's and his colleagues' (see Harré & Davies, 1990; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999; also Harré et al., 2009) ideas on the nature of the social discursive activities and stances taken in these activities. Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) conceptualise human activity as discourses and social transactions and aim to interpret how individuals are positioned in these discourses in an ongoing and lived storyline. For the construction of identity, the positioning view opens up possibilities to examine identity transformation as both personal and social identity processes; for example, in the context of participation in education or in the interplay between education and working life in the adult learner's life situation.

Narratives serve a purpose for passing along and handing down culturally shared values (Bamberg, 2011, 103). Firstly, narratives map the terrain of what is changing and what is seen as remaining the same and position the person in terms of continuity and constancy. Another dimension is how people feel sameness or difference, how they belong to particular communities, and what aspects they pick up when they refer to this community. Narrative practice views people in interaction and under construction (Bamberg, 2011, 105). A third dimension of identity navigation is agency. People are in control of positioning themselves and not just accommodating situations.

Our study considers identity as a narrative practice in career building process (see LaPointe, 2010). We argue that when adult learners narrate about their careers they argue about their meaningful experiences (Bruner, 2004), situate and organise these experiences in a coherent way, and construct such storylines (Polkinghorne, 1995; Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) in which they are able to negotiate their identity positions (LaPointe, 2011). Our study aims to increase the understanding of how adult learners argue their career change possibilities and describe their identity positions within this process. LaPointe (2011) found three practices of identity positions in her study. The first practice was that of a proactive career changer. Sometimes the change had been caused by an old broken career and the disruption narratives talked about resilience. Sometimes the changer was trying to find a more valuable career and these mismatched narratives sought authenticity. Another reason for changing careers was a change in one's personal life and these life renewal narratives talked about purposefulness. The second career position practice

involved ordering the multiple identity positions of the past, the present and the imagined future. One reason for positioning one's identity in a new way was conflicts. In her follow-up study, LaPointe (2011) found that career transitions change over time. Sometimes adults find a new career directions and identity positions, sometimes they modify their existing careers and identity positions. The third practice was to see the need for change, but not yet realise any changes.

Research questions and methodology

In our study, we used the narrative research approach to explore the kinds of stories constructed during a two-year programme of pedagogical studies for IT professionals. In the academic year 2017–2018, a total of 16 adult learners started the programme. The entry requirement was that their previous master's degree included computer science studies worth at least 60 ECTS. The aim of this new training programme was that participants could focus on the field of teaching: teaching, coordinating and developing IT teaching or producing digital teaching and learning materials; or on further and continuing education, in their own company, for example. The programme sought to open up new career opportunities for adult learners.

By combining the narrative research approach and the positioning view we aimed to examine adult learners' positioning in relation to the social context of the current study programme and their career construction beyond university. The concepts of storylines and positioning (Van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), following both Harre's and others' (Harré et al., 2009; Harré & Van Langenhove, 2010) social discursive positioning views, and Bamberg's (2011) personally active positioning view, offered ways of interpreting agency and meaning-making during the programme.

Research questions:

- How were the adult learners' storylines and positions constructed within the two-year pedagogical studies at the university?
- What kind of meaning the teachers' pedagogical studies had for the adult learners from the perspective of their career and identity construction?

Participants and data

The target group of the study were the 16 adult participants of the two-year programme, 10 women and 6 men, who had very different professional backgrounds. Some of them had worked in the IT sector for several years, some still did, some were IT entrepreneurs, and some were searching for new employment opportunities.

The narrative data consisted of both written stories and interviews during the two-year programme in 2017–2019. The first part of the data consisted of written essays. At the beginning of the programme, in the autumn of 2017, we asked the participants to write story-like narratives in which they described their reasons for applying for the programme, their preliminary experiences as adult students at the university and their expectations of the future. They were instructed to write their essays in story form. We received 16 stories from the programme participants. The second part of the data consisted of interviews of the participants at the end of the first academic year (or after the summer break at the beginning of the second year), by which time most of the participants had already successfully completed the programme. These thematic interviews included topics such as the importance of pedagogical studies, perceptions of themselves as students at the university compared to previous study experiences, and their own immediate and long-term plans after their studies. We conducted nine interviews altogether. The last part of the data consisted of vignettes, six months later, at the beginning of 2019, we emailed the informants and asked them to write a small description of what they were doing and whether they had used their pedagogical studies. Although many of the participants had already transferred to their own or new jobs, 11

responded to this request from the original 16 informants. Overall, eight adult learners participated in all three phases of data collection.

Analysis

The first stage of the narrative analysis focused on the written essay stories (first part of the data) and individual adult learner cases. Both authors did this reading separately. After the reading round, the authors negotiated a common understanding of the interpretations of the individual stories. The focus of the reading round was on the storyline itself and the interesting details that emerged. The analysis then moved to the second stage in which the authors made a cross-comparison of all the stories and discussed the common patterns of the storylines and positioning. Using the main lines and the personally meaningful details, it was possible to further elaborate on what united or separated these stories. As a result, three distinct storylines were initially identified, which each brought very different meanings to the studies for the adult learners' career and identity construction. This analysis of the storylines also guided the planning of the second and third parts of the data collection during which informants were selected to represent each of these three different storylines and positioning patterns.

Together, the second and the third parts of the data collection (interviews, vignettes) formed the third stage of analysis, during which the three storylines underwent their final interpretations. Moreover, conclusions were made as to how the informants had understood the positioning in the storylines and how the pedagogical studies were interpreted as creating a context for their career and identity construction within these storylines.

Results

From the 16 participants' narratives, interviews and vignettes we identified three storylines and positioning: (1) the storyline of different alternatives, in which the participants positioned themselves as planners of different career paths, (2) the storyline of becoming a teacher, in which the participants positioned themselves as reflectors of teaching and learning and saw working as a teacher as an enriching alternative, and (3) the storyline of looking forward, in which the participants positioned themselves as developers and saw mainly their studies as expanding their job opportunities. Within these storylines, a very different relationship between adult learners and pedagogical studies emerged compared to both to their previous career and future career aspirations. Generally, these storylines mirrored the personal key life transitions and changes that the participants were going through, as well as how they were aiming to respond to these changes (see Kasworm, 2003).

Storyline 1: The storyline of different alternatives

In this storyline, persons position themselves as a career path builders and planners, who worry about the future and weigh different options. Five of the 16 informants represented this storyline. At the beginning of the project, these informants wrote in their narratives that they had undertaken the pedagogical studies as a mere experiment to see what they would lead to, seizing an opportunity.

Harvey (narrative): I applied for this education because my wife suggested it. She'd seen an announcement about the programme in the newspaper or on the internet and suggested it to me.

Ann (narrative): I started teacher education thinking, let's see where it leads.

In this storyline, studying is also seen as an opportunity and additional competence, in which teaching is one possible option.

Ian (narrative): I now dream about teacher posts when I ponder my future. In fact, I believe I'll work for a short time as an IT consultant but try to find myself a more 'pedagogical job image', either from my current employer or possibly other IT companies. I'm currently trying hard to collect a list of all the different doors the pedagogical studies will open for me. The list is starting to be nice and long and it makes me positive.

Jocelyn (narrative): I have no specific plans as to where I'll use my education and qualification. I don't think I'll be a teacher at any school. Instead, I think it's very likely that I'll continue to educate adults as part of my work. I hope I do it better than I would have done without these studies.

Some of the informants were also planning to combine technology and pedagogy in developing their own firms.

Harvey (interview): In a way, the ideal situation for me would be to have a teacher's job and at the same time develop my firm.

Becoming an adult student inspired many of these informants to study. They recognised that studying was different to what it had been as young students, and their motivation was also different. In this storyline, the informants had many features of a lifelong learner who may also look for new courses and continue their studies.

Ann (interview): At the moment, I think, I'm not at all sure whether I'd like to have a traditional job. I hope this opens up some new opportunities to do other kinds of projects too, and project work. Perhaps it'll open up some kind of job as a developer, a designer or something.

Afterwards, a year after the pedagogical studies had ended, the possibility of becoming a teacher had crystallised. Some of the informants in this storyline had become teachers and others had found new opportunities.

Harvey (vignette, a year later): For me, it enabled a new career. [...] Now I have an interesting job in which the future looks good. I'm very happy with my job of full-time ICT teaching. At the moment, I only teach adult students. The work has positively surprised me by its versatility. It allows a lot of autonomy, and at the same time different forms of collaboration with colleagues. I wasn't sure whether teaching would suit me, but in my current job at least, I'm really comfortable at the moment.

Jocelyn (vignette, a year later): At least partly thanks to this program, I'm writing a coding book. I don't think it's just had an impact on the workplace, although it does involve some teaching or training, and I can utilize these skills.

Ann (vignette, a year later): At the end of my studies, I felt that classroom teaching wasn't for me. I didn't feel comfortable with assessing learning and maintaining order, nor with the school schedule and the hectic atmosphere. [...] So this programme has clearly opened up new opportunities and future paths for me. It's also made me more aware of myself, my past and my thoughts.

Storyline 2: The storyline of becoming a teacher

In this storyline of becoming a teacher, persons position themselves as a reflector on their own teaching and learning and consider working as a teacher as an enriching alternative. Seven of the 16 informants were following this storyline. These informants were specifically reflecting on the benefits of the pedagogical studies, they discussed their actions as teachers, and talked about teacher's role and teaching. In their background, there was also a vision of working with people not only with computers and pedagogical studies were perceived to bring a broader knowledge base related to this.

Heidi (narrative): The idea of being a teacher has formed through a long growth process. Since childhood, I've always enjoyed managing, organizing and guiding my smaller siblings.

Noel (narrative): Teacher's pedagogical studies have been an option for me since the first year of university.

Rylie (narrative): I see the teacher's work as meaningful and rich in content. I feel I've grown little by little into this profession. [...] I've always ended up on guiding others, both colleagues and customers. Refining and

crystallizing my skills and sharing them with others brings me great satisfaction. I feel that, along with my teacher studies, I'm currently undergoing a strong growth process. I'm looking for my identity as a teacher, learning new things and perspectives, and I'm also happy to see how much I already know.

For four informants of these seven, these reflections were positive, but a parallel storyline of struggle could also be identified. Three of these seven informants saw becoming a teacher through negation. Because of some negative experiences in the past, being a teacher had not previously been their focus.

Evelyn (narrative): If I go back far enough, the story is a pretty typical: 'I'm not going to be a teacher'.

Paisley (narrative): When I was small, I didn't want to be a teacher.

Nonetheless, through the pedagogical studies, some insights and perceptions had changed, and all of these seven informants saw the possibility of becoming a teacher as worth considering. They reflected on what kind of students to teach (lower secondary, upper secondary, adult learners), what kind of professional path to take and compared their paths and teaching practice experiences, and the importance of pedagogical studies.

Paisley (interview): These studies are really important when changing your field to that of education. It may be a path to working with children and young people instead of working with computers. I give great weight to these studies for my own career and future. Moreover, I think these studies have also given me an emphasis on interpersonal skills and communication skills.

Lauren (narrative): Teacher training has given me a great basis for planning new study modules, as well as self-confidence as a teacher, trainer and mentor. At the moment, I don't believe I'll work in a permanent teacher profession; I want to utilize these skills in other fields and in life.

Perhaps a regular teaching position was not seen as an alternative, because there are not many IT teacher posts available, but in general, the informants in this storyline thought about different postgraduate studies and saw achieving teacher qualifications as personally meaningful.

Olivia (narrative): I still don't know who or what I'll teach in the future. [...] In any case, I strongly believe I've made a right choice and that in some way I'll make use of my pedagogical studies.

Heidi (vignette, a year later): My pedagogical studies have also influenced my professional skills. I can now plan and evaluate work assignments, workshops and management involvement situations much more rationally.

In this storyline, the reflection on becoming a teacher or not seems to continue a year later, as seen in Rylie's and Evelyn's interviews and vignettes.

Rylie (vignette, a year later): What has been beneficial for me in teacher education is that I'm now able to more closely follow the educational policy debate in the media. I felt empowered during my studies when I realized that my life experience (beautifully above average student age) and my career was very useful in studying and adopting new things. [...] My self-image as a capable learner was strengthened – it seemed a bit lost before I began my studies. [...] However, I wouldn't really do anything differently – it is comfortable and safe to get paid every month. [...] Pedagogical studies offer opportunities to change careers and I'm grateful that I got the opportunity to complete them.

Evelyn (vignette, a year later): I've now been working in high school as a substitute mathematics and information technology teacher for over four months. [...] It's heavy work and it's hard, especially when you start as a new teacher, and in the middle of the school year. [...] and I finally decided that I can't continue in this place, even though there are a lot of good things here, too. [...] Fortunately, for me, teaching isn't my only option.

However, for some of the informants in this storyline, the project really changed their careers.

Paisley (vignette, a year later): I wanted to complete the pedagogical studies because then I could change fields. It seems that this programme really did give me a good chance. I completed my studies in a year. Immediately after them I got a longer (almost four-month) position as a second-grade teacher. Now I've already been working as an information technology and maths [subject] teacher for six months.

Storyline 3: The storyline of moving forward

In this storyline, persons position themselves as a developers or educators, and individual development in relation to the educational field (without forgetting one's own background in the IT field) is at the centre. In these four cases, pedagogical studies formed a continuum for the storyline in relation to the past. These informants' previous educational experiences seemed to be in line with the pedagogical studies, and they combined education with their own IT background and built on this.

Kevin is a good example. In his narrative, he is already planning how to combine his pedagogical studies with his own field and in his vignette a year later he seems to have succeeded in this.

Kevin (narrative): Basically, my family and relatives have supported my decision to become a teacher. However, someone mentioned that there is a shortage of workers in the ICT sector. I have to admit that I've not been very active in searching for project manager positions. I know the sector so well, and so far, it's not terribly inspiring. Instead, I'm more and more interested in the teaching work, and am gathering more tools for teaching.

Kevin (vignette, a year later): I'm now working as an IT teacher in vocational education. Without teacher training, I probably wouldn't be working here. [...]

Pedagogical studies also expanded Patrick's job opportunities.

Patrick (interview): In the autumn [2017] our company had employee redundancy negotiations. When I learned I wasn't going to be kicked out, I was a bit disappointed. [...] I was interested in various teaching jobs and developmental work in education. There were a couple of firms offering these, but it would've required setting up a company.

Patrick (vignette, a year later): I'm currently working full time in a software company under the title Senior Architect. I also study mathematics at the university. [...] My future plans don't include teaching work, at least not on a permanent basis. [...] Teaching is a backup plan. [...] At the moment, it probably wouldn't make sense economically.

In this storyline, some people continued in their previous jobs after they had completed their pedagogical studies.

Mason (narrative): I feel that my pedagogical studies are very useful in my current work and I've already been able to apply some of the issues that emerged in the studies, for example, in planning training. [...] I don't know if I'll ever be a traditional subject teacher, but I feel that teaching skills and qualifications will be present in whatever I do in the future.

Stella (interview): I have a pretty interesting job and I can do new things all the time and be in touch with customers. That's also a kind of teaching. I organize information into an understandable form and tell customers what we're doing and train them in what's coming. So, maybe I'll keep my job and teaching alongside each other.

Stella (vignette, a year later): Pedagogical studies were a nice counterbalance to working life. I gained confidence that an adult learner can also learn new things. [...] My group provided support and security for learning new things. I could be myself, and we had a safe atmosphere in which to learn. [...] I'm in the same job as before. However, I've developed a new way of working and was among the first to introduce this new way to others. [...] Sometimes I think life could be quite different if I worked as a teacher. It's interesting, and now after completing my studies, I'll probably look into what opportunities are available.

Discussion

In this study, narrative orientation helped clarify the adult learners' processes of personal meaning-making and taking stances regarding their pedagogical studies during the two-year programme. Learning at the university can be an empowering experience for adult learners and it can open new perspectives to the self and one's possibilities (Alheit & Dausien, 2002; Field, 2012). All the adult learners successfully completed the programme, and the narrative approach made

the personal relationship with studies visible. This provided some evidence of how participating in an HE programme affects lifelong and continuous learning and what adults gain from participation.

Adult learners' relationships with studying are multifaceted and connected to their transitional identity processes (see Field, 2012; Kasworm, 2010). In our study, the informants could be placed already in the beginning of their studies within the three identified storylines and seemed to continue along the same storyline after the programme ended. Their positioning along these storylines reveals something essential about the meaning of studies for adult learners. In this sense, the sources of identity were discursive in nature and in how the informants worded their experiences and perceptions. By connecting past events to present experiences, and further, to future possibilities, the narratives constructed causality and continuity, which are preconditions for a sense of identity and its coherence (LaPointe, 2010). In the first, 'storyline of different alternatives', the focus was on future career possibilities and rationally outlined different career paths. Positioning was therefore settled in the studies as a *career path builder*. In the second, 'storyline of becoming a teacher', acting as a teacher was perhaps the most realistic option. Teaching was natural, and enriching alternative and positioning was by nature a *reflector on teacherhood*. The third 'storyline of moving forward' focused on self-development and the development of training methods, but mainly in one's current career context. Therefore, in this storyline, the person positioned themselves as a *developer*, with the combination of education or educational development work and the IT field at the centre.

Although pedagogical studies are not a self-evident choice for IT professionals, completing the studies gave the participants some additional qualifications and expanded their opportunities for careers transitions. For some participants, this provided the opportunity to return to work and continue a disrupted career. For others, it strengthened a dormant teachership and conceptualised the trainer identity. When comparing the identified positions in the three storylines with the career and identity negotiation practices observed in the LaPointe's (2011) study, the teacherhood reflector corresponds with a proactive career changer identity negotiation. The pedagogical studies were a useful opportunity to search for new career directions or expand one's opportunities to find a more valuable career. The career path builder position in turn strongly involved multiple identity negotiations during the training and in the outlined future, like in LaPointe's (2011) negotiation of multiple identities in career narrative. Identity position undergoes profound changes in career transition phases, and alternatives are explored and kept open. Teaching was perhaps one option, together with other alternatives, in the future. The third emerging identity position in the storylines, a developer, resembles the modified negotiation of existing career direction (LaPointe, 2011), where the old career is constructed in a new way. The pedagogical qualification was mainly seen as expanding job opportunities in the context of current career options. It is also worth noting that for some participants, the importance of these pedagogical studies opens perhaps later, as identity building continues in the new openings and opportunities that arise after the completed studies.

Conclusion

Lifelong and continuous learning projects in HE institutions require students who are willing to enter the projects and complete the studies specifically designed for them. Our study demonstrated that this requires a strong commitment from adult learners, and that they have insights and motivation for new openings. Compared to younger students, adult learners bring life experiences into their learning, at the same time mirroring their studies to their life experiences and future aspirations (Kasworm, 2003; Merrill, 2001). These reflections can be understood as part of a person's life and career construction (M.L. Savickas, 2005), but more broadly, also as part of ongoing institutional and societal transformations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). It is both a process of individuals' own career re-building and a process caused by structural changes that adult learners were going through when constructing their biographies. It seems that the

dissimilarity and boundary-crossing (the participants' previous HE degree and work experience from a different field) strongly highlights career reflection necessities. It was not obvious or easy for the participants to combine pedagogical studies with their previous expertise in the IT field.

If comparing the fields that emerged in this study, the IT field is rapidly evolving and professional images are changing accordingly and professionals in the field are required to have flexibility, willingness for continuous learning and the ability to adapt to new roles. The teaching profession, on the other hand, is an established profession with a clear professional image and very stable career prospects. The 'continuous learning' policy agenda, which was introduced in Finland to emphasise the importance of upskilling and reskilling necessities, seems particularly suitable for rapidly evolving technology-intensive industries such as IT field, where there has traditionally been a strong learning need during the entire working career (Oosi et al., 2019). But it should be noted that the professional image of the teacher is also changing in a present-day society where accelerating digitalisation (especially as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic) and changes in national curriculum fundamentals create order for strong IT skills that have not traditionally been at the core of the teaching profession. These societal changes bring new opportunities between modern and traditional professions and even combine them to some extent, although this reflection between very different professional fields was not by no means easy for adult learners.

This narrative study, combining career and identity perspectives, recalls the need to look at the role of adult learners in education holistically. The significance of studying cannot be separated from the adult's other areas of life (Kasworm, 2003, 2010; Merriam et al., 2007). It is essential and important to untangle the premises under which adult learners embark on studies in tertiary education. In this study, we investigated the different storylines and positions that the IT professionals narrated and we focused on forming an understanding of the possibilities the adult learners saw when they entered the HE programme of becoming a teacher and how these studies met their expectations. Merrill (2015) points out that adult learners' stories about university studies often emphasise the importance of support. It should also be noted that such separate projects and programs for continuous learning also set aside sufficient resources for adult learners in the form of tailored support and learning community building. In the context of the studied programme, support and encouragement from the lecturers, in-depth feedback and reflection within the assignments, and continuous peer support were important elements enabling participants to successfully complete their studies and identify the meaning of the studies for their personal life transitions and changes.

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