The sense of inadequacy and uncertainty arising from teacher work: Perspectives of pre- and in-service teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on the notion that teacher work has changed rapidly in recent decades. Teachers all over the world face students with diverse needs, and increased duties beyond actual teaching. Thus, teacher work has become more complex and demanding, with in-service teachers experiencing stress stemming from their work in general and different relationships, in particular. Simultaneously, pre-service teachers experience inadequacy and uncertainty about whether they can meet society’s expectations of teachers. This phenomenon has been studied before, but most relevant research has addressed pre- and in-service teachers separately; hence, the commonalities and differences between these groups have been ignored. The present study focuses on Finnish pre- and in-service teachers’ experiences of inadequacy and uncertainty in teacher work. The data consist of 37 pre-service teachers’ and 21 in-service teachers’ written narratives on teacher work. Narrative categorical analysis resulted in four conceptual categories: 1) the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from the nature of teacher work, 2) the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from a lack of concreteness in teacher education, 3) the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from not fulfilling societal ideals of a proper teacher, and 4) coping with inadequacy and uncertainty. The second and third categories were found only among pre-service teachers. The findings suggest that feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty arise from various interacting factors, including the solitary nature of teaching responsibilities, heavy workloads, and the demands imposed by the national curriculum. The pre-service teachers had a realistic understanding of the demands and responsibilities of teaching. The in-service teachers’ experiences related more closely to the actual concrete practices of teachers’ everyday work, whereas the pre-service teachers’ concerns were more general. The implications for the development of initial and in-service teacher education are discussed.

1. Introduction

Teacher work can be characterised as a process of constant change and hecticness, making the profession complicated and demanding (Korte et al., 2023; Räsänen et al., 2020). Multiple social changes, such as digitalisation, the strengthening of active citizenship, the implications of migration, and the polarisation of student achievement, will complicate future teachers’ work (Ministry of Education & Culture, 2022). Husu and Toom (2016) have argued that working as a teacher today requires an increased capacity to...
tolerate continuing change, uncertainty, unfinished tasks, and personal incompleteness. This raises questions about how to develop both initial and in-service teacher education in a way that ensures that future teachers acquire all the necessary competences (Korte et al., 2023; Lutovac et al., 2024).

Inadequacy and uncertainty can be seen as manifestations of the current era, which Bauman (2005) describes as a ‘liquid’ phase of modernity in which there are no solid and firm structures guiding life. Metaphors other than liquidity have been used, such as ‘gaseous modernity’, which could better describe the current multiplications of practices, technologies, and relationships (Lapoujade, 2018). Regardless of the metaphor used, teachers’ lives can be described as series of short-term projects and episodes. Like other professions, the teaching profession is ever-changing. Teacher development does not automatically mean sequential development with a secure career. In the era of individualisation, the focus of teaching has shifted from teaching to learning, with teachers no longer the only source of information. Teachers are supposed to be active participants in schools, for instance, by taking part in curriculum planning (Priestley et al., 2012). At the same time, teachers are supposed to teach students the most important skills for the future, which is a difficult task because the future is unpredictable. Moreover, curricula guiding teachers’ work always lag behind developmental trends, a situation that tends to increase the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty among future teachers.

Previous research has revealed that both teacher work and the process of learning to become a teacher are highly emotional endeavours during which pre- and in-service teachers experience emotional struggles. During teacher education studies, pre-service teachers face emotionally distressing situations, affecting their teacher identity and how they learn to become teachers (Lindqvist et al., 2017). Furthermore, pre-service teachers seem to experience inadequacy and uncertainty about meeting society’s expectations of teachers (Lutovac & Korkkö, 2023). Pre-service teachers may have strong cultural images of a proper teacher when entering teacher education programmes (Holappa et al., 2022; Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015; Kettunen et al., 2023); however, it is questionable whether the ideal teacher identity of pre-service teachers is aligned with the reality of teacher work, considering the new demands and responsibilities involved (Kettunen et al., 2023). The inability of pre-service teachers to fulfill the ideals of a proper teacher could lead to tensions and amplify their uncertainty about their suitability for their chosen career. Similarly, in-service teachers experience professional inadequacy and uncertainty, largely driven by the relational perplexities inherent in their work, which can significantly affect their job satisfaction, overall well-being, and professional development (Korkkö & Lutovac, 2024).

This study contributes to research on the emotional aspects of teacher work and the process of becoming a teacher by comparatively examining this sense of inadequacy and uncertainty from both pre- and in-service teachers’ perspectives, providing a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. To this point, this phenomenon has typically been examined in isolation, from either the perspective of pre-service teachers (Lindqvist et al., 2017) or in-service teachers (Lindqvist et al., 2020). Comparative knowledge on the experiences of the two groups will provide a broader understanding of how this sense of inadequacy and uncertainty develops, contributing to knowledge about teacher well-being and the developmental needs of teacher education. It is essential to recognize and address the struggles faced by pre- and in-service teachers to ensure the retention of educators in the field and improve the overall quality of teacher education. Thus, examining the written narratives of 37 pre-service teachers and 21 in-service teachers, this study asks the following question: what do pre- and in-service teachers’ narratives convey about their sense of inadequacy and uncertainty regarding teacher work and ways of coping with this issue? Based on the findings, the implications for both initial and in-service teacher education are described.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Teacher work as an emotional and relational practice

In this study, we approach teacher work as a deeply emotional and relational practice (Hargreaves, 1998; Korthagen, 2017). Previous studies have addressed the emotional dimensions of teacher work, for example, from the viewpoints of pre-service teachers’ development of teacher identity (Kettunen et al., 2023; Lindqvist et al., 2017), burnout and turnover intentions (Rajendran et al., 2020; Räsänen et al., 2020), relationships and micropolitics (Uitto et al., 2021), and social and emotional competence (Korkkö & Lutovac, 2024). Teachers often experience a wide range of emotions in their work. They may feel joy when witnessing a student’s success, empathy when a student faces challenges, frustration when dealing with classroom-management issues, and even stress due to the demands of the job. Moreover, teachers form connections with their students, colleagues, parents, and administrators, and these relationships are essential for successful teaching (Heikonen et al., 2017). These various relationships can be both very rewarding and simultaneously emotionally demanding (Kelchtermans, 2009; Uitto et al., 2021). Emotions are interconnected with and evolve through interactions with the ethical and moral nature of teacher work within the context of school micropolitics. Teachers use power and make decisions based on their moral commitments, and these decisions have an influence on their students’ lives (Kelchtermans, 2017).

2.2. Inadequacy and uncertainty in teacher work

The emotional and relational aspects of teaching mean that vulnerability is an inevitable part of teacher work (Holappa et al., 2022; Kelchtermans, 1996). Vulnerability can be described as a complex emotional experience. It involves not feeling safe enough in an environment to take risks because of the fear of negative consequences, such as losing face, experiencing loss, or feeling pain (Lasky, 2005). In the context of teaching, this definition suggests that teachers may hesitate to try new methods or approaches. At the same time, vulnerability can be regarded as an integral aspect of the teaching profession whose realisation should be promoted (Kelchtermans, 1996, 2017). Inadequacy and uncertainty can be seen as parts of vulnerability, with inadequacy referring to teachers’
experiences of insufficient competence in some aspects of their work, for example, teacher–student relationships (Heikonen et al., 2017). A sense of inadequacy typically arises when teachers cannot meet their professional standards, such as during ethical dilemmas or when facing a lack of resources (Etäläpelto et al., 2015). A lack of self-confidence and a feeling of not being prepared are typically experienced simultaneously during feelings of inadequacy (Lindqvist et al., 2017). Uncertainty often results from inadequacy, even though it can also appear without a clear link to inadequacy (Heikonen et al., 2017; Holappa et al., 2022; Lindqvist et al., 2017). Moreover, professional inadequacy has been recognised as one of the three distinct symptoms of burnout, so its relationship to teacher well-being is multidimensional (Hakanen et al., 2006).

Micropolitics, that is, wider organisational structures (Kelchtermans, 2009), affect the so-called emotional rules (Zembylas, 2007) dictating which emotions can or cannot be expressed in specific settings. Which emotions are regarded as appropriate to express shapes the experience of inadequacy and uncertainty. For example, teachers may suppress the anger and irritation aroused by teacher–student or teacher–parent relationships (Lindqvist et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers may hide their uncertainties from their colleagues and students but show them in environments in which they feel safe enough (e.g., Uitto et al., 2016). Similarly, in a teacher education context, pre-service teachers may feel pressured to suppress parts of themselves to ‘fit in’, which means hiding features that are not considered to be those of a proper teacher, such as unpleasant emotions (Holappa et al., 2022; Shapiro, 2010). Doing so can have negative consequences for the development of teacher identities and affect pre-service teachers’ willingness to enter the teaching profession. Therefore, studying pre- and in-service teachers’ experiences of inadequacy and uncertainty is important because it can reveal aspects of teachers’ daily work and micropolitics as well as the reality of teacher education.

Pre- and in-service teachers’ experiences of inadequacy and uncertainty are related to teacher job satisfaction, attrition, and retention, and through various intermediating factors they also contribute to professional communities, student achievement, and the quality of education in general (Heikonen et al., 2017; Räsänen et al., 2020). For example, Heikonen et al. (2017) found that perceived inadequacy in teacher–student relationships mediated relationships between Finnish beginning teachers’ professional agency and turnover intentions. Teacher turnover is recognised as a serious problem worldwide. In Finland, specifically, teacher turnover rates have increased over time, and there is social concern about the attractiveness of the teaching profession (Heikkinen et al., 2020; Ministry of Education, 2007). Thus, it is essential to recognise the reasons behind the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty experienced during basic teacher education.

3. Methods

This is a qualitative research study that applies a narrative research approach, as described by Lieblich et al. (1998). Narrative research involves collecting and analysing personal stories and narratives to understand the lived experiences of individuals and the realities of their work (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this case, the narratives are collected from pre- and in-service teachers to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences related to feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty in teacher work. Data analysis of this study was guided by the following question: what do pre- and in-service teachers’ narratives convey about their sense of inadequacy and uncertainty regarding teacher work and ways of coping with this issue?

3.1. Participants and data collection

The context of this study is Finnish teacher education. In Finland, all primary school teachers go through a five-year master’s degree programme, completing a Master of Arts in Education degree. After completing this degree, they receive a formal qualification to teach grades 0–6. Subject teachers (grades 7–9 in lower secondary school or upper secondary school) typically have a master’s degree in a specific subject domain (e.g., mathematics, science, or English). Additionally, they are required to undertake an additional one year of study (equivalent to 60 credit points) in educational science and pedagogy. Special education teachers, who teach across a wider grade range (grades 1–9), typically hold a master’s degree in special education (Finnish National Agency for Education, n.d.).

This study is part of two larger projects titled ‘The Unpacking and Redefining Changing Relationships in Teachers’ Work (RELA)’ (Research Council of Finland, 2020-2024) and ‘Pre-service Teachers Navigate Teachers’ Changing Work and Its Relationality (NAVI)’ (Eudaimonia Institute, University of Oulu, 2022-2025). Collectively, these projects focus on teachers’ work and its changing nature, along with its relational and emotional dimensions, and examine these phenomena from the perspective of pre- and in-service teachers in the fields of primary, subject, and special education.

The data used in this study consist of the written narratives of 37 pre-service teachers and 21 in-service teachers. From 2021 to 2022, pre- and in-service teachers from all over Finland were invited to submit their narrative writings, via a Webropol survey, in response to the following open question: what is teachers’ work today like? The participants were included through several rounds by informing pre- and in-service teachers about the projects via email lists, utilising researchers’ personal contacts in other Finnish universities, and use of the snowball method. The length of the writings varied from relatively short paragraphs to almost one-and-a-half-page texts.

The in-service teachers were asked about their backgrounds (age, work experience, current workplace, and gender if they wanted to reveal it), and they were free to choose the details they wanted to share. The 21 participating in-service teachers represent different ages, work experiences, school sizes, and geographical areas. Eleven teachers identified themselves as female and three as male, while seven teachers did not specify their genders. Teachers’ ages ranged from 28 to 60 years, with the medium being 48 years. Their work experience ranged from a few months to 36 years, with the medium being 20 years; thus, in general, the participating teachers had considerable teaching experience. All teachers worked at the primary or lower secondary school levels: 13 were primary school teachers, five were subject teachers, and one was both a primary school teacher and a subject teacher. Two teachers did not specify
**Table 1**
Data analysis process of pre-service teachers’ written responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Excerpts from narratives</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Teaching is a relaxed job physically, but mentally, it is tough when you must often figure out solutions by yourself to problems that suddenly pop up in class.”</td>
<td>Mentally challenging work</td>
<td>The sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from the nature of teacher work</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I feel inadequate every day when I am not able to be present to the audience of over 20 students. You could always do more. You could plan better. You could be a better example for students. You could collaborate better with parents.”</td>
<td>Working alone</td>
<td>Sense of inadequacy constantly present</td>
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<td>“Busy, a lot of work other than teaching, more than before… inclusion does not work as it should… there is a lack of resources, some pupils need smaller teaching groups and shorter days.”</td>
<td>Hecticness and hurry</td>
<td>Intensified interaction with parents through technological devices</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Teacher work today focuses on discipline and pupil behaviour as well as education, which limits the time for actual learning during classes…”</td>
<td>Heavy workload, many duties besides teaching</td>
<td>Contradictions between the demands of the national curriculum and teachers’ own pedagogical freedom</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Parents come along the wires for whatever reason, a ‘bad exam grade, etc. But on the other hand, parents may not participate in parent meetings and evaluation discussions anymore.”</td>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>Teacher education encouraging certain teacher traits and attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The documents are political and produced at too high a level, and they really can’t know enough about the grass-roots level and the culture that prevails there. In other words, as a teacher, I feel that in difficult situations, my hands are tied, but at the same time, I am required to act.”</td>
<td>National curriculum disconnected from teachers’ daily work</td>
<td>The sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from a lack of concreteness in teacher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“After graduation and entering working life, we jump straight in at the ‘deep end’. I have often heard from others how little we were taught during the training phase about the tools that would be most important in everyday teaching situations (e.g., how to intervene in bullying or challenging situations with students.).”</td>
<td>Teacher education not preparing pre-service teachers by giving them concrete tools to intervene in bullying or other challenging situations with pupils</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Multilingualism has only been discussed in passing in education, and no concrete means to manage it have been taught. Similarly, you will not receive any training to support students with learning difficulties if you do not apply for special education studies yourself. This is a major drawback, as the implementation of three-tiered support is equally the responsibility of the class teacher… The training does not concern, for example, group management, disciplinary action, intervention in bullying at school, or cooperation between home and school.”</td>
<td>Teacher education not preparing pre-service teachers with concrete tools to support pupils with special needs, such as learning difficulties</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“Some kind of candle for the people thinking is still present in our society. I can’t say if it is teachers themselves who are maintaining it, or expectations from the society if it is sum of these two.”</td>
<td>Teacher education encouraging certain teacher traits and attitudes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“Pretty quickly, during my studies, it became clear that if you are not creative, do not want to sacrifice your whole life for children, possibly do not want to have children of your own, are not basically happy and outgoing by nature, or like order, you are not suitable to be a teacher. Many people from my annual course have changed fields completely, or their studies have been delayed, like myself. I personally don’t want to do the work of a classroom teacher. Creative, extroverted ‘sillies’ or even those with a conservative worldview have remained in the field.”</td>
<td>Finding meaning in work</td>
<td>Coping with inadequacy and uncertainty</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Despite everything, the work feels meaningful, and successes give immense strength.”</td>
<td>Success in work</td>
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<tr>
<td>“A little positive feedback from the students helps you cope in addition to the fact that this work is a calling.”</td>
<td>Positive feedback from students</td>
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<tr>
<td>“A certain self-compassion towards one’s own time and strength helps but does not correct situations in which, for example, it is not possible to provide special support with one’s own know-how. In such situations, I have experienced despair.”</td>
<td>Teacher work as vocation</td>
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Table 1 (continued)

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<th>Excerpts from narratives</th>
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<td>“A teacher’s job is not just teaching… I can consider this a heavy thing, but I feel that if I can make students feel better or create the impression that they are important or good, just as themselves, then I want to use these roles.”</td>
<td>Seeing diverse duties as opportunities</td>
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</table>

1 Since 2011, learning support in Finnish basic education has been delivered through the three-tiered support system emphasising all teachers’ responsibility to deliver support within the regular educational setting.

2 At the time when the Finnish education system was primarily based on folk schools, the folk school teachers (class teachers, primary school teachers) were called kansan kylläiset in Finnish, that is, the candle for the people. The label often had rather negative connotations and referred particularly to rural folk school teachers who ‘set light to the world’.

their positions. The teachers worked in various geographical areas, mainly in the northern part of Finland.

The pre-service teachers were asked about their degree programmes and previous work experiences as teachers. They were not asked about their gender. Of the 37 participating pre-service teachers, 34 were studying to become primary school teachers, two were studying to become subject teachers, and one was studying to become a special education teacher. Most of the pre-service teachers were enrolled in either their fourth (n = 17) or fifth year of study (n = 8) in teacher education. As regards the study years of the other participants, five were in the first year, one was in the second year, four were in the third year, and two were in the sixth year. The pre-service teachers represented various Finnish universities.

Both pre- and in-service teachers were informed about the study in detail. Those who sent their writings gave their consent by submitting their responses, which included all the necessary information for the study, participation, and data protection. The contact details of the projects’ principal investigator were provided in case the participants had any questions or concerns. This study followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2023) and did not require institutional review board approval.

3.2. Data analysis

The data obtained from pre- and in-service teachers were analysed separately and in two phases. First, the researchers read the data holistically to gain a sense of the dataset as a whole. This reading revealed an emerging sense of inadequacy and uncertainty related to various aspects of teacher work. Second, the narratives were analysed categorically in terms of their content (Lieblach et al., 1998) to identify the key categories in both datasets (see Tables 1 and 2). The first and second author were familiar with the data because they were working for the associated projects and had therefore read through the data before writing this article. The preliminary analysis and categorisation were conducted by the first author. However, interrater reliability was increased by collaborative discussion of the initial codes and final categories among the three authors. During this process, the initial codes and final categories evolved until consensus was achieved among the authors.

The analysis of pre- and in-service teachers’ data resulted in four conceptual categories: 1) the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from the nature of teacher work, 2) the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from a lack of concreteness in teacher education, 3) the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from not fulfilling societal ideals of a proper teacher, and 4) coping with inadequacy and uncertainty. As seen in Tables 1 and 2, the second and third categories were found only among pre-service teachers’ narratives. The results section presents these categories as well as commonalities and differences between pre- and in-service teachers within them. The letters following the participants’ extracts identify the participants: PST = pre-service teacher; IST = in-service teacher.

4. Findings

4.1. The sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from the nature of teacher work

The findings indicate that the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty is inherent in teaching and is closely tied to stress and mental strain. The pre-service teachers’ narratives reveal that this sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stems from the nature of teacher work, which is characterised by teachers working alone and having to take responsibility for an entire class:

I feel inadequate every day when I am not able to be present to the audience of over 20 students. You could always do more. You could plan better. You could be a better example for students. You could collaborate better with parents. (PST 24)

Teaching is a relaxed job physically, but mentally, it is tough when you must often figure out solutions by yourself to problems that suddenly pop up in class. (PST 3)

The pre-service teachers described teacher work as hectic including many duties. Teachers confront inclusive classrooms where students’ needs are diverse and there is a simultaneous lack of resources, making it more difficult to meet those needs:

Busy, a lot of work other than teaching, more than before… Inclusion does not work as it should… there is a lack of resources, some pupils need smaller teaching groups and shorter days. (PST 2)

Like the pre-service teachers, the in-service teachers wrote about working and taking responsibility for the students alone. They spoke of how hecticness and hurry aggravate the sense of inadequacy and may cause feelings of guilt:

Endless planning, taking responsibility, settling disputes and bullying issues, emotional work, and taking care of student matters...
The constant sense of urgency does not accumulate into a feeling of guilt. (IST 11) I am willing to face all these challenges in my work, but there should be more time so that the decisions made support the students more and the constant sense of urgency does not accumulate into a feeling of guilt.

Long days are quite stressful without breaks during long days. The load stems from the reality that you must manage work alone. I would be willing to face all these challenges in my work, but there should be more time so that the decisions made support the students more and the constant sense of urgency does not accumulate into a feeling of guilt.

Moreover, the in-service teachers mentioned the diversity of students’ needs and lack of resources. Unlike the pre-service teachers, they pondered their lack of competence to meet diverse students’ needs, which might deepen their sense of inadequacy especially when there is lack of teaching resources in real-life classrooms:

There are students who could study better in small groups. I do not have separate training in special education, so I feel a huge inadequacy with such students.

Children with special needs have been placed in large general education classes, but resources have not followed. There are more and more students with behavioural disorders in regular classrooms; handling them takes time away from those [students] who need support for their learning. The constant sense of inadequacy burdens me and makes me sad. This is no longer the job I was trained to do and loved.

In my opinion, the latest basic education curriculum is too vague and fragmented. The distribution of hours has failed in many respects, and despite the best efforts, the assessment criteria do not lead to sufficiently uniform assessment.

The work is fragmented, and the period planning that we studied so much in training is pointless when other variables keep coming in all the time...for example, the three consecutive hours starting at 9 a.m. on Fridays reserved for teaching that is not included in the timetable are already starting to fray the nerves and create pressure in terms of whether there is time to go through and study all the things required in the curriculum. In addition, the variables include the issues of individual students.

The teacher must also be more responsible for guiding and raising the child in their everyday life and receives less comprehensive support from homes than they used to. Teachers are no longer respected in the same way as they used to be, and building cooperation requires a lot of pedagogical skills, interaction, emotional skills, and a strong educational partnership.

The best thing in work is direct feedback from the children, the joy of learning as well as seeing development in (students’) skills. I would not change my job for any other.

Co-teaching is becoming more common, which I see as a positive change: the teacher does not work alone; rather, colleagues support them in their work, and teaching can be arranged together, which also benefits the students.

I can trust and rely on the school management and my colleagues.

“Renewal and professional development bring new things to teaching and cooperation within the school. After all, this is a huge job, but I would not change job either.”

“However, I must consciously pay attention to my coping. That is why I turn off my work phone during my free time and do not read parents’ messages outside of working hours. I also limit my time on the teachers’ WhatsApp.”

Table 2

Data analysis process of in-service teachers’ written responses.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Excerpts from narratives</th>
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<th>Categories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Endless planning, taking responsibility, settling disputes and bullying issues, emotional work, and taking care of student matters without breaks during long days are quite stressful...”</td>
<td>Working and taking responsibility alone</td>
<td>The sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from the nature of teacher work</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Hectic, busy, stressful, so much to do that there is only time to plan lessons quickly or not very much, or you need to really overwork. Most of the time goes into contacting homes, child welfare, police, social workers, and other stakeholders, writing support documents and having meetings around them...”</td>
<td>Heavy workload, many duties besides teaching</td>
<td>Diverse students’ needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There are students who could study better in small groups. I do not have separate training in special education, so I feel a huge inadequacy with such students.”</td>
<td>Lack of competence in meeting diverse students’ needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Children with special needs have been placed in large general education classes, but resources have not followed. There are more and more students with behavioural disorders in regular classrooms; handling them takes time away from those [students] who need support for their learning. The constant sense of inadequacy burdens me and makes me sad. This is no longer the job I was trained to do and loved.”</td>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>Strengthened educational role of teachers: discipline and behaviour management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“In my opinion, the latest basic education curriculum is too vague and fragmented. The distribution of hours has failed in many respects, and despite the best efforts, the assessment criteria do not lead to sufficiently uniform assessment.”</td>
<td>Pressure to follow the national curriculum in a changing school environment</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction with the national curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The work is fragmented, and the period planning that we studied so much in training is pointless when other variables keep coming in all the time...”</td>
<td>Intensified interaction with parents through technological devices</td>
<td>Parents’ judgements and complaints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The teacher must also be more responsible for guiding and raising the child in their everyday life and receives less comprehensive support from homes than they used to. Teachers are no longer respected in the same way as they used to be, and building cooperation requires a lot of pedagogical skills, interaction, emotional skills, and a strong educational partnership.”</td>
<td>Weakened parental respect for teachers</td>
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<td>“The best thing in work is direct feedback from the children, the joy of learning as well as seeing development in (students’) skills. I would not change my job for any other.”</td>
<td>Finding meaning in work</td>
<td>Coping with inadequacy and uncertainty</td>
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<td>“Co-teaching is becoming more common, which I see as a positive change: the teacher does not work alone; rather, colleagues support them in their work, and teaching can be arranged together, which also benefits the students.”</td>
<td>Co-teaching</td>
<td>Support from colleagues and school leaders</td>
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<td>“I can trust and rely on the school management and my colleagues.”</td>
<td>Professional learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“Renewal and professional development bring new things to teaching and cooperation within the school. After all, this is a huge job, but I would not change job either.”</td>
<td>Setting boundaries around one’s work</td>
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without breaks during long days are quite stressful... The load stems from the reality that you must manage work alone. I would be willing to face all these challenges in my work, but there should be more time so that the decisions made support the students more and the constant sense of urgency does not accumulate into a feeling of guilt. (IST 11)
reduce support...Our school has one permanent special needs assistant. However, we also need another. I often have to teach crafts for the third and the fourth graders alone or with an unskilled trainee. After classes like this, I feel powerless and, sometimes, like a failure, even though I have tried to find workable ways to calm the class. (IST 5)

In the pre-teachers’ experiences, the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty relates to overall teacher workload and the fact that demands have increased over the past few years. Meetings with various stakeholders, taking care of pupils’ issues, and developmental work take up a tremendous amount of time, as does administrative work, for example, documenting student learning. As a result, more and more work is done after official working hours.

When describing the increased workload and demands in more detail, the pre-service teachers mentioned the broader range of tasks that teachers are expected to take on, which affects their sense of inadequacy and uncertainty. The pre-service teachers found that managing students’ behavioural issues and conflicts took much time away from actual teaching:

Teacher work today focuses on discipline and pupil behaviour as well as education, which limits the time for actual learning during classes. (PST 6)

Like the pre-service teachers, the in-service teachers mentioned the school’s increased responsibilities, which had, in their view, resulted in a situation whereby schools have assumed part of the parental responsibility for education:

Children with special needs have been placed in large general education classes, but resources have not followed. There are more and more students with behavioural disorders in regular classrooms and handling them takes time away from those [students] who need support for their learning. The constant sense of inadequacy burdens me and makes me sad. This is no longer the job I was trained to do and loved. (IST 4)

Some pre-service teachers mentioned students’ parents as one source of feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty. They described how common it is today for parents to have constant access to teachers via digital technology, which further allows parents to challenge teachers and make demands. At the same time, parents may not participate in official meetings with teachers:

Teachers have always been and still are bound by many laws, but I feel that teachers’ fear has grown. Parents come along the wires for whatever reason, a ‘bad’ exam grade, etc. But on the other hand, parents may not participate in parent meetings and evaluation discussions anymore. (PST 21)

Additionally, the in-service teachers noted that parents’ judgements and complaints were perceived as showing a decline in respect for teachers:

Cooperation with parents has changed over time. Parents, on the one hand, are more demanding, and on the other, more indifferent. The teacher also has to be more responsible for guiding and raising the child in their everyday life and receives less comprehensive support from homes than they used to. Teachers are no longer respected in the same way as they used to be, and building cooperation requires a lot of pedagogical skills, interaction, emotional skills, and a strong educational partnership. (IST 7)

One issue causing inadequacy and uncertainty was the demands set by the national curriculum. Some pre-service teachers expressed how they sometimes struggled, feeling split between the demands of the national curriculum and their own pedagogical freedom. They were critical of the curriculum, which they found to be far from the reality of teacher work. Uncertainty about how to act in certain situations led to fear in some pre-service teachers:

I’m afraid to be myself, even though, at the same time, I know that this is how I would be at my best...The documents are political and produced at too high a level, and they really can’t know enough about the grass-roots level and the culture that prevails there. In other words, as a teacher, I feel that in difficult situations, my hands are tied, but at the same time, I am required to act. (PST 11)

Similarly, some in-service teachers were critical of the national curriculum, labelling it too fragmented, disconnected from teachers’ daily work, and flawed in many ways. The teachers thought they should be listened to when educational reforms are being planned:

In my opinion, the latest basic education curriculum is too vague and fragmented. The distribution of hours has failed in many respects, and despite the best efforts, the assessment criteria do not lead to sufficiently uniform assessment. The teachers should be listened to (not just seemingly heard) more and used as experts more. (IST 14)

Some in-service teachers felt pressured to follow the national curriculum. At the same time, they had to be flexible and react to changes, for example, by pondering what was important for students. This created extra pressure for the teachers:

The work is fragmented, and the period planning that we studied so much in training is pointless when other variables keep coming in all the time...for example, the three consecutive hours starting at 9 a.m. on Fridays reserved for teaching that is not included in the timetable are already starting to fray the nerves and create pressure in terms of whether there is time to go through and study all the things required in the curriculum. In addition, the variables include the issues of individual students. (IST 20)

Overall, the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty seems to stem from the nature of teacher work, which, despite being very collaborative (Lutovac et al., 2024), still entails working alone and taking responsibility for multiple tasks, with potentially limited competence and resources, in a hectic environment. In the long term, these experiences can result in feelings of guilt, frustration, and powerlessness. Moreover, the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty related to increased and competing demands stemming from the relationships between the basic education curriculum, pedagogical freedom, the realities of teachers’ daily work, and students’ parents.

4.2. The sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from a lack of concreteness in teacher education

The pre-service teachers’ narratives revealed their views about the role of teacher education in teacher work. Some pre-service teachers were critical of teacher education studies, highlighting that education had offered them very few concrete tools, for example, for dealing with bullying and difficult encounters with students:
After graduation and entering working life, we jump straight in at the ‘deep end’. I have often heard from others how little we were taught during the training phase about the tools that would be most important in everyday teaching situations (e.g., how to intervene in bullying or challenging situations with students). (PST 27)

Moreover, according to pre-service teachers, teacher education did not offer them adequate training regarding multilingualism, learning difficulties, group management, or home–school cooperation:

Multilingualism has only been discussed in passing in education, and no concrete means to manage it have been taught. Similarly, you will not receive any training to support students with learning difficulties if you do not apply for special education studies yourself. This is a major drawback, as the implementation of three-tiered support is equally the responsibility of the class teacher…The training does not concern, for example, group management, disciplinary action, intervention in bullying at school, or cooperation between home and school. (PST 15)

Overall, the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty among pre-service teachers was affected by the experience of a lack of concreteness in terms of teacher education studies.

4.3. The sense of inadequacy and uncertainty stemming from not fulfilling societal ideals of a proper teacher

Some pre-service teachers described how they had felt pressured to be a certain kind of teacher. For some pre-service teachers, this led to doubts about their suitability for a teaching career and feelings of inadequacy. According to the pre-service teachers, there is still some kind of social and cultural expectation of being a ‘candle for the people’:

Some kind of ‘candle for the people’ thinking is still present in our society. I can’t say if it is teachers themselves who are maintaining it, or expectations from the society, or if it is sum of these two. (PST 12)

The most common experience was that teacher education encouraged certain teacher traits and attitudes, such as positivity, extroversion, creativity, and a conservative worldview. This was one of the reasons why some pre-service teachers had quit or delayed their studies:

Pretty quickly, during my studies, it became clear that if you are not creative, do not want to sacrifice your whole life for children, possibly do not want to have children of your own, are not basically happy and outgoing in nature, or like order, you are not suitable to be a teacher. Many people from my annual course have changed fields completely, or their studies have been delayed, like myself. I personally don’t want to do the work of a classroom teacher. Creative, extroverted ‘sillies’ or even those with a conservative worldview have remained in the field. (PST 14)

The results indicate that one factor impacting pre-service teachers’ inadequacy and uncertainty may be the cultural images of a proper teacher, which affect the willingness to enter and/or complete teacher education and work.

4.4. Coping with inadequacy and uncertainty

Both pre- and in-service teachers described ways of coping with a sense of inadequacy and uncertainty. For the pre-service teachers, these included finding meaning in work, being successful at work, having positive feedback from students, seeing a teaching career as a vocation, and being kind to oneself:

Despite everything, the work feels meaningful, and successes give immense strength. (PST 16)
A little positive feedback from the students helps you cope, in addition to the fact that this work is a vocation. (PST 24)
A certain self-compassion towards one’s own time and strength helps but does not correct situations in which, for example, it is not possible to provide special support with one’s own know-how. In such situations, I have experienced despair. (PST 32)

Moreover, one way to cope with the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty can be to see the diverse duties of teacher work as opportunities, as one pre-service teacher did:

A teacher’s job is not just teaching…I can consider this a heavy thing, but I feel that if I can make students feel better or create the impression that they are important or good, just as themselves, then I want to use these roles. (PST 31)

Like the pre-service teachers, the in-service teachers found meaning in work and mentioned students as a source of reward. The in-service teachers appreciated direct feedback from students. Unlike the pre-service teachers, they also mentioned the joy of learning and seeing students’ progress in learning:

The best thing in work is direct feedback from children, the joy of learning as well as seeing development in (students’) skills. I would not change my job for any other job. (IST 5)

Moreover, unlike the pre-service teachers, the in-service teachers mentioned support from their colleagues and school leaders, collaboration with other teachers, and professional development:

Co-teaching is becoming more common, which I see as a positive change: the teacher does not work alone; rather, colleagues support the work, and teaching can be arranged together, which also benefits the students. (IST 10)
I can trust and rely on the school management and my colleagues. (IST 15)

Renewal and professional development bring new things to teaching and cooperation within the school. After all, this is a huge job, but I would not change job either. (IST 7)

Furthermore, one way to cope with the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty for the in-service teachers was setting boundaries around one’s work, for example, turning off one’s work phone after official working hours and restricting the reading of messages from parents and colleagues:

However, I must consciously pay attention to my coping. That is why I turn off my work phone during my free time and do not read parents’ messages outside of working hours. I also limit my time on the teachers’ WhatsApp. (IST 5)
Overall, both groups found teacher work rewarding, which can be regarded as an essential coping strategy. They wrote about the positive sides of their work, which also helped them to cope with burdens, inadequacy, and uncertainty.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal that the sense of inadequacy and uncertainty develops because of multiple interacting factors, such as the solitary nature of teaching responsibilities, heavy workloads, demands imposed by the national curriculum, relationships with students’ parents, the content of teacher education, and cultural images of what constitutes a proper teacher. The pre- and in-service teachers mentioned many similar sources of inadequacy and uncertainty, indicating that the pre-service teachers had a realistic picture of teacher work. However, the in-service teachers’ experiences were often related more strongly to the actual and concrete practices of teacher daily work, whereas the pre-service teachers’ concerns were more general. For instance, when talking about the nature of teacher work, the in-service teachers described in detail the daily challenges they face at work, such as meeting diverse students’ needs, adjusting the curriculum to the changing nature of the school day, and collaboration with parents. When talking about coping, the in-service teachers referred to their working communities, such as their colleagues and school leaders, and mentioned students’ progress. Because many participating in-service teachers had relatively long working experience, they had probably witnessed several instances of students’ developmental progress. The differences between pre- and in-service teachers’ experiences are understandable because as in-service teachers actively work in the field, they have a more direct connection to school life than pre-service teachers.

Pre-service teachers’ narratives, on the other hand, delved deeper into how teacher education impacts this group’s feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty. In their position as future teachers, they recognised the challenges of the teaching profession and naturally aspired to be prepared for their future roles as teachers. It is thus understandable that feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty arose. Furthermore, reflective practice is an integral part of Finnish teacher education; therefore, pre-service teachers are typically encouraged to reflect on various aspects of the process of becoming a teacher and of teachers’ work. This kind of reflective practice requires introspection and fosters self-awareness, highlighting both personal strengths and weaknesses (Lutovac & Kaasila, 2014). In addition, the discourses around self-development as a teacher are normative in the Finnish teacher education context (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015). While both reflective practice and self-development are important for teachers, we believe they may be part of the problem discussed in this paper, as they heighten pre-service teachers’ awareness of their vulnerabilities (Holappa et al., 2022) and pose additional pressures (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015), contributing to feelings of inadequacy and uncertainty.

The sense of inadequacy and uncertainty seems to be built into teacher work, being constantly present and related closely to stress and mental strain as well as hecticness and hurry. Experiences of these phenomena stemmed from the teachers’ taking responsibility for multiple tasks by themselves. The in-service teachers were concerned about their lack of competence to meet diverse students’ needs, as well as a lack of teacher resources, which further indicates their link to the reality of teacher work. The pre- and in-service teachers raised their willingness to act in the best interests of students. The narratives reveal that in many cases, the participants found this aim difficult to achieve. The results illustrate ethical dilemmas in teacher work in relation to students and how these might provoke a sense of inadequacy and uncertainty when teachers cannot do their work as well as they wish (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Hanhikoski & Sevö, 2024; Lindqvist et al., 2017).

The results of previous studies support the relationships between inadequacy and uncertainty and teachers’ burdens and stress. Professional inadequacy is linked to teachers’ professional agency and turnover intentions (Heikonen et al., 2017; Räsänen et al., 2020). We know, for example, that inadequate teacher–student relationships have been identified as one symptom of burnout (Hakanen et al., 2006). The findings of the present study reveal that experiences of inadequacy and uncertainty may develop as a result of working conditions and relationships at work, that is, working mainly alone with students with restricted resources and/or a lack of competence. The findings of this study are aligned with the results of Lindqvist et al. (2017) and Lindqvist et al., 2020) in indicating that professional inadequacy can be understood through powerlessness, limited means of action, and uncertainty.

Corroborating existing research (Lutovac et al., 2024; Räsänen et al., 2020), both the pre- and in-service teachers mentioned teachers’ increased workload and the demands of work, which aggravated their experiences of hecticness and hurry. Both pre- and in-service teachers critically questioned the curriculum, perceiving it as detached from the daily work of teachers. The pre-service teachers were uncertain about when to use their pedagogical freedom and when to adhere to the curriculum. The in-service teachers described in detail the daily challenges they face at work, such as meeting diverse students’ needs, adjusting the curriculum to the changing nature of the school day, and collaboration with parents. When talking about coping, the in-service teachers referred to their working communities, such as their colleagues and school leaders, and mentioned students’ progress. Because many participating in-service teachers had relatively long working experience, they had probably witnessed several instances of students’ developmental progress. The differences between pre- and in-service teachers’ experiences are understandable because as in-service teachers actively work in the field, they have a more direct connection to school life than pre-service teachers.

Both groups noted a shift in educational responsibility from homes to schools, impacting teacher work and teacher–parent relationships. Students’ parents emerged as a source of inadequacy and uncertainty because of increased judgements and complaints. Researchers have highlighted the importance of working teacher–parent relationships but also shown how these relationships can include tensions (Baeck, 2015; Lindqvist et al., 2020; Uitto et al., 2021). Experiences of trust and appreciation are very important to teachers (Kelchtermans, 2017); therefore, being questioned by parents can lead teachers to feel guilty, putting them in a vulnerable situation (Uitto et al., 2016). The findings of the present study seem to corroborate these results. Even though teachers find...
Teacher–parent collaboration important and see its benefits, they might consider parents’ questioning to represent a lack of trust in and threat to their professional authority, as was evident in the experiences of the in-service teachers of the present study (see also Bæck, 2015; Lindqvist et al., 2020).

This study also identified the coping strategies of both groups of teachers. Both pre- and in-service teachers found teacher work rewarding and mentioned students as one positive aspect of work. The findings add to the existing research, which lacks knowledge of pre-service teachers’ coping. To date, for example, Lindqvist et al. (2017) have focussed on lower secondary pre-service teachers’ coping strategies when faced with stressful situations. The authors encountered partially similar and partially different results, indicating that pre-service teachers coped with the situations by modifying their professional ideals, depending on future colleagues, and continuing to build experience. The pre-service teachers relied on adaptive and avoidance coping strategies without considering how they could learn from these stressful situations during teacher education. In the present study, the pre-service teachers seemed to focus on the positive aspects of teacher work and did not attempt to negotiate their professional ideals, consider their future teacher work, or build experience. Seeing diversity as an opportunity, as identified in the data, refers to a learning-centred approach that can help pre-service teachers cope in the long term. The pre-service teachers did not mention peer support or supervision as sources of coping, which can be regarded as surprising because in Finnish teacher education, learning is strongly based on group work and peer reflection (Paksuniemi et al., 2021; Tiainen & Lutovac, 2022). In contrast to the pre-service teachers, the in-service teachers mentioned that finding support from colleagues and principals, as well as collaboration with colleagues, eased their work. Overall, these findings are encouraging and corroborate existing studies indicating that pre- and in-service teachers find meaning in work and can tackle emotional burdens (Lutovac & Korkko, 2023; Lutovac et al., 2024; Newberry & Allsop, 2017).

Two categories were identified only in the pre-service teachers’ narratives. Only the pre-service teachers expressed criticism of and concerns about the lack of concreteness in teacher education studies and noted that they had learned about concrete tools mainly during teaching and from more experienced teachers. Previous research has recognised both pre-service teachers’ and beginning teachers’ feelings of being unprepared for the demands of working life (Lindqvist et al., 2017; Salovita & Tolvani, 2017). At the same time, it is argued that because of rapid changes, teacher education can never offer teachers all the knowledge they will need. Moreover, research has recognised that pre- and in-service teachers may lack the competence or willingness to use research-based knowledge and may therefore prefer experience-based knowledge to research-informed sources of teaching knowledge (Ferguson & Bätten, 2022; Thomm et al., 2021). Pre-service teachers may believe that learning to become a teacher only happens in working life, undermining the role of teacher education (Lindqvist et al., 2017). It is possible that the pre-service teachers in the present study had similar doubts about the value of teacher education or were uncertain about how to achieve pedagogical competence and acquire the essential professional knowledge that would help them fill knowledge gaps. This topic would require a closer analysis for wider conclusions to be drawn.

Some pre-service teachers felt that quite strict norms still prevailed about what it means to be a proper teacher in Finnish society, which limits the range of acceptable teacher traits and creates a sense of inadequacy and uncertainty. For some pre-service teachers, this led to hesitation about their suitability to be a teacher and even quitting or delaying their studies. The results are in line with those of previous studies, which found that pre-service teachers possess ideal images of a proper teacher that they aim to live up to. For example, Holappa et al. (2022) studied the emotional dimension of Finnish pre-service teachers’ teacher identities and found that the ideal teacher seems to be characterised by positivity, which can lead pre-service teachers to hide or suppress other emotions and therefore act as a source of uncertainty and vulnerability. Thus, norms have the potential to restrict the development of teacher identities (Holappa et al., 2022; Shapiro, 2010). Similar emotional suppression seems to continue in working life (Lindqvist et al., 2020; Uitto et al., 2015). The findings of the present study complement previous studies indicating that, like schools, teacher education programmes have some emotional rules that regulate pre-service teachers’ emotional reactions (Zembylas, 2007). This means that some emotions are more desirable than others, which may result in a tendency to hide one’s emotions.

6. Conclusions and implications

This study focussed on pre- and in-service teachers’ senses of inadequacy and uncertainty in teacher work. The findings of this study are based on a limited number of narratives, and it is not therefore possible to draw generalisable conclusions from pre- and in-service teachers’ experiences. However, the results add to existing knowledge of the phenomenon. We believe that the findings of this study can be utilised to develop teacher education in a way that considers the current demands of teacher work.

The findings of this study indicate that during their studies and even when entering teacher education, pre-service teachers might have a realistic image of teacher work. Like the in-service teachers, the pre-service teachers did not include any overidealistic views in their narratives and were aware of the realities of work. As regards future work, this awareness can be considered a good thing because pre-service teachers know what to expect in the field and might not become discouraged when facing challenging situations at work.

What is concerning, however, is that future teachers might experience a similar mental burden and stress as those of in-service teachers even during their teacher education. We see this as a risk because mental overload can develop into emotional exhaustion and cynicism, which are symptoms of burnout (Hakanen et al., 2006; Räisänen et al., 2020). Therefore, based on the findings, we regard it as likely that we are already observing symptoms of burnout during teacher education (Lindqvist et al., 2017). Hence, we argue that there is a need to discuss and develop practices that can prepare teachers for the diverse and changing demands of teacher work during initial and in-service teacher education. During their basic education, teachers could begin learning skills that support them in coping with stress, including general social and emotional competences as well as self-compassion, that is, a kind and understanding attitude towards oneself (Korkko & Lutovac, 2024; Wu et al., 2023). Based on in-service teachers’ narratives, we see that professional development initiatives must also include opportunities for teachers to build their self-confidence and self-compassion to mitigate their
sense of inadequacy and uncertainty. At all educational levels, more attention should be paid to teachers’ workload and the demands on them as well as the relations between these factors and teachers’ overall well-being. Based on the study’s findings, time seems to be a crucial aspect of teacher work. From this perspective, future research could pay more attention to how teachers use their time.

To support teacher well-being and success at work, it is important to support both pre- and in-service teachers in recognising factors affecting their sense of inadequacy and uncertainty, reflecting on their emotions, and developing long-term coping strategies. These strategies include, for example, feeling joy about students and student learning and asking for help from a peer student, colleague, or school leader when in need of support. Despite the challenges, teachers find their work meaningful. Future studies focusing on teachers’ sense of reward would paint a broader picture of these essential emotional aspects of work. As (Lutovac et al., 2024) have argued, seeing teaching as rewarding, together with hecticness, may lead to a risk of teacher burnout. Therefore, pre-service teachers should receive guidance about how to find a balance between various duties and, at the same time, maintain a positive attitude towards their work.

The findings confirm that inadequacy and uncertainty are intertwined with other emotions, such as powerlessness, guilt, and sadness. Future research could focus on the relationships between the intertwined emotional experiences of pre- and in-service teachers. Finally, a critical emphasis should be placed on teacher education micropolitics, specifically, what kind of teacher images may support or limit. This kind of emphasis requires teacher educators to reflect on their own beliefs about teaching and how these emerge and find ways to question norms that may be considered self-evident (Körkkö & Ketonen, 2023).

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Minna Körkkö: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. Sonja Lutovac: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. Satu-Maaria Korte: Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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