PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY LEVEL OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGY STUDENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF CAREER DECISIONS

STANIŠAUSKIENĖ Vilija, EDINTAITĖ Gintarė

Kaunas University of Technology, Kaunas, Lithuania

Abstract

The concept of professional identity involves professional suitability, training, professional choice, professional image, professional plan, career awareness and motivation. Students of social pedagogy as future professionals have their self-conception which depends on the level of professional identity the students have achieved: diffuse identity, self-determination without debate, moratorium and the identity achieved. Each level reflects the identity of a certain combination of investigation and resolution of the undertaking. However, professional identity is not only an objectively perceived phenomenon; every subjective perception leads to one's own career in the context of human evolution, social life, economic conditions, learning experience.

Professional identity, which has been understood as professional roles, is one of the most important factors of career success and satisfaction. It is based on personal characteristics, values and experience. The profession of social pedagogues is specific, because they work with people and, in particular, socially sensitive. Therefore, the students of social pedagogy must have the inclination to work with people. Social pedagogues are responsible for social well-being and, therefore, career decisions of students in social pedagogy must be self-directed and adequate. Thus, the higher education professionals providing career guidance, mentors and teachers should recognize whether these programs are relevant to young people at an early stage of the professional identity. Future social pedagogues must also understand the characteristics of the formation of professional identity of a social pedagogue. Therefore, this article addresses the following research questions: what career decisions were taken when choosing studies in social pedagogy? How and what appropriate level of professional identity was reached during the period of studies at university?

Keywords: Career decisions; Professional identity; Social pedagogy; University.

Background

Career success in the 21ˢᵗ century is related to human performance, satisfaction and self-realization (Rodrigues et al., 2013). The formation of professional identity is a professional inquiry into the alternatives to the undertaking of commitments, the selected alternative and the revision of occupational alternatives (Porfeli, 2012). A commitment to a particular profession provides career stability in this dynamic world of work. A strong professional identity is a professional character which is a necessity in the field of competitiveness.

The profession of a social pedagogue is related to services and dedication. The *Career **Anchors** theory* by Schein (1990) reveals career anchors as priorities that are shaped by particular human abilities, interests and values, leading to career decisions and acting as the main stimulus of career path. The anchor of services and

devotion describes the human desire to help others, improve the society and make the world better. The success of social pedagogues' performance is influenced by personal qualities: sociability, empathy, sincerity, tact and ability to listen (Jonutytė, 2007). Thus, the identification of these characteristics in ourselves and a commitment to help others achieve a better society is the essence of the social pedagogue's professional identity.

Professional identity has been analysed in many aspects. Kroger and Marcia (2011) revealed the formation of professional identity in the context of human evolution; Wiles (2013) investigated the construction of professional identity patterns. Urbanavičiūtė et al. (2014) investigated the school-age youngsters' professional identity related with adaptation of their careers. Žydžiūnaitė & Crisafulli (2011, 2012) focussed on the university students' identity, the factors of professional identity development and professional links with the curriculum.

There are many researchers who identified the specific characteristics of professional identity formation. Construction and analysis of pedagogue's identity was investigated by Boreham & Gray (2005), O'Connor (2008), Williams (2010), Canrinus et al. (2012), Wilkins et al. (2012). The higher school teacher's professional identity was investigated by Fitzmaurice (2013), Rastauskienė et al. (2009), whereas Jatkauskienė (2010) focused on the professional identity of adult pedagogues. Rimkienė and Žydžiūnaitė (2013) investigated the nursing students' professional identity. Eidukevičiūtė & Večkienė (2015) analysed the social worker's professional identity, Mažeikienė & Dorelaitienė (2011) investigated the professional identity of social workers in terms of gender. The research on the formation of professional identity, design, reconstruction and definition shows the importance of this research subject in the world and in the context of career development.

This article addresses the following research questions: what are the career decisions that were taken when choosing the studies in social pedagogy? How and what appropriate level of professional identity was reached during the period of university studies? This research focusses on the professional identity level of social pedagogy students in the context of career decisions. The research aims to reveal the students' professional identity of social pedagogy study program in the context of career decisions.

The levels of social pedagogy students' professional identity

The research on the professional identity of social pedagogues is scarce. This leads to endless discussions and the growing necessity and importance of the profession in the context of the Lithuanian labor market, as well as the profession itself. The profession of social pedagogue has not been defined yet, which is a problem of the developing country's social system. This profession is interpreted differently from other Western European countries, where social work already has deep traditions. However, one may note some significant work that continues to inspire the research on identity and the profession of social pedagogue. It can help to organize the preparation for students' future career decisions, which lead to the formation of professional identity. Žydžiūnaitė & Crisafulli (2011, 2012) were investigating the identity of the university students and the factors of the professional identity and the professional links with the curriculum. The recent research by

Jezerskytė & Žydžiūnaitė (2015) revealed the opinion of social educators about their professional responsibility while working with the clients. The researchers pointed out that social pedagogues, as being responsible professionals must realize themselves not only as professionals, but also as human beings who must find ways to connect with the diversity of clients. The results from this study once again confirm that the profession of a social pedagogue is a sophisticated and complex set of competencies and human characteristics. Thus it is especially important that the future professionals identify themselves as soon as possible. This means that the students' professional identity is formed through the personality traits, values, vocation and self-awareness. According to Stanišauskienė (2015), Eidimtas & Jucevičienė (2014), in making career decisions both internal (self-image: attitudes, interests, personality characteristics, values, etc.) and external (other people's opinion, the city and the university, predicted the future of professional prestige and remuneration, etc.) factors are significant. The internal factors often play a decisive role, especially in choosing the social professions that require certain personal characteristics, often in dedication and devotion (Schein, 1990).

The vague definition of social pedagogue's profession, the context of Lithuania as a developing country in terms of issues in the national social system and different interpretations of the social system are the obstacles in the construction of professional study programs, training of students, and, most importantly, the future of professional identity (Lukoševičius & Saveljeva, 2006). However, despite the confusion in the social system, researchers are trying to define the profession of the pedagogue and the social guidelines. This helps understanding what the profession of a social pedagogue is.

Social pedagogy underlies the work with children and families. Even though it is most often referred to in relation to residential child care, its principles can be, and in many European countries are, extended to working with individuals and groups across the life course. Its principles might be applied to a range of different groups: early years, teaching support in schools, family support, work with drugs addiction, youth and criminal justice, learning disability and physical disability services and support for older people. The professional activities of social pedagogues are based on their permanent, continuous interactions with their clients (Augustinienė & Stanišauskienė, 2012). These interactions are related to different target groups, but the component of professional responsibility is manifested in activities of specialists (Jezerskytė & Žydžiūnaitė, 2015).

The social pedagogue is a person who has acquired a degree in social pedagogy (or social work bachelor degree and professional educator) and is willing to work in social institutions, which carry out the functions of education, is able to work in the field of prevention, early socialization, assistance and social rehabilitation programs with social groups. The main objective of the professional activity of the social pedagogue is child welfare, early prevention, social capacity-building and provision of necessary social services (Kvieskienė, 2001).

With reference to the social pedagogue's identity it is important to point out that every person has a different understanding of professional identity (Kraniauskienė, 2005). The Oxford English Dictionary identifies two meanings of the word 'identity' (*Dictionary of Sociology*, 1998): the concept of the absolute

identity, meaning 'this is identical to a' and, secondly, the notion of separateness, distinctness, describing the consistency, stability and continuity over time. One may assume that we can expect different interpretations of this profession, stemming from personal life experience. Professional identity includes professional suitability, vocational training, professional choice, professional image, professional plan, career awareness, personal motivation and personality (Rimkienė & Žydžiūnaitė, 2013). Professional identity is conceptualized as a development process that is directly related to vocational training and practice, and the concept of individuals, showing what it means to be real professionals and how they should behave (Žydžiūnaitė & Crisafulli, 2012).

What is the concept of a student in social pedagogy as a future professional, what does it to a professional? Answers to these questions depend on the student's professional identity achievement level. In the scientific literature a variety of professional identity theories can be found. However, the purpose of this investigation is not only to reveal the professional identity, but also to identify its level.

The modern theory of professional identity is based on the theoretical insights by Erikson (2004) and Kroger & Marcia (2011). Erikson (2004) pointed out that the main task of adolescence is identity formation, which is very important for teens in response to social and developmental challenges and giving meaning to their life choices. Erikson (2004) argues that the identity of the individual's ability to modify the synthesis represents the teenage years, based on ideals, purposes, values, and identity confusion shows the individual inability to raise productive, effective goals and commitments, which forms the identity of adults. Marcia (2011) has developed Erikson's (2004) concept of formation of the identity of the teenage years, a process which is critical to the two dimensions: investigation (exploration) and commitment. The investigation is the process where individuals are actively seeking their identity in various areas of life, in deciding the issues of choice, giving themselves a variety of objectives and forming beliefs. Drawing on Erikson's theory, Kroger & Marcia (2011) found out two key criteria of identity: the identity of a specific undertaking and exploration of alternatives. According to Kroger & Marcia (2011) there are four levels of professional identity: identity diffusion, moratorium on identity, self-determination without debate (foreclosure) and reached identity (identity achievements). Each status shows a certain level of commitment to investigation and resolution.

Diffusion identity (low investigation and the low level of commitment) means indifference, disinterest as identity. Individuals who are characterised by diffusion bonding identity status, described as not motivated, inadequately assessing their identity, retreated from the career development review process, at least adaptive. Diffusion identity is regarded as those cases where individuals have not committed to any area and deny the need to consider their personal goals and values, do not have real solutions to implement their choices. They do not care about the definition of their own life career and feel unable to control their position.

Self-determination without debate (low investigation and a high level of commitment). According to Kroger and Marcia (2011), this is a withdrawal which is defined as commitment to any field, without other alternatives. In this condition people are implementing certain objectives or values but they do not reflect on them: they just accept. Withdrawal is often a period of ending adolescence, when the child seeks to identify

with one or both parents. Parent identity, their ambitions are adopted and become their own. In this condition a person is seeking to be recognized by the surrounding people (Marcia et al., 1993).

Moratorium (high investigation and low level of commitment) is represented as an active investigation procedure without any obligation, with one from investigation alternatives. People actively explore alternatives, trying to choose any of them. The status of moratorium is stable, even though it is sometimes called the crisis, as it relates to the desire to change something in their lives. Reaching another identity level from self-determination and withdrawal statuses is possible through the moratorium status. This stage cannot fall short time. If it takes a long period, it can increase the growing level of anxiety in relation to personal objectives, values and beliefs.

Identity has been reached (high-level of investigation and high commitment) is represented commitment, which is accessed after a careful examination. While defining the identity of this level, according to Marcia et al. (1993), persons specify that they have seriously considered different approaches or belief systems and selected the one to commit to. Resolution and certainty here is different from inflexibility and self-righteousness characteristic of the withdrawal level. The people in this state have their own worldview and are less dependent on the surrounding provisions. This level does not mean the end of the development of identity. A person may begin considering alternatives again, if previous decisions appear to be inadequate.

Methodology

Design

The research addresses the following questions: what career decisions were taken when choosing social pedagogy studies? How and what appropriate level of professional identity was reached during the university studies? This research focusses on the professional identity level of social pedagogy students in the context of career decisions. The research aims to reveal the professional identity of students in social pedagogy in the context of the career decisions.

Narrative as a research strategy was chosen for the purposes of empirical research. It allows to disclose students' biographical facts. They were reflecting on their career decisions and their experience of the real world. Narrative as a method can maintain flexibility, complexity and freedom of expression, the experiences of an individual. Narrative is suitable for the analysis of life stories. A narrative inquiry explores life experience using the language of 'story'. The narrative researcher uses the themes or categories to restore the field of texts. On the basis of students' stories the level of students' professional level could be determined. In this research, the theoretical analysis presents the levels of professional identity by Marcia et al. (1993). A narrative story can reveal the unknown phenomenon. In this case, this method is used to reveal the identity of students in the context of vocational career decisions. According to Guerrero (2011, p. 89), many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities have incorporated the research of narrative as the organizing principle for human action: 'history (White, 1981), folklore (Behar, 1993), psychology (Bruner, 1990; Davies & Harre, 1990; Mishler, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; Schiffrin, 1996; Wortham, 2000), sociology and sociolinguistic (Gee, 1986; Linde, 1993; Ochs and Capps, 1996; Labov & Waletzky, 1997) as well as anthropology (Tannen,

1997). This research is also oriented to human behaviour, i. e., career opportunities of social pedagogy students.

Sample

The 3rd year students of social pedagogy were selected as subjects for this research keeping in mind that these students will graduate shortly and they do not tend to change the study programme. This implies the achievement of identity or just continuation of higher education studies to receive a Bachelor degree. The students were in the same academic group which means that they share the same study conditions; 20 self-reflections were obtained.

Methods

Data collection. The data collection method is the narrative survey. Narrative is a method where the researcher recreates the texts to facilitate the reader's experience of lives or events. Students have prepared their self-reflections. They had to analyse the career decisions in the context of their professional development and life events, while choosing the studies in social pedagogy. The self-reflection texts had a general topic. The students were writing their personal stories on the topic 'My career'. Special questions were also given: what were the first thoughts on my career? What were the early decisions that influenced the choice of the study programme? Why am I choosing the profession of a social pedagogue as my life career? The answers to the first two questions help to figure out how the decision to choose social pedagogy was made, whereas to the third - to reveal the identity of the professional level. These self-reflections were analysed and the research results were compiled.

Data analysis. The research data were analysed according to the four levels of professional identity. The data analysis was made using the method of content analysis. This method was chosen as it allows to decode the meanings behind the content and make interpretations of the narrative content. There are the provisions of the human experience, context, emotion reflected in the texts and in the context, in this case, the context of career decisions. The analysis of the text was structured consistently, step by step, by dividing the content into the units of analysis. The analysis of stories by young people choosing the career of a social pedagogue, has four categories: *There is no professional identity, Choice without debate, Investigation without commitment, Strong professional identity*.

Ethics

Ethical approval was received from the Department of Educational Studies at Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania) (24.05.2016, Protocol No. V19-1204-6). The research has respected the following

ethical principles (Howe and Moses, 1999): voluntary participation – the respondents participated in the study on a voluntary basis; informed consent – the respondents were informed about the research aim and content, the meaning and importance of the research were also explained; respect to individual's dignity – the respondents could refuse to participate in the study, also they had the right to refuse to provide the information or they had the right to ask questions and receive information about the research; anonymity – in the research anonymity was assured regarding the provided information; the respondent's names and surnames were not mentioned and only generalized and summarized findings were provided in the study.

Findings

The analysis of stories by the social pedagogy students about choosing a career has four categories: 'There is no professional identity', 'Choice without debate', 'Investigation without a commitment', 'Strong professional identity'.

The category 'there is no professional identity' includes statements defining the characteristics of diffuse identity and revealing a reluctance or inability to consciously opt for career related decisions. The statements that reflect the features of diffuse identity are characteristic of all life stages referred to by the respondents. Although the most common 'ignorance of what they want and unwillingness to learn' is associated with the childhood and teens ('I was a typical child, because I avoided thinking who I wanted to be as long as I could' (X 8)). The following are the examples of professional identity characteristic of social pedagogy students who will shortly graduate from their studies. Student X 9 says: 'so far, I'm not sure what I am doing here, although next year I will get a bachelor degree in social pedagogy; I also don't know what I need to do after that. I just feel lazy…'. These statements mean that the diffuse identity at this stage, the person's emotions and specific factors determine the career decisions.

One of the most prominent causes of diffusion is personal immaturity. Student X5 writes: 'the moment of completing the study application form gave a lot of panic, which was accompanied by fear and laughter, and, maybe, even hysteria, because I had no idea what I wanted, where I wanted to see myself in the future. I just wanted to stop thinking about that and maybe postpone the decision until the following year to be more clear about my choice. But I chose to dive into the unknown area'. This story illustrates that the student is not ready to accept the risks of tension and confusion in the career decisions. Career decision making naturally stimulates the feeling of curiosity, interest, excitement, and also the experience of other feelings: anxiety, uncertainty, fear and helplessness. If a person makes immature decisions, forced by circumstances, then those decisions are often accompanied by anxiety and a feeling of helplessness. During adolescence and later, when confusion and identity search crisis take place, diffuse identity is related to psychological discomfort in an effort to avoid the pressure of the environment to make a decision. 'For me, it was exciting to discuss with my mom. She was always asking me about my choices, but I never let to make any influence on my choices, I was avoiding discussions on this topic'. These thoughts by student X2 illustrate the maturity to search for career decisions and, in addition, a defensive position.

When there is no professional identity, career decisions are determined by external factors. In making career decisions both internal (self-image: attitudes, interests, personality characteristics, values) and external

(other people's opinion, the city and the university, the future of professional prestige and remuneration) factors are significant. Internal factors often play a decisive role, especially in choosing the social professions that require certain personal characteristics, in particular dedication and devotion. The students in diffusion usually highlight only the external factors: 'a social pedagogue's career choices have resulted in three factors: the university (one of the famous ones in Lithuania)/.../ the city (I live in Kaunas, Lithuania, and life elsewhere does not seem attractive), mom (she completed similar studies) (X 5); 'the choice of study is mainly due to the desire to study at university and to live in Kaunas' (X 6).

The category 'choice without debate' includes claims that imply a low level of investigation and a high level of commitment. This level of professional identity is characterized by rigidity, conformism, non-critical thinking and commitment with alternatives. This level of professional identity can occur in childhood ('from my early school years I wanted to be a flight attendant, all of the time, wearing those beautiful uniforms, flying, which is so romantic' (X 6)), but usually a decision without debate is fixed at school. X2 says: 'the study programme of accountancy impressed me, just the word itself and a real career perspective attracted me. I don't have a proper explanation why I have chosen this study program. I didn't have a bit of patience, I didn't choose from other alternatives, I thought that I will start the studies and I would like them, but I didn't... It was a mistake, which cost me one year...'.

In this category the emergence of a minimum investigation, just spontaneous selection of the career field, may be observed. The identity is affected by the external influence.

However, the analysis of data showed that quite often the selection of interest (of social pedagogy in this case) occurs later, while studying or working. Student X11 says: 'I was offered a babysitting job. I didn't think a lot and agreed. The job was not easy. I was doing this for half a year and I realized that my area is taking care of children and their education'. This statement illustrates how an embryonic professional identity emerges in practice. The following example illustrates 'the break of consciousness' occurring after the three years of studying: 'I have become interested in learning to help others. Sometimes I lose my resolution, I remember my dreams, I blame myself that I don't study enough. And then I am trying to work harder, and I realize that I still have time to discover my true path. /.../ when I was choosing the credits in a foreign university (student exchange program), I realized that the social area is truly interesting for me (X6)'. However, it is difficult to say whether this is a tendency for professional identity and performance or students' choice of justification. According to the theory of cognitive resonance, people tend to justify and defend their decision.

Sometimes a decision can have a significant impact on the career as a result of a hint made by close people; in addition, there is an issue of personal ambition. X6 says: 'I remember that day. I had a discussion with my mother who said: 'I think you are going to study somewhere, at least in a vocational school, so you don't have what to worry about''. In assessing myself, I can tell you that I am a very ambitious, willful and purposeful person. After talking with mother I finally found the goal to prove for mom, teachers, friends, myself, and the whole world that I can'. It is important to note that the 'I can' evidence' is not related to any specific area, because there is no clear picture of professional identity and a sense of purpose.

Other factors affecting students' career without reflection is a place of study ('I wanted go to Kaunas, to Kaunas..., that's why I filled just the applications forms of universities in Kaunas (X 14)), professional authority ('We were taught psychology by a teacher who inspired me, I decided to become a social pedagogue' (X18), significant personal characteristics ('I just love children, so I wanted to associate my career with child development' (X 16)), the lineage tradition ('The family of three generations of teachers: granny, mom and me...' (X13)).

The analysis of the category of 'choice without debate' makes it clear that the sense of social identity, and the choice of pedagogue's career is usually random.

The category 'investigation without commitment' includes statements that represent the status of professional identity, which is characterized by the diversity of interests of self-searching, career alternatives, without verification of the final decision.

Students' stories reveal that career opportunities without a commitment is a natural phenomenon in the early teenage years, up to 11-12 school years. For example, X3 says: 'I attended a singing class in the eighth grade, so I was thinking that maybe I would sing in the future. I attended a drama class and I was thinking that perhaps I would be staring in movies. I was even dreaming about becoming a hair stylist...'. But intensive investigation also continues while studying ('I was looking for myself from the first year of studies...' (X18)), or begins just after a few years of studying ('I didn't like to work with kinds, and now I still don't. I started to follow myself, I start thinking about what would suit me best...' (X2)).

'I was hesitant. I wanted to be a librarian, a school teacher, historian, just a housewife, social worker, psychologist, vet, lawyer, and probably many more, those I cannot remember at the moment' (X8). The analysis of the social pedagogues who are young people choosing a career allows to notice that almost all of them are related to the social area. Thus, social pedagogues in professional identity formation are going to investigate career opportunities related to the general feature of working with people, helping people, human and public awareness. Very often they refer to the area of interest in psychology: 'at that time, I was very interested in psychology, reading psychological books, started thinking about psychology studies (X14),'began to be interested in psychology, and to me it seemed overwhelming' (X10), 'I don't know, but I have always been fascinated by people who are knowledgeable about their work. This seems to be something deeper when you learn and can get to know someone. And after all, human beings are unique creatures and you are competent to understand them (X3).

Students refer to volunteering as very significant for their career opportunities. They remember how volunteering helped them stimulate the development of their professional identity: 'I was volunteering at child care home, here's one of the aspects why I chose to study social pedagogy– I want to help children' (X11). X1 says: 'constantly, every day, I walked to school to find an excuse at least for a short time to get into the office of the social pedagogue. It was as good as at home there. Mountains of paper and the pupils' problems didn't scare me, I wanted to help them'. This comes close to the experience of volunteering which can be identified as suitability for the social pedagogue profession. During the period of studies, volunteering helps students to choose. X7 says that volunteering helped her to find out the age group of

children she wants to work with and the direction she will continue her career: 'I was volunteering in this field, however, I realized that I cannot work with teenagers, I need regular contact with small children./.../I like to create events, performances, I can write scenarios, make costumes, organize interesting and non-traditional activities with children; I really love kids, while being with them, I feel happy and the meaning of life'.

The analysis of the category 'the investigation without commitment' points out that the profession of a social pedagogue is recognized in the field of other social professions. It is not even considered with technologies, the natural sciences and similar professions.

The category 'strong professional identity' includes claims which reveal the career, the young peoples' choices and specifics how professional identity status has been achieved.

Upon a successful overcoming of the investigation status, a strong professional identity can be achieved in the period of last year at school ('after leaving school, you had to fill out application documents. All my options were in the same direction: either social pedagogy or social work. And in various high schools. I didn't fill other options, perhaps I had a risk, but I was sure I would be accepted... (X3) or the same ('Never have thought 'what am I doing here?' 'is it really me?', I always knew that this area is my 'cup of tea'" (X7)). There is no argument that the social pedagogue's professional identity was formed during childhood or adolescence in these cases, but some answers illustrate that there exists an early and active social pedagogue's professional identity, especially when students are interested in self-searching: 'about the career opportunities at school, I was fourteen and I wanted to become responsible and to help others. Later I was active in organizing events and problem solving' (X1).

Student X4 says: 'even in early childhood, when coming back from the kindergarten, I was writing what I had learned that. Often, playing games I was imagining that among my students (toys), there is a disagreement, I was inviting more professionals (mother, brother) to assist'. Young people from 16-18 years are getting to know themselves by estimating their talents, interests and other characteristics, and providing a potential career direction. X7 claims: 'in school years '8-9 I decided to be a pedagogue. I truly adore children, I discovered that this is an area in which I can reveal almost all of my capacity and meet others' needs. /.../the teacher's profession provides an opportunity to create, I cannot work if I cannot be creative. I was lucky, from a young age I knew what my path is, so I didn't need much searching, never felt doubt or lack of inspiration'.

The status of achieved professional identity can be characterized by students' desire to help others. It is a pedagogical mission revealed at an early age: 'there is nothing better when you work and you can help others, when the results of your work are not just numbers or words, documents, but you are able to give assistance and hope to others' (X1); 'my work can help people, to change them, to help them become better. It seems such a simple thing, but so valuable' (X3); 'I wanted to help people in difficult periods of their life (X8). The research results reveal that a strong professional identity may be characterized by the need for communication and engagement. X1 says: "your career must be like a drug. This 'drug' for me is communication with people who constantly give me strength and willingness to continue...". The

professional identity of a social pedagogue is associated with daily challenges and students should accept them in a positive way: 'I like challenges in this work, I think they are useful for my experience' (X8); I cannot just sit, I need to fight, to solve problems and to get adrenaline' (X16). This feature is typical of young people who specialize or intend to specialise in juvenile delinquency and protection of children rights.

The analysis of the status of the achieved professional identity of young future social pedagogues revealed the resistance to their career in their personal environments and how they have to defend their career choices. The low level of professional prestige, inadequate status in educational institutions and low financial status reveal poor career trajectories. This is why youngsters rarely receive support from their family members and they are forced to defend their career choices. Student X1 says: 'when I was talking about social pedagogy, other people were surprised, they were silent and showed that they could not understand me. They were criticising me: 'this is not for you', 'are you going to live on cents?', but I never gave up, I always had to defend my choice'. Especially talented students were criticised, they were disappointing their families by choosing the social pedagogue's profession: 'it was a considerable amount of resistance in my family. According to my mom, 'teacher's profession is not prestigious, not well paid, with no career opportunities and finally leads to burnout' (X7).

Different generations perceive career success in different ways. This is why there is a misunderstanding between students and their parents. X4 says: 'people constantly seek to prove that financially this profession is just a failure. However, they can say what they want, because, as I mentioned above, I already got my benefits, and it is not an economical approach'.

Discussion

The research on students' professional identity levels aimed to answer the following questions: what are the career decisions that were taken when choosing social pedagogy studies? How and what appropriate level of professional identity was reached during the period of study? The focus was also on the context of students' career decisions. There were four levels of professional identity analysed: 'There is no professional identity', 'Choice without debate', 'Investigation without commitment', 'Strong professional identity'.

The professional identity is exposed to external factors that may affect human life (in a positive and negative way). The results of research by Stanišauskienė (2015), Augustinienė & Stanišauskienė (2012), Eidimtas & Jucevičienė (2014) revealed that the adoption of meaningful career decisions are both internal (self-image: attitudes, interests, personality characteristics, values) and external (other people's opinion, the city and the university, predicted the future of professional prestige and remuneration). Internal factors often play a decisive role, especially in choosing social professions that require certain personal characteristics, often dedication and devotion (Schein, 1990). But students highlight the external factors that are inconsistent with their chosen social pedagogue's career.

Students' professional identity achievement is characterized by the social pedagogue's vocation, consistent interest in the development of pedagogical activities (according to Super & Sverko, 1995). Young people are also characterized by the desire to help others; they perceive it like a mission of their life which is recognized

in early age. The need to provide assistance to others is characterized by Schein (1990) in service career anchor theory. A strong professional identity is also associated with daily challenges. It is important to mention that the majority students who have achieved strong professional identity, meet the resistance of their environment to their career decision. They have to be strong personalities to defend their choice to study social pedagogy.

Comparing the results with other research, it is possible to point out some essential insights on the students' professional identity. The research by Rimkienė & Žydžiūnaitė (2013) revealed the common practice of the nursing study programme. Students actively develop their professional identity, reflect on their experience, look for alternatives, but they still have a lack of internalisation of the professional obligations and professional nursing values. The strength of students' professional identity status depends to a great extent on teachers' professional experience of cooperation with patients and health care personnel. However, our research did not aim to trace students' reflection on how their professional identity is developed by cooperating with university teachers. However, there are some unanswered questions: why students do not mention cooperation with teachers in the process of their studies? This may be the question for future research. Bubnys & Žydžiūnaitė (2008) revealed that the specificity of work has an influence on making a decision to be or not to be a social pedagogue. But our research results showed that this factor is not so important: students are not afraid of hard work and, on the contrary, working with children and daily challenges inspire them to choose this career. According to Jezerskytė & Žydžiūnaitė (2015), social pedagogues must realize themselves not only as professionals, but also as human beings who must find the ways to work with the diversity of clients. This means that the future social pedagogues must at first realize themselves as personalities. The research has shown that this aspect is important for young people and their professional identity.

Conclusions

The concept of *professional identity* involves professional suitability, training, professional choice, professional image, professional plan, career awareness and motivation. Students of social pedagogy as future professionals have their self-conception which depends on the level of professional identity the students have achieved: diffuse identity, self-determination without debate, moratorium and the identity achieved. Each level reflects the identity of a certain combination of investigation and resolution of the undertaking. However, professional identity is not only an objectively perceived phenomenon; every subjective perception leads to one's own career in the context of human evolution, social life, economic conditions, learning experience.

The results of qualitative research on students' professional identity, in the context of career decisions, revealed that the young person's predisposition and interest in the area of social pedagogy can occur already at an early age in school. But usually the interest in this particular social profession is recognized in school years or in the first year of university studies. Students who achieved professional identity have a desire to help children and young people in difficult situations. The social pedagogue's professional identity in

different stages of development is characterized differently. Diffuse level means that students are not mature enough to make adequate career decisions. Sometimes students make career choices in relation to psychological discomfort. The level of choice without debate includes the specific decision compensating factors (a logically constructed career plan, 'inherited' the career, etc.), a strong external influence on career and spontaneous decision. Moratorium level is characterized by an abundance of career opportunities in the social field and voluntary activities. The achieved professional identity level describes how social pedagogues are choosing career based on their own decisions, strong vocation, desire to help others recognized from early years, communication skills, and that they are open to meet daily challenges. The social pedagogue's professional identity formation is influenced by internal and external factors. The internal factors mean personal qualities, interests, values, career vision and other factors. The external factors are, above all, family traditions, authority of the former teachers and the location (the city and the university).

References

Augustinienė, A., & Stanišauskienė, V. (2012). Būsimųjų informatikos specialistų karjeros sprendimų prielaidos. Šiuolaikinio specialisto kompetencijos: teorijos ir praktikos dermė: 7- osios tarptautinės mokslinės-praktinės konferencijos straipsnių rinkinys [elektroninis išteklius], 7, 228-236.

Boreham, N., & Gray, P. (2005). *Professional identity of teachers in their early development.* Paper presented at Dublin Symposium.

Bubnys, R., & Žydžiūnaitė, V. (2008). Reflektuojančio būsimo specialiojo pedagogo profesinio apsisprendimo patirtys. *Teacher Education,* 2, 71-84.

Canrinus, E. T., Helms-Lorenz, M., Beijaard, D., Buitink, J., & Hofman, A. (2012). Self-efficacy, job satisfaction, motivation and commitment: exploring the relationships between indicators of teachers' professional identity. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 27(1), 115-132.

Eidimtas, A., & Jucevičienė, P. (2014). Factors Influencing School-Leavers' Decision to enroll in Higher Education. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences Journal,* 116, 3983–3988.

Eidukevičiūtė, J., & Večkienė, N. P. (2015). Profesinio identiteto formavimasis socialinio darbo praktikoje: komunikacinės kompetencijos aktualizavimas. *Tiltai,* 69(4), 37-56.

Erikson, E. H. (2004). *Vaikystė ir visuomenė*. Vilnius: Katalikų pasaulio leidiniai.

Fitzmaurice, M. (2013). Constructing professional identity as a new academic. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(4), 613-622.

Guerrero, A. L. (2011). Narrative as resource for the display of self and identity: The narrative construction of an oppositional identity. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal,* 13(2), 88-99.

Howe, K., & Moses, M. (1999). Ethics in educational research. *Review of Research in Education,* 24, 21-59.

Ibarra, H., & Barbulescu, R. (2010). Identity as narrative: Prevalence, effectiveness, and consequences of narrative identity work in macro work role transitions. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(1), 135-154.

Jatkauskienė, B. (2010). Andragogų profesinio identiteto kontūrų raiška profesionalizacijos kontekste. *Teacher Education*, 15(2), 59-77.

Jezerskytė, E., & Žydžiūnaitė, V. (2015). Opinions Of Social Workers And Social Pedagogues About Their Professional Responsibility While Interacting With Clients. *Vocational Training: Research and Realities*, 26(1). Available at: https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/vtrr.2015.26.issue-1/vtrr-2015-0007/vtrr-2015-0007.xml (Accessed on 10/08/2016).

Jonutytė, I. (2007). Asmenybės savybių svarba socialinio pedagogo profesinės veiklos sėkmei, jos tobulinimas. *Tiltai,* 2, 113-122.

Kraniauskienė, S. (2005). Identiteto tyrimo metmenys: kartų identiteto paieška XX a. lietuvių autobiografijose. *Mintis ir veiksmas*, 2, 40-52.

Kroger, J., & Marcia, J. E. (2011). The identity statuses: Origins, meanings, and interpretations. In *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research.* (pp. 31-53). NY: Springer.

Kvieskienė, G. (2001). Socialinio pedagogo kompetencijos samprata. *Pedagogika,* 53, 63-69.

Lukoševičius, A., & Saveljeva, R. (2006). Socialinių pedagogų profesinio tapsmo ypatumai. *Akademinė Edukologija II.* (pp. 496-517). Klaipėda: Klaipėdos universiteto leidykla.

Marcia, J. E., Waterman, A. S., Matteson, D. R., Archer, S. L, & Orlofsky, J. L. (Eds.). (1993). *Ego Identity: A Handbook for Psychosocial Research.* NY: Springer.

Mažeikienė, N., & Dorelaitienė, A. (2011). Biografinis metodas: socialinių darbuotojų vyrų profesinio identiteto tapsmas. *Socialinis Darbas: Patirtis ir Metodai*, 7(1), 51-70.

O'Connor, K. E. (2008). 'You choose to care': Teachers, emotions and professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24 (1), 117-126.

Porfeli, E. J. (2012). Career Adapt-Abilities Scale-USA Form: Psychometric properties and relation to vocational identity. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 80(3), 748-753.

Rastauskienė, G. J., Kardelis, K., & Šeščilienė, I. (2009). *Universiteto dėstytojo profesinio tapsmo ypatumai.* Šiauliai: Šiaulių universiteto leidykla.

Rimkienė, R., & Žydžiūnaitė, V. (2013). Professional identity statuses of first-year college students in general practice nursing programmes: the case of Lithuania. *Balkan Military Medical Review*, 16(2), 79-91.

Rodrigues, R., Guest, D., & Budjanovcanin, A. (2013). From anchors to orientations: towards a contemporary theory of career preferences. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 83(2), 142-152.

Schein, E. (1990). *Career Anchors: Instrument: Discovering Your Real Values*. London: Prentice Hall.

Stanišauskienė, V. (2015). Karjeros sprendimus lemiančių veiksnių dinamika kartų kaitos kontekste. *Tiltai*, 71(2), 1-20.

Super, D. E., & Šverko, B. E. (1995). *Life Roles, Values, and Careers: International Findings of the Work Importance Study*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Urbanavičiūtė, I., Kairys, A., Pociūtė, B., & Liniauskaitė, A. (2014). Career adaptability in Lithuania: A test of psychometric properties and a theoretical model. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 85(3), 433-442.

Wiles, F. (2013). 'Not easily put into a box': constructing professional identity. *Social Work Education*, 32(7), 854-866.

Wilkins, C., Busher, H., Kakos, M., Mohamed, C., & Smith, J. (2012). Crossing borders: new teachers co-constructing professional identity in performative times. *Professional development in education*, 38(1), 65-77.

Williams, J. (2010). Constructing a new professional identity: Career change into teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(3), 639-647.

Žydžiūnaitė, V., & Crisafulli, S. (2012). News construction in the higher education institution, as a precondition for the development of vocational student identity. *Professional Studies: Theory and Practice,* 10, 133-141.

Žydžiūnaitė, V., & Crisafulli, S. (2011). Universiteto studentų profesinį tapatumą lemiantys veiksniai. *Profesinis Rengimas: Tyrimai ir Realijos,* 20, 168-179.