CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHER PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY RESEARCH: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review explores recent trends in teacher professional identity (TPI) research and compares them with the findings from Beijaard et al.'s (2004) literature review on TPI studies. The conceptualization of TPI, as well as the purpose of studies done by different scholars is explored in the review. Taylor & Francis, Sage, and Emerald databases chosen to select relevant empirical work focusing on general education pre-service, in-service, and student teachers. Literature reviews and studies pertaining to higher education and early childhood education teachers were excluded. Thus, 66 articles were analyzed in this review.

The findings reveal that authors define and conceptualize TPI variously, some focusing on what TPI is, while others on the aspects that TPI includes, or the process of developing or constructing TPI. The definitions highlight different aspects of TPI depending on the focus of the respective study. There seems to be an agreement that TPI is fluid and constructed throughout one's career, it is contextual, it encompasses sub-identities, and it is connected with agency. In the review, the author proposes another lens for analyzing TPI – intersectionality.

From the analysis of the studies' aims, five themes emerged: (1) PI construction; (2) identity tensions; (3) influential factors; (4) PI development strategy; (5) theory development. Compared to the 2004 review, it was concluded that contextual factors are more widely studied in TPI research nowadays. This review highlights the definitions and themes in current TPI research. As a result, it serves as a reference point for future research, offering insights into the evolving landscape of teacher professional identity research.

Keywords: general education teachers, professional tensions, student teachers, systematic review, teacher professional identity, teacher education.

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, teacher professional identity (TPI) has established itself as a relevant area of research that is frequently addressed in studies about teachers. Both smaller-scale studies, which the author explores in this review, and large-scale papers published by the OECD (e.g. Suarez & McGrath, 2022) or UNESCO (e.g. UNESCO, 2024)

recognize TPI as an important factor in teacher role-orientation, job satisfaction and retention, and, consequently, the educational outcomes of students.

The Latvian professional standard for teachers (The State Education Content Centre (VISC), 2018) determines that teachers must evaluate their performance and professional mastery, and plan their professional development accordingly. This includes planning one's career and professional development by critically reflecting on one's pedagogical work, as well as recognizing the social role of teachers. The standard also outlines the need for teachers to be able to assess their health (including mental health) and proactively engage in health-promoting activities. Kerby (1991) wrote that the need to reflect on one's identity may not present itself until one is faced with a problem or a "possible or impending future" (p. 38). Likewise, some teachers may not be inclined to ponder about their professional identity – who they are as teachers and who they wish to become (Flores & Day, 2006) – unless they encounter identity tensions. Although tensions and crises are a natural part of any career and can lead to growth and increase resilience (Golzar et al., 2022; Russo-Netzer & Shoshani, 2019), they can also contribute to loss of confidence in self and one's teaching practices (Palacios et al., 2020), as well as burnout.

Focus of the review

Teachers' values and beliefs about teaching and education in general are part of their professional identities (Flores & Day, 2006). If professional identity is viewed as the lens or framework through which teachers make sense of their professional lives (Liu & Sammons, 2022; Szocik et al., 2021), agency is the force that allows teachers to enact their values and beliefs to "transform the context" (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 183). TPI, therefore, enables teachers to become aware of their professional development needs and assess how those needs interact with their values, as well as the political and social context in education (Wray & Richmond, 2018).

Different scholars have attempted to make sense of the concept of TPI in existing studies (e.g. Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004) or offer new ways to look at identity in educational research (e.g. Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Gee, 2001). As a result of one of these attempts, in 2004, Beijaard et al. published a literature review of TPI studies. At that time, professional identity was a novel field of educational research and the authors sought to clarify how researchers defined TPI, what it entailed, as well as highlight the challenges in TPI research (Beijaard et al., 2004). As the conclusions of Beijaard et al.'s review have remained relevant and are referenced in studies about TPI to this day (e.g. McCaw, 2023; Nickel & Crosby, 2022; Hahl, 2021 etc.), this review revisits Beijaard et al.'s findings to determine if the field of TPI research has changed.

Purpose

There is a lack of reviews that capture the recent trends in TPI studies, therefore, this review aims to address this gap by exploring the current trends in TPI research, focusing on studies published since 2017 across three academic databases. The novelty of this review lies in its exploration of the latest trends and methodologies in the field of TPI.

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

142

In this systematic review, the author focuses on two research questions:

1. How is teacher professional identity defined in studies?
2. What are the current trends of TPI research?

The first question allows to see how TPI is conceptualized and how terminology is addressed by different researchers. The second question sheds light on the aspects of TPI that researchers have deemed important and their implications.

To guide the systematic review, the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist (2018) for systematic reviews was followed. Although the checklist was developed for systematic reviews in health care, the questions were equally relevant for an educational setting. In the next section, the literature selection and screening process is described, which is then followed by an analysis and discussion of the results. In the conclusion, the limitations are discussed and the answers to the research questions are proposed.

Methodology

The literature selection process (see Figure 1) for the review was done between July and August of 2023. Emerald, Sage Journals, and Taylor & Francis were selected for the review. These specific databases were chosen because the library of the University of Latvia offers free access to the content of the databases and due to the convenience of the search engines and filtering. Only studies published in English were included in this review.

On Emerald, the phrase *teacher professional identity* was searched. The initial hits were limited to full-access articles published since 2017. On Sage Journals and Taylor & Francis, keywords *teacher professional identity, professional identity*, and *teacher identity* were searched in the *abstract* field. The results were then narrowed down to only include full-access articles published since 2017. On Sage and Taylor & Francis, advanced search was used, whereas basic search was used on Emerald, which lead to a large number ($n = 2047$) of results, most of which were rejected.

After the keyword search, abstracts were reviewed to identify studies about pre-service and in-service general education teachers, as well as special education teachers working in general education settings. Studies about teacher educators, early childhood teachers, and school management were excluded from further review. One study was excluded, as it did not have a literature review and, therefore, did not have the information that the author was looking for. Following the abstract review, four sections of the relevant articles – introduction, literature review (if applicable), methodology, and results, were scanned to determine the relevance of each article. In the final review round, 29 articles from Emerald, 5 from Sage Journals, and 66 from Taylor & Francis were selected for full reads. 66 articles were determined relevant to the scope of this literature review.

In the papers selected for full reads, the author identified the definition of TPI and the aim or research question of the study. As suggested by the CASP (2018) checklist, the results of the studies, the research design (if mentioned) and data collection methods that were used were also noted.
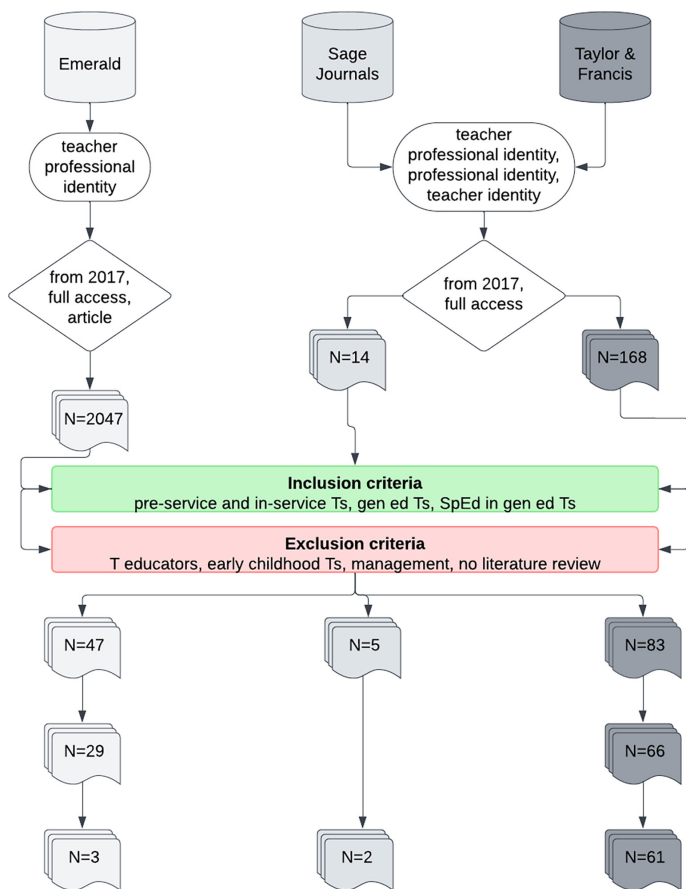
HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

143

Figure 1   Literature Screening and Selection Flowchart

Within the introductions and literature review sections of the papers, definitions or descriptions of TPI were identified. To analyze them, the author looked for similarities in phrasing and key words. The purpose was analyzed and coded according to theme to determine what scholars' current focuses in TPI research are. The methodology of the studies allowed to better understand how researchers address their study questions.

Results

Figure 2 illustrates a summary of the definitions of TPI included in the list of papers that were analyzed. In three articles, there was no definition of TPI. The definitions of TPI could be roughly categorized in four ways: (1) explaining what TPI *is* (a reflection of professional self, the ideal self, analytic lens etc.); (2) exploring what TPI *is like* (fluid, socially legitimated etc.); (3) defining what TPI *is comprised of* (lived experiences, sub-identities, values etc.); (4) exploring how TPI *is developed* or *constructed* and what *impacts* TPI (interpretation and reinterpretation of self, social, political, cultural forces etc.).

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

144

Figure 2 Summary of descriptions or definitions of TPI in the articles

Author(s), year	What TPI is
Moghadam et al., 2019	dynamic, multi-dimensional, impacted by personal, social, cultural factors
Poole, 2019	includes personal, professional, cross-cultural experiences
El Masry & Alzaanin, 2021	dynamic, impacted by inter- and intrapersonal factors; includes one's values, beliefs, motivations, experiences; "seeing" oneself as a teacher
Virta, et al., 2023	includes one's values, beliefs, goals, competencies etc.; TPI is constructed by becoming a teacher
Poom-Valickis & Löfström, 2019	teacher as expert/professional (subject, pedagogical, socially interacting)
Tokoz Goktepe & Kunt, 2023	dynamic, multi-dimensional, developed by self(re)interpretation
Valdés-Sánchez & Espinet, 2020	professional self-image, includes perceived and enacted roles, personal histories, values, beliefs
Ayinselya, 2020	dynamic, interpretable, influenced by personal factors and practice
Shen et al., 2024	includes teachers' ways of knowing, doing, and being; impacted by social, cultural, educational contexts
Smetana & Kushki, 2023	a reflection of what a teacher is, who they are becoming and who they want to be
Hahl, 2021	ongoing, includes knowledge, beliefs, attitudes etc. Developed by self(re)interpretation, requires agency
Stenberg & Maaranen, 2020	ongoing, contextual, comprised of multiple identities
Clarke et al., 2023	comprised of multiple identities
Ruohotie-Lyhty & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2022	agentive
Nickel & Zimmer, 2019	shaped by contextual and personal factors, reflection on experiences
Cobb, et al., 2018	ongoing, socially legitimated, contextual; TPI is constructed within community of practice
Molander & Hamza, 2018	TPI is constructed within community of practice; participation in teacher education (TE) means constructing TPI
Magen-Nagar & Steinberger, 2022	dynamic structure of intra- and interpersonal factors; constructed before TE, during, and after (throughout career)
Schellings et al., 2023	a reflection of what a teacher is, who they are becoming and who they want to be
Dahl, 2020	identification with the idea of becoming a teacher
Wray & Richmond, 2018	values; positioning of oneself within communities
Sheybani et al., 2019	beliefs, attitudes, motives, experiences through which one identifies; future-orientation
Nickel & Crosby, 2022	dynamic, comprised of multiple identities, requires agency
Moore et al., 2020	ongoing, developed by self(re)interpretation; influenced by personal and social factors
Zhu et al., 2022	ideal, aspirational self

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024

S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

145

Author(s), year	What TPI is
Karousiou et al., 2019	evolving, dynamic, contextual
Liu & Li, 202	dynamic, relational; constructed in relation to others, including outside the classroom
Dvir & Schatz-Oppen-heimer, 2020	beliefs, goals; perceived compatibility with profession; constructed through tensions
Gu, 2018	lived experiences, cultural background; influenced by cultural, social, political processes
Muchnik-Rozanov & Tsybulsky, 2021	basis of meaning and decision making; practice (learning) as construction of identity
Kudaibergenov & Lee, 2022	dynamic, ongoing, developed by self(re)interpretation, contextual
Huang & Wang, 2024	self-image regarding one's professional mastery; fluid, multifaceted, contextual, includes educational beliefs
Wang et al., 2022	self-image, identification as part of a group; a reflection of what a teacher is, who they are becoming and who they want to be
Ostad et al., 2019	social construct, fluid; includes personal and professional experiences, communal context, organizational culture
Shiyama, 2021	beliefs and meanings attributed to teachers, fluid; includes beliefs, practices, lived experiences, requires agency
Blackmore et al., 2018	TPI is constructed by sharing experiences, exposure to teaching
Garner & Kaplan, 2019	includes subject and pedagogical knowledge, competencies, values, view of self, interests, goals, beliefs etc.
Nguyen & Loughland, 2018	interrelated, continuous, social
Brunetti & Marston, 2018	ongoing, contextual, agentive
Mehdizadeh et al., 2024	analytic lens through which to evaluate self, solve problems
Fanshawe et al., 2023	values, beliefs; who one is and aspires to be
Li & Lai, 2022	meanings attached to self by self and others
Golzar et al., 2022	how one understands the world, constructs relationships across time and space, future-orientation
Lambert & Gray, 2020	complex, multifaceted; personal, social, structural aspects of being a teacher; behavior according to belief
Wang, 2021	multifaceted, complex, fluid; choice to be agentive or passive
Lo & To, 2023	constructed by self-efficacy
Romylos, 2021	interaction between self, social, political contexts
Chien, 2020	n/a
Sherman & Teemant, 2023	dynamic, socially situated, agentive; TPI is not a singular core identity, but comprised of multiple identities
Yilmaz, et al., 2017	group membership, role membership; construction of TPI means developing a personal framework of meaning
Russo-Netzer & Shoshani, 2019	impacted by personal experiences, schooling experiences, role and school culture
Han, 2021	perception of self as a teacher; includes beliefs, attitudes, enables interaction with others

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024

146

S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

Author(s), year	What TPI is
González-Calvo et al., 2021	impacted by personal experiences, social, cultural, institutional context
Iranzo-García et al., 2020	multifaceted, non-linear; impacted by self, social, professional environment
Szocik et al., 2021	the lens through which to engage with current issues
McCaw, 2023	ongoing, embodied, enacted; comprised of multiple identities that are impacted by power and agency
Nigar et al., 2024	process of becoming, dynamic, constantly (re)negotiated
Khalaf, 2021	perceptions of the profession and future role
Venegas-Weber, 2018	n/a
Liu & Sammons, 2022	how one sees oneself, the profession; lens for negotiating values and the social and cultural conditions
Aliakbari & Sadeghi, 2022	self-image; role perceptions; self-evaluation; self as part of occupational group; commitment to professional practices
Xiang, 2021	includes cognition, emotions, social practices, professional lives, roles, responsibilities, purpose, sense of confidence etc.; how teachers distinguish themselves from different groups of professionals
Parmigiani et al., 2023	complex, multidimensional, learning process
Chávez et al., 2023	knowledge, skills, abilities, understanding of role; requires agency
Palacios et al., 2020	reflexivity, self-inspection; exists within context of structural powers
Muchnik-Rozanov & Tsybulsky, 2019	n/a

Within the purposes of the studies, the author was able to identify five themes (see Figure 3), however, some of the studies covered more than one of the themes, as illustrated by the numbers above the lines.
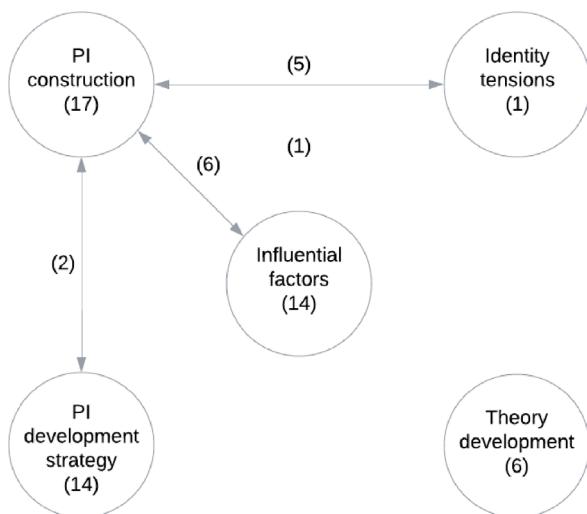

Figure 3   Themes in the Selected Teacher Professional Identity Studies

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

147

1) In the *PI construction* theme, the author included studies focusing on teachers' experiences constructing their professional identity. Authors of the studies included in this category sought to explore how TPI is constructed in specific contexts, for example, during teacher education (e.g. Poom-Valickis & Löfström, 2019; Stenberg & Maaranen, 2020, etc.) or in different geographic locations (e.g. rural Ghana in Ayinselya's (2020) work, rural China in Shen et al.'s (2024) work).

2) Studies related to *identity tensions* explicitly explore identity crises or constraints impacting the construction of TPI. The tensions varied in the studies – some were personal conflicts such as the challenge of negotiating different roles within a teaching career (Mehdizadeh et al., 2024), others were caused or reinforced by systemic problems such as bias against non-native English-speaking English teachers (Nigar et al., 2024) or new educational policies affecting special education teachers (Palacios et al., 2020).

3) The *influential factors* theme includes studies exploring the factors that impact the construction of TPI, as well as studies looking at the relation between TPI and one or more factors, such as agency (Cobb et al., 2018; Wray & Richmond, 2018; Venegas-Weber, 2018; Chávez et al., 2023) or critical thinking (Sheybani et al., 2019). Contrary to the studies included in the *PI construction* theme, the work included in the *influential factors* theme focus on the contextual factors more than individual experiences.

4) In the *PI development strategy* theme, studies looking at specific strategies that aid the development of TPI were included. Among these were co-teaching (Valdés-Sánchez, & Espinet, 2020; Nguyen & Loughland, 2018), reflection (Hahl, 2021; Muchnik-Rozanov & Tsybulsky, 2021; Szocik et al., 2021), simulations (Magen-Nagar & Steinberger, 2022) and others. The studies included in this theme were written by teacher educators working with student teachers at college or university level, which indicates that identity work is an aspect that is being intentionally included in teacher education to promote TPI.

5) The final theme, *theory development*, includes studies that were aimed at proposing new ways of thinking about TPI (positioning theory in Huang & Wang, 2024; complex dynamic systems perspective in Garner & Kaplan, 2019 etc.) or conceptualizing the way TPI is constructed throughout teachers' careers (Brunetti & Marston, 2018).

Discussion

In Beijaard et al.'s (2004) work, it was found that in the reviewed studies the definitions of TPI, where provided, were diverse. Based on the data, they were able to identify four features of TPI: (1) it is ongoing; (2) it encompasses the interplay of personal and contextual factors; (3) it includes sub-identities; (4) it is agentive. The author will compare Beijaard et al.'s (2004) findings to those of this review and then propose another characteristic of TPI.

In the definitions analyzed within this review, the author found that the dynamic and changing nature of TPI is emphasized by nearly all authors. There seems to be

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

148

a unanimous consensus that TPI is not a static concept, but rather an iterative process that begins as early as during teacher education and lasts throughout one's career.

1) For the interaction of "person and context" (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 122), the author found that this feature of TPI is similar to the idea of *TPI as an analytical lens* for teachers. It was also echoed in Wray and Richmond's (2018) work where they wrote that teachers' actions are primarily driven by values rather than outside influence (e.g. policies, reform).

2) Sub-identities were a common theme in Beijaard et al.'s (2004) and this review as well. Here, the author also found that these sub-identities could refer to the different roles that teachers play within the professional setting (McCaw, 2023; Stenberg & Maaranen, 2020).

3) As mentioned in the analysis of the themes encountered in the work, the relationship between agency and TPI was looked at in several ways within the studies included in this review. Agency was also one of the factors that showed up in the definitions of TPI either as a facilitating factor of TPI development (Chávez et al., 2023; Cobb et el., 2018) or conversely – with TPI as the catalyst for a greater sense of agency (Wray & Richmond, 2018). Nevertheless, researchers believe that the concepts of TPI and agency are related and impact one another.

After having reviewed the features Beijaard et al. (2004) identified and exploring the ways they were present in the studies reviewed here, the author would like to propose a fifth feature of TPI to add to the four – intersectionality. Although the interrelation of different identities was to an extent addressed by the second and third feature of TPI, it could be useful to look at it separately, as it seems to be a recurring theme in some studies. Gee (2001) stated that those who hold the power in society are able to share it within affinity groups. Meanwhile, the oppressed are often limited by the identities imposed onto them by the authorities. Palacios et al. (2020) explored the treatment of special education teachers when they entered generalist classrooms after a reform in special needs education in Chile. Liu & Li (2023) wrote about the hierarchy of languages and cultures in the classroom, Venegas-Weber (2018) examined the role of bilingualism in teaching, and similar ideas were presented in Nigar et al.'s (2024) work about non-native English-speaking English teachers and the discrimination they face while seeking employment in Australia – the personal lives and careers of teachers and, therefore, the construction of their identities is impacted by what is deemed acceptable by the authorities. In other words, while some identities may be more welcome in the classroom than others, all identities contribute to teachers' lived experiences and shape their TPI.

After analyzing the themes of the studies, it could be seen that the majority of scholars were interested in the TPI construction experiences, the factors that impact TPI, and strategies for TPI development. This contrasts with Beijaard et al.'s (2004) findings, as most studies in their review focused on personal factors and teachers' stories of their professional experiences. The researchers also mentioned that the primary data collection tools in the studies they reviewed were interviews and portfolios, which limited the type of information that was available. In the current review, the author found that

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

149

the methodology of the studies has diversified along with the themes that scholars write about. The majority, 54 out of 66, of the studies were qualitative, 9 were mixed-method, and 3 were quantitative. Within the three main themes mentioned above, various types of interviews (e.g. life history, semi-structured, narrative interviews etc.) are the main type of data collection method used, but included among others are: observations (ethnographic, classroom behavior), document analysis (reflections, drawings, teaching philosophies, metaphors, lesson plans), and questionnaires (including self-report scales). Both the themes of the studies and the data collection methods used in them indicate that although researchers are still interested in the personal experiences of teachers and their professional identities, the impact of context on TPI is acknowledged and made explicit in current research.

Conclusion

TPI plays a critical role in shaping teachers' professional lives. As educational systems everywhere undergo changes triggered by reforms, technological developments, and the shifting societal expectations of teachers and schools, it is necessary to understand how teachers construct their professional identities in contemporary educational contexts. The findings of this review further the field of TPI studies by determining the current trends of the field, as well as revisiting the findings of Beijaard et al's (2004) review and assessing their applicability in studies published over the past five years.

Two research questions were posed to guide this review. The first one concerned the definition of TPI. The definitions of TPI are diverse and the focus of the definition depends on the purpose of the paper. Beijaard et al. (2004) had identified four features of TPI that they deemed essential. In this review, the author concluded that the features are still used to describe TPI in more recent studies, as well as proposed a fifth feature for describing TPI – intersectionality. This feature would allow to more clearly conceptualize the ways TPI is impacted by other identities that teachers choose to hold or those that are imposed onto them.

The second question explored the current trends in TPI research. It was concluded that stories in the forms of narratives of TPI construction experiences are the main theme in TPI research, however, scholars also focus on the factors that impact TPI, as well as identity tensions. There is a growing number of studies describing methods or approaches that can be used to promote the development of TPI in early-career teachers and teacher education students, proving that the value in promoting TPI is recognized by higher education institutions. A small number of studies also look at new approaches to studying or conceptualizing TPI.

In the future, it would be useful to further clarify the concept of TPI by creating a typology of seminal studies in the field that would allow researchers to differentiate among the various definitions of TPI and their theoretical underpinnings.

A notable limitation of this systematic review was that it was done by a single researcher. For more significant results, the review should include a more diverse set

HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

150

of work, which could be achieved by screening a wider range of databases, expanding the search to all fields, instead of the abstract field, as well as including studies written in languages other than English.

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HUMAN, TECHNOLOGIES AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION, 2024
S. Semjonova. Current Perspectives on Teacher Professional Identity Research: a Systematic ..

151

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152

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153

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155