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Determinants of Career Dynamics of Young Teachers

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Abstract

Young teachers are entering the profession, but many leave quickly due to professional stress, unfavorable working conditions, a lack of support, or an unclear professional identity. This trend disrupts the continuity of the educational process and reduces the quality of education, and reveals systemic gaps in the recruitment, training, and retention of teachers. Still, there is insufficient research on how these factors shape the career trajectory of young teachers from their perspective. Therefore, this paper addresses the research problem of which personal and environmental factors determine the professional stability, development, or departure of young teachers from the teaching profession. The study used a qualitative research strategy. The research data were collected from purposive sampling using semi-structured interviews with 14 young teachers. The interview data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The results of the study revealed two main dimensions of factors influencing the career start of young teachers. Personal factors include fluctuations of emotional well-being, development of a professional self-concept and identity, motivation to teach, professional development, and a sense of career meaning. Only when environmental circumstances are favorable—school microclimate, support from managers and colleagues, infrastructure and working conditions, perception of education policy—can these internal resources be effectively realized.

Keywords: young teachers; career development; teacher career

1. Introduction

Teachers play an important role in providing quality education, which is a key to societal growth (European Council, 2020). However, many countries, including Lithuania, face the challenge of teacher shortage and unstable career paths for young teachers (Yinon & Orland-Barak, 2017; OECD, 2024). On average, 30–50 percent of young teachers leave the profession within the first five years of employment (Kelly et al., 2019; Procter-Legg et al., 2025). In Lithuania less than 4 percent of teachers are under 30 years of age (OECD, 2025). Although young teachers are joining schools, many of them leave the profession quite quickly due to professional stress, unfavorable working conditions, lack of support or unclear professional identity (Daly et al., 2023; Lander, 2022; Lebedytė-Mečionienė, 2022; Thompson-Lee et al., 2025).

Young teachers are a particularly vulnerable group, facing the challenges of professional adaptation, emotional exhaustion, unclear career development and insufficient social support (Göregen et al., 2024; Kelly et al., 2019). At the same time, professional skills,

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self-confidence and relationships with colleagues are formed at this career stage—the factors that influence the further career of the teacher (Ingersoll et al., 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Thomas et al., 2019). This period is particularly important for the formation of a teacher's professional identity, professional happiness and the decision to remain in education (Didžiulienė, 2023; Hulme & Wood, 2022; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Young teachers often face "reality shock"—a discrepancy between the expectations formed during education and the actual working conditions and challenges (Göregen et al., 2024; Hobson et al., 2009). It is the first few years of work that are a crucial period when many teachers decide to change their profession (Cels et al., 2023; Procter-Legg et al., 2025).

Career research emphasizes that professional trajectories are shaped by the interaction of personal and environmental factors (Ingersoll et al., 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Career dynamics refers to the nonlinear, multi-stage evolution of career trajectories over time, characterized by repeated transitions, adaptations, and reshuffles of professional roles, driven by the ongoing interaction between individual career self-regulation and changing social, economic, and organizational contexts (Akkermans et al., 2024; Baruch et al., 2025; Ibarra et al., 2026). Scholars generally agree that as careers have become increasingly oriented toward continuous learning and development, career patterns have become more dynamic and distinctive (De Vos et al., 2020; Fouad & Kozlowski, 2019). Successful management of career transitions influences young teachers' work adjustment and well-being, and career dynamics in general depend on the interaction of various factors—internal (motivation, self-confidence, values) and external, especially supportive factors (professional networks, the educational institution's ability to empower young teachers, mentoring, school culture, working conditions) (Ben-Amram & Davidovich, 2024; Day & Gu, 2010; Mockler, 2022; Mokone & Setlalentoa, 2023; Savickas, 2013). Young teachers constantly balance between the desire to establish themselves in their professional activities and the uncertainty they experience (De Vos et al., 2020; Procter-Legg et al., 2025; Redding & Henry, 2018). This trend disrupts the continuity of the educational process, reduces the quality of education and reveals systemic gaps in the areas of teacher recruitment, training and retention. However, researchers have yet to discover how to harness and amplify the positive motivations of young teachers during their difficult first years of teaching (Procter-Legg et al., 2025), and there is still a lack of research-based insights into how these factors shape the career trajectory of young teachers. This situation encourages a deeper analysis of the factors influencing the career development of young teachers, considering both individual experiences and the broader professional and institutional context (Luft et al., 2022). Therefore, in this context, the research question is raised: What factors determine the career dynamics of young teachers from their perspective?

1.1. The Concept and Characteristics of Young Teachers

The terms young teacher, novice teacher, beginning teacher, and early-career teacher are often used in the literature as partially overlapping, but they denote different aspects of professional development and demographics. A novice teacher is usually defined as a person with very limited practical experience and is just beginning to apply pedagogical knowledge in real classroom situations. This concept emphasizes the level of competence and cognitive-professional development (Berliner, 2004; Farrell, 2009). Meanwhile, a beginning teacher is usually associated with the first years of professional activity (usually 1–3 years) and emphasizes the phase of entry into the profession and adaptation processes (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Li et al., 2022; Rosenberg et al., 2024). The broader concept of early-career teacher covers a longer period (usually up to 5 years) and is used to analyze not only the initial adaptation experiences, but also further professional development, identity formation and survival in the profession (Davis & Park, 2025; Elyashiv & Rozenberg, 2024).

On the other hand, the concept of young teacher is not strictly linked to the duration of professional experience, but is more often defined demographically—as younger teachers (usually up to 30 years old), regardless of their professional stage (OECD, 2024; Geeraerts et al., 2018). Young teachers can be both novice teachers and teachers who have already accumulated some experience, therefore this category is more often used when analyzing generational change, labor market dynamics or teacher supply, rather than the development of professional competence (De Witte et al., 2023; Gore et al., 2024; Haberman, 2012). Therefore, it is suggested to use the overlapping concepts in a differentiated manner: novice more reflects the level of competence, beginning—the transitional phase of entering the profession, early-career—a broader career trajectory, and young teacher—the age or generation dimension (OECD, 2024, 2025).

Young teachers (up to 30 years old) currently working in schools represent Generation Z, which is characterized by a different approach to career than older generations and by a specific career-related behavior. Work and career are not a priority or goal in themselves for Generation Z representatives. Representatives of this generation demonstrate a strong need to prioritize personal life, combining it with work (Bińczycki et al., 2023; Lulewicz-Sas et al., 2025). The motivation, engagement and productivity of Generation Z employees are directly driven by the alignment of career aspirations with the goals of the organization, in addition, self-realization, interpersonal relationships and the atmosphere at work, employer respect and individual attention (Król, 2020), salary and employer ethics (Fratrièová & Kirchmayer, 2018) are important for Generation Z. Studies (Nabahani & Riyanto, 2020; Surugiu et al., 2025) show that representatives of Generation Z change jobs more often than previous generations, they do not feel obliged to work in one place for a long time and have low loyalty to organizations, often prioritizing personal preferences over long-term commitments. Salary is important to them, but it is not the most important thing. Young people strive to acquire competencies that provide opportunities for development and career advancement. They seek jobs that develop their skills and abilities, provide experience and practice (Barhate & Dirani, 2022; Hill et al., 2024; Surugiu et al., 2025; Nabahani & Riyanto, 2020).

The characteristics of young teachers are described in the literature as a complex set of professional, emotional, and social characteristics. Empirical studies (Göregen et al., 2024; Hobson et al., 2009) show that young teachers exhibit lower situational awareness and less-developed classroom management and decision-making skills than experienced teachers, as their actions are more often guided by rules than by contextual assessment (Berliner, 2004). At the same time, young teachers are characterized by greater professional vulnerability: they more often experience stress, burnout, and uncertainty, especially in conditions of high workload and limited organizational support (Daly et al., 2023; Lander, 2022). However, this group is also distinguished by high learning potential, reflexivity, and flexibility, which create the prerequisites for faster professional growth under the right conditions (Shuls & Flores, 2020). It is important to emphasize that the characteristics of young teachers are not only individual, but they are also significantly shaped by the school microclimate, the quality of mentoring, and the educational policy context, the analysis of this group must be based on an ecological, multi-level approach (OECD, 2024; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

1.2. Factors of Young Teachers' Career Dynamics

The career dynamics of young teachers are analyzed as a process shaped by a complex system of environmental factors. This study applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) with the extension of the personal system proposed by Mansfield et al. (2018) to include personal risk factors (for example, difficulties in asking

for help) and resources (for example, motivation and efficacy, a sense of moral purpose and calling, hope and high expectations) in the microsystem. According to Bronfenbrenner, the microsystem includes the patterns of activity, roles, and interpersonal relationships. The mesosystem is a system of relationships that focuses on the connections and processes that occur between two or more micro situations, where, according to Mansfield et al. (2018), teachers encourage one another to develop through their unique characteristics, emotions, aspirations, and experiences as they interact with their surrounding environment. The ecosystem refers to the relationships and processes between two or more situations in which the developing person is indirectly involved, but whose events influence the person's situation. The macrosystem is a societal model of a given culture, subculture, and broader social context. The chronosystem, according to Bronfenbrenner (2005), concerns changes in individuals and their environments that result from significant life events or experiences. Applying this approach to teachers' careers, career dynamics occur in a multi-layered system in which micro- (school), meso- (professional community), and macro- (educational policy) level factors operate.

In this context, young teachers' career decisions can be better understood by differentiating between two interrelated but distinct dimensions: retention intention and intention to leave. Although these dimensions are often considered opposite, empirical research suggests that they may be influenced by different mechanisms: the retention intention is more associated with positive internal resources (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy), while intention to leave more often arises as a reaction to negative professional experiences and structural constraints (Van den Borre et al., 2021; Räsänen et al., 2020). In addition, longitudinal studies show that the intention to leave the profession forms early in the career and remains relatively stable over time, in the absence of significant interventions (Räsänen et al., 2020). Integrating these perspectives, it can be argued that the career dynamics of young teachers unfold as the interaction of two parallel processes: the intention to remain in the profession is strengthened by inclusive factors, and the intention to leave is formed by exclusionary factors. These processes are not mutually compensatory; rather, they can coexist, and the balance between them determines the final career trajectory. Such a conceptualization allows us to substantiate an integrated theoretical model in which internal psychological resources (e.g., teacher enthusiasm, self-efficacy, motivation to teach) act as protective factors against leaving the profession (Ben-Amram & Davidovich, 2024; Burić & Moè, 2020; Elyashiv & Rozenberg, 2024; Kouhsari et al., 2024), and negative professional experiences and structural constraints (e.g., burnout, working conditions) act as risk factors, jointly shaping both the retention intention and the intention to leave (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Procter-Legg et al., 2025).

The career dynamics of young teachers are interpreted as a complex interaction of pull and push factors, encompassing individual psychological resources and characteristics of the professional environment (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2014; Lindqvist & Kelchtermans, 2025; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). This perspective allows us to conceptualize career dynamics not as one-off choices or decisions, but as a non-linear process in which positive and negative factors operate in parallel and cumulatively.

Pulling career factors are considered to be those that strengthen the connection with the profession, primarily intrinsic motivation, the experience of professional meaningfulness and self-efficacy (Lander, 2022). Recent research suggests that self-efficacy is a key internal resource for early-career teachers, closely linked to professional commitment and readiness, greater job satisfaction, and resilience to negative emotions, all of which are significant predictors of young teachers' intention to remain in the profession (Ben-Amram & Davidovich, 2024; Elyashiv & Rozenberg, 2024; Grant & Brantlinger, 2023; Mockler, 2022; Mokone & Setlalentoa, 2023). Social and emotional competencies serve as an ad-

ditional internal resource that strengthens resilience to professional challenges through the mechanism of self-efficacy (Cels et al., 2023; Daly et al., 2023; Mokone & Setlalentoa, 2023; Pikić Jugović et al., 2025). A supportive school culture, good relationships with colleagues and supervisors, mentoring, and flexible work schedules help develop resilience, self-confidence, and promote professional engagement (Bellibaş et al., 2023; Mokone & Setlalentoa, 2023; Sincock et al., 2026).

Career dynamics disincentives include both internal and external elements that weaken professional commitment and increase the risk of attrition (De Vos et al., 2020; Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Procter-Legg et al., 2025; Redding & Henry, 2018). These include low self-efficacy, uncertainty about professional identity, and a mismatch between expectations and actual work experience (Beijaard et al., 2004; Cobb, 2022; Pillen et al., 2013). These internal factors often interact with adverse structural conditions—high workload, limited autonomy, or insufficient organizational support—creating a cumulative negative effect that manifests as increased stress and burnout (Carroll et al., 2021; Hulme & Wood, 2022; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). An unsafe work environment, inadequate conditions, or tense relationships with colleagues can cause demotivation and hinder adaptation (Toropova et al., 2021). Meta-analytic studies confirm that burnout is one of the strongest predictors of intention to leave the profession, often surpassing other individual factors (Madigan & Kim, 2021).

In addition, recent research highlights the importance of resource availability in the professional ecosystem of teachers. Environmental factors affect career dynamics through access to material, social, and professional resources. When these resources are available (e.g., mentoring, professional development, supportive organizational culture), they enhance young teachers' professional growth and job satisfaction. Conversely, lack of resources can lead to burnout, decreased motivation, and a higher likelihood of leaving the profession (Diab & Green, 2024).

The teacher is an active element of the system—she/he actively interprets and uses the resources provided by the environment, which can promote or limit career development; therefore, even under similar conditions, different teachers experience different career trajectories. Environmental factors of young teachers' career dynamics should be analyzed systematically, as a network of interrelated influences. An ecological approach reveals that career development is not only the result of individual decisions—it is shaped in constant interaction with the education system, social environment, and available resources. Such an approach is particularly important for understanding the challenges of young teachers' professional development and for designing effective educational policy and organizational interventions.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Collection Methods and Instruments

The study adopted a qualitative research strategy, with the aim of gaining a deep understanding of a social phenomenon from participants' perspectives. The research data were collected using the semi-structured interview method (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviews were conducted after prior agreement with the participants at a time and place convenient for them. Ethical approval was obtained from the Kaunas University of Technology, with informed consent procedures in accordance with institutional requirements. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researchers of this article. Respondents were selected using the snowball sampling principle. The duration of each interview ranged from 35 to 90 min; all interviews were recorded to ensure data accuracy and subsequent analysis.

A semi-structured interview questionnaire (Table 1) was developed, which allowed the participants to freely share their personal professional experiences, while ensuring systematic data collection in accordance with the intended purpose of the study. The questions were formulated to clarify what factors influence the career dynamics of young teachers.

Table 1. Semi-Structured Interview guide.

Questions
How do you feel about working at school?
What qualities have you developed while working at school?
How does working at school align with your values?
How do you assess your teaching competencies? How have they changed while working at school?
What is your motivation for a career as a teacher? Do you notice any changes in it?
What are your future career goals? How have your first years as a teacher influenced your attitude towards this profession?
How does the school microclimate affect your well-being and career plans?
What kind of support do you feel from your managers or colleagues?
How do you assess your relationships with students and their parents?
How does your work environment meet your expectations and needs?
What decisions of education policymakers influence your career decisions?
What do you think about the prestige of the teaching profession?

2.2. Data Analysis Method

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, which enables systematic processing of text data to identify significant themes and their interrelationships (Braun & Clarke, 2025). First, the initial transcription of the interviews and familiarization with the text were carried out. Next, thematic analysis was applied to identify newly emerging subthemes. Finally, a synthesis of themes was performed, in which the discovered themes were interpreted using theoretical models and the research objective. The audit trail was recorded in analytical reports, and changes in themes were documented, thus ensuring the transparency of the decision-making process. The final themes were refined through a reflective dialogue between the researchers. This analysis process helped to ensure the generation of systematic, reasoned, and data-based insights.

2.3. Participants

The study involved 14 young teachers from across Lithuania. The selection was purposive, with participants meeting the following criteria: age up to 30 years and school experience of 1 to 5 years. Certain criteria were defined in order to collect the most heterogeneous sample possible. Following the principle of increasing variance (Patton, 2021), the sample differed in various important characteristics, such as place of residence, gender, type of school in which it works (rural, urban, private, and public), and subject of study (exact, humanities, arts, etc.). The aim was to ensure a diversity of experiences, allowing for the analysis of both individual and general features of career dynamics. All participants signed an informed consent to participate in the study, were guaranteed confidentiality, and the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of the sample.

Research Participant Code	Gender	Age	Years of Schooling	Subject	School Type
T1	female	25	1.5 years	Information technology	District lower secondary school
T2	female	27	2.5 years	Primary education	Small rural school
T3	female	29	3 years	Mathematics	City secondary school
T4	female	24	1.5 years	Geography	City secondary school
T5	female	28	1 year	Life skills	Private basic school
T6	female	29	5 years	German	City lower secondary school
T7	female	24	2.5 years	Primary education	District basic school
T8	female	29	4.5 years	Primary education	City basic school
T9	female	26	1.5 years	Lithuanian	City secondary school
T10	male	27	2.5 years	Mathematics	Private lower secondary school
T11	female	26	1.5 years	Physics	City secondary school
T12	female	28	3 years	History	District lower secondary school
T13	female	27	3 years	Preschool education	Private lower secondary school
T14	male	26	2 years	English	City secondary school

3. Results

The study participants' responses showed thoughtful, diverse opinions about the beginning of their careers as teachers and the factors influencing their course. Taking into account the theoretical model of factors determining the dynamics of teachers' careers, personal and environmental factors are analyzed separately.

3.1. Personal Factors Determining the Dynamics of Young Teachers' Careers

Personal factors determining the dynamics of young teachers' careers include value, emotional, self-regulatory, identity, and other aspects. When analyzing the responses of the study participants, five themes emerged: "Fluctuations of emotional well-being", "Development of professional self-concept and identity", "Motivation to teach", "Professional development" and "Sense of career meaning" (see Figure 1).

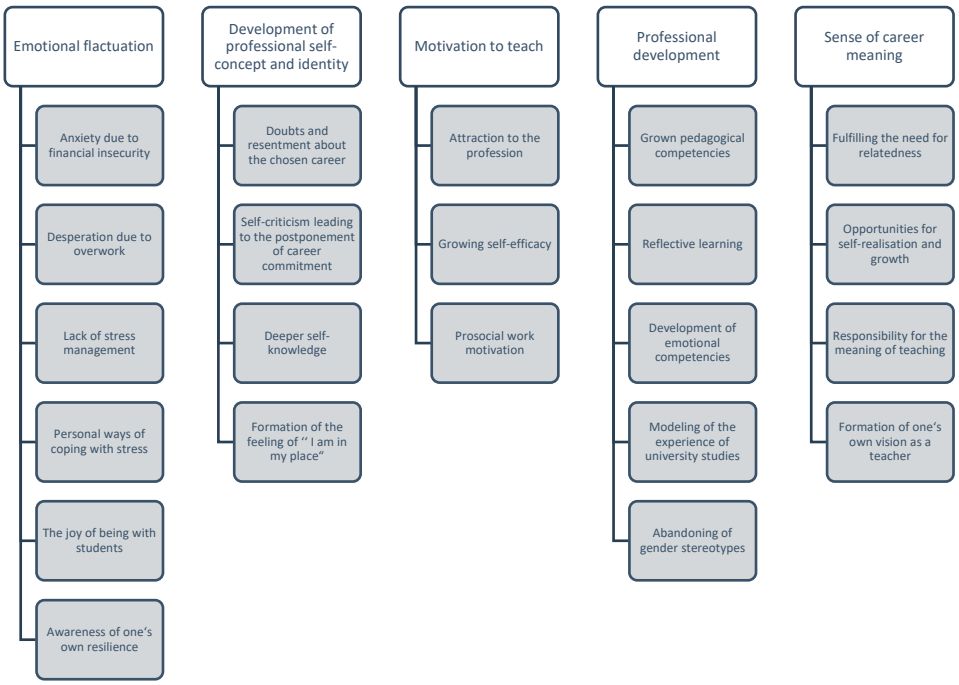


Figure 1. Personal factors determining the dynamics of young teachers' careers.

3.1.1. Emotional Fluctuation

Young teachers experience a significant emotional change during their first year of work. Teaching is associated with emotional experiences, intense interpersonal interactions, and constant pressure due to responsibility and expectations (Fullan, 2003; Hargreaves, 2003). Answering questions about emotional well-being and stress experienced at work, young teachers provided important insights that helped them identify factors in the dynamics of a teacher's career that both encourage them to continue their career and hinder them, or even push them toward another career choice. The topic "Emotional Fluctuation" has 6 subtopics: "Anxiety due to financial insecurity"; "Desperation due to overwork", "Lack of stress management", "Personal ways of coping with stress"; "The joy of being with students", "Awareness of one's own resilience".

One of the internal factors that causes strong experiences is the anxiety of young teachers about financial insecurity. To suppress it, a young research participant says she had additional jobs and new obligations even while studying. And then the price she paid for suppressing the anxiety of not being able to make ends meet was exhaustion and overwork: "In my first year, I was afraid that it would be difficult to survive as a physics teacher, so I signed a contract with a tutoring company. However, just before September, the school management offered me to teach not only physics but also human safety and mathematics. It turned out that I had to not only study at the university, but also work 1.5 staff. The decision to take on both jobs was made out of fear and the desire to be financially independent. Although it allowed me to move out of my parents' house and gave me a lot of experience, I was very exhausted by the end of the school year. This continued for some time during the last year of my bachelor's studies, but I had an excessive workload and had to take an academic leave. I was emotionally devastated. It gave me a lot of insecurity and self-doubt, both in my personal life and in terms of career decisions. I would like to say that it was only a short-term effect, but I think that the consequences of those years are still with me today. I feel it" (T12).

Young teachers experience such intense stress that they cannot control it, and this desperation overshadows all meaningful aspects of their work. The research participant says, "I don't really manage to cope with stress. There are days when it seems like I'm going to give up everything, but I still somehow hold on until I figure out the next step. Sometimes I come home and tell myself, "I need to stay at least this school year". And I keep repeating to myself that we can't leave students without a teacher in the middle of the school year. Of course, there are those good moments and that meaning in the work, but still, it doesn't seem to outweigh all the stress around us" (T10). In these words, it can be seen that the young teacher seems to accumulate stress from the environment, it becomes very general, even without specific details of the situation. But other study participants note that the cause of stress often arises not from the teacher's direct activities—teaching, classroom management, but from the environment, especially—due to prolonged negative relationships with the parents of students: "The second year, when I started working with the second year students, it was a difficult stage, when the parents also put a lot of pressure and showed dissatisfaction. That was such a turning point that I thought, I would leave, I would not work, I also received an incentive scholarship in the fourth year of studies, so I would have to pay the money back, but I thought, I would rather give everything, but I would not do this job. It was such a turning point, the amount of stress, when I could not cope on my own" (T1).

The research participants, when asked about their emotional state, admit they are overworked and exhausted from the heavy workload of their teaching duties. This feeling, which began as just fatigue from the heavy workload, eventually grew into desperation during the first two years of teaching. T9 states: "I still try to stay positive, that inner fire,

but I feel that 'fire' is starting to fade. Overwork feels stronger and stronger as the year goes on. I hope that summer will help me recover, gather strength, and welcome the new year with new energy. But frankly, I'm scared. I'm scared that it could be even harder." With the loss of resources due to fatigue, young teachers lose motivation to act, hope that something can change fades, so a feeling of helplessness takes over and the idea of giving up teaching arises: "Motivation is not very high at the moment. I lost it because of fatigue, a lot of stress, and the feeling that nothing much will change if I stay here longer" (T10); "There were very difficult moments when students wouldn't listen to me and would make noise. Because of this, my desire to try decreased" (T14).

It is clear that fatigue can be a key factor in deciding to leave teaching. Emotional exhaustion is associated with low job satisfaction and a sense of meaninglessness: "that overwork, burnout, preparation. . . It is very difficult when you are preparing, trying, sitting in the classroom, and not many people are interested in the fact that you are preparing. Sometimes you feel meaningless" (T4).

For other young teachers, challenges and doubts work in the other direction—they reflect on them as an awareness of their own resilience: "This is a responsible and meaningful stage: I organize activities, maintain contact with parents, and help children feel safe. At the same time, I face challenges—a lot of work, burnout, and doubts. However, it helps me grow, discover inner strength, and make me even more sure that I am on my way" (T13).

On the other hand, young teachers also experience strong positive emotions at work, arising from a close, warm relationship with students and colleagues. Research participant T6 says, "I feel that I am good here. It is good to work and just be with children. Students feel this, they come during breaks, even those who do not have lessons with me. <. . .> I think they really have fun. It is also good with colleagues. We communicate, support each other, and help each other when necessary. It is great to have such a connection." It is the emotional connection with students that gives us the strength to endure difficulties and continue my teaching career: "It's enough for me to come to work, see the children, when they run up to me with those smiles, hug me, and then you understand: it's not so bad. There are hard days, of course. But somehow, they pass, and everything passes. The next day it's all over again. Nothing like that, it's as if yesterday didn't happen. Of course, there are moments of exhaustion, just like now I feel tired. But I think: it's okay, there's not much left (until the summer holidays), I'll endure it" (T8).

Young teachers say that they have discovered their own ways of coping with stress that help them maintain a good mood. The research participant tells about the entire set of measures and demonstrates healthy lifestyle habits, the ability to manage stress and separate life roles: "I have my own personal rituals that help me prepare for the working day and detach myself after it. Over time, I realized that I need to invest in myself. Sports, breathing exercises, relaxation techniques help me a lot. I also have such a rule when I leave work, as much as possible, I leave my worries at work. By the way, I recently remembered a seminar I attended, where I heard very good advice that I still apply to this day. Teachers are even recommended to have separate "work clothes" and separate ones for personal life. It may seem like a trifle, but it helps to detach physically and psychologically. I myself try not to go out in the same clothes or meet friends I work with at school. This helps to distinguish between the parts of my personality where I am a teacher and where I am just me" (T9).

Emotional resilience, reflexivity and the ability to cope with stress are important for survival in pedagogical activity (Carroll et al., 2021; Gudžinskienė & Pozdniakovas, 2021). The responses of the study participants confirm that the emotional well-being of teachers is closely related to the sustainability of their professional path, and self-applied stress coping methods can become a preventive measure against burnout. It can be argued that critical

self-observation, emotional resilience and support systems are important internal factors shaping the career trajectory of beginning teachers.

3.1.2. Development of Professional Self-Concept and Identity

The topic "Development of professional self-concept and identity" includes the statements that reveal how young teachers perceive their professional identity and its change. This topic has four subthemes: "Doubts and resentment about the chosen career", "Self-criticism leading to the postponement of career commitment", "Deeper self-knowledge", and "Formation of the feeling of 'I am in my place'".

The professional self-concept and identity of young teachers are formed when faced with the everyday life of a teacher and the praxis shock experienced, or in other words, professional identity tensions. Some research participants express doubts about their chosen career or even recognize their personal limitations. For example, one young teacher states that the oppressive activities of a teacher cause endless doubt: "To be honest, I don't quite feel like I'm in my place as a teacher yet, and I keep wondering if this profession is really my path. There are aspects of the work that are oppressive, raise doubts, and a sense of difficulty" (T3). But T10 simply regrets realizing his limitations and quite clearly understands that he made a mistake in his choice: "To be honest, I don't quite feel like I belong. I thought it would be one way, but it's different. . . a lot of stress, a lot of paperwork. At school, I realized that I had less patience than I thought, and that I would really like a job that would be less psychologically draining." Finally, this young teacher states that he was looking for a calling, but did not find it: "When I started teaching, I hoped that I would find my calling here, maybe even a long-term career, but now those expectations have changed a lot. I understand that this is probably not my path" (T10).

Other young teachers, due to self-criticism as a personality disposition, assess their abilities as average and, when mentioning commitment to their career, associate the position of avoidance and detachment they experience with this: "I never took my career seriously. I always swam downstream and went where I was lucky to go. I always tried my hand at everything because, for a long time, I didn't know what I wanted, and I was always average everywhere. <. . .> But even while doing my teaching work, feeling extremely good, deep down I still wonder if I will really stay here for a long time" (T11). During the first year of working at school, young teachers deepen their self-knowledge, discover new traits necessary for their work as teachers, and accept them as their emerging professional identity. The young teacher says that only the pace of school life helped her discover her strengths—the ability to react quickly, be spontaneous, and work in a team, and overcome the fear of the audience:

"I realized that I have more patience than I actually thought. Also, constantly changing situations taught me to react quickly and make decisions here and now. I also discovered that I could organize activities and work in a team. This work also helped develop spontaneity, especially when I had to replace colleagues or teach lessons without prior preparation. Then you also need to act here and now and simply get along with that situation. And, perhaps most importantly, working at school helped me overcome the fear of the audience, which previously seemed insurmountable" (T2).

The emergence and strengthening of the feeling of "being in one's place" experienced by young teachers is one of the factors shaping the dynamics of their careers, which characterizes their professional identity (Stenberg & Maaranen, 2021) and confirms the correctness of their choice to teach. The participants of the study emphasize their suitability for the work of a teacher: "I think I am sitting in my sleigh. Of course, there are all kinds of days, but in reality, somehow, I can't really imagine another profession. It seems to me that I have always been a teacher to some extent" (T8).

The results of the study allow us to assume that the professional identity that is intensively formed in the first years of teaching is an important factor determining further career-related decisions, the source of stress experiences changes: the tension due to doubts about one's role as a teacher shifts to the search for a balance between work and personal life. Young teachers report that stress has a greater impact on working relationships in the second year, but in that year, they are less likely to seek help; they are already relying on their own abilities to cope with challenges.

3.1.3. Motivation to Teach

The theme "Motivation to teach" includes the statements that reveal a meaningful human passion for the field of teaching activity (Dobrow et al., 2023), which encourages active involvement and the desire to remain in the profession despite challenges. Three subthemes are distinguished: "Attraction to the profession", "Growing self-efficacy", and "Prosocial work motivation".

Young teachers, when talking about choosing a career path as a teacher, emphasize the internal attraction to this profession: "I always wanted to work as a teacher. Somehow, I didn't even think about a career in the sense that I would strive for some higher position or qualification. I just wanted to fit into school life and be a teacher" (T4).

The participants of the study emphasize their growing self-efficacy as an important source of commitment to their career. The teaching profession gives them joy, satisfaction, and allows them to realize themselves by helping others. T1 names success as a source of internal motivation: "I see that I am quite successful. I am successful in expressing ideas, I like to be proactive. That is what motivates me not to stop and try in this career". T4 believes that motivation for a career lies in meaning: "When you feel that work has meaning, then the motivation to try, prepare, and improve your skills appears." T2 expresses the teacher's enthusiasm for the variety and creativity of the teacher's daily life: "I am very motivated by the opportunity to create a creative and interesting educational process. I am also very interested in looking for new methods and tools to make learning for children engaging and meaningful." Young teachers identify teaching as a life path that they associate with their personal mission. The responses of young teachers clearly show prosocial work motivation (Dik et al., 2012), an idealistic attitude, ethical responsibility, and personal involvement in creating students' well-being:

"It seems to me that children are our future. And if I help children, it means that I contribute to the future of all of us. This is my main motivation. In a few years, I will be gone, but children will remain. People will remain who will live, work, make decisions. Some will become leaders or work in highly qualified jobs; others will have less-qualified jobs, but together they will create our society. And therefore, if we want a better future, we must invest in children. It is very important for me to do so that they will be better off in the future. Because after us, the world will still remain, and it depends on us what we put in it, what we will leave. It seems to me that one of the most beautiful forms of legacy is to help children, be with them, teach them. This is my main motivation" (T9).

The intrinsic motivation to teach expressed in the responses of the study participants is characterized by growing self-efficacy, moral commitment to their students, which in turn increases the meaningfulness of work and psychological well-being (Bellibaş et al., 2023; Dobrow et al., 2023), it is likely to strengthen the intentions to remain in the teaching profession.

3.1.4. Professional Development

The topic of "Professional development" includes statements reflecting young teachers' thoughts about changes in their competencies and signs of professional growth. This

topic has 5 subthemes: "Grown pedagogical competencies", "Development of emotional competencies", "Reflective learning", "Modeling the experience of university studies", "Abandoning gender stereotypes".

One of the most prominent signs of career dynamics is professional growth. Young teachers notice that their pedagogical competencies have increased during the first year of work: "I compare myself now and two years ago—the difference is obvious. In fact, I had a completely different vision of working at school from my studies. /. . ./ I have learned a lot, and I still find a lot where I can improve" (T7). The change in both general and subject-specific pedagogical competences is particularly evident: increased abilities to manage a classroom, speak publicly, collaborate, create and adapt educational content, and apply digital tools. T2 states: "Of the improved competences, the work is most facilitated by the strengthened management of the school classroom. Now it is easier to keep children's attention, manage situations, and create a conducive learning environment. The use of digital tools is of great importance /. . ./ Digital tools not only help me make lessons more interesting and engaging but also make my own work easier as a teacher. /. . ./. In addition, strengthening communication skills helps maintain good relationships with both students and their parents." T6 emphasizes the competence of individualizing education: "I had to learn to adapt work and general programs for children. I have really improved in this area because at first I just expected that everyone would learn as written in the program. But that is not the case. In reality, you have to constantly adapt to the needs and capabilities of children". T7 notes improved public speaking and communication skills with various audiences—students, their parents/guardians and even the professional community: "communication competence has also improved, well, really improved. And that communication, well, of course, is the same with students, but completely different with students' parents. <. . .> Previously, there was some fear of speaking, which is now completely gone. There is no longer any fear of standing in front of students' parents, before a parents' meeting, or reading a report to colleagues at some conference".

Professional development in career development is also associated with increased emotional competence among young teachers, that is, the ability to manage emotions in professional environments and to respond to complex situations in a professional manner (Savina et al., 2025). A young teacher notes: "I remember how I used to react to one thing or another, and how I would react now. . . Now I get angry less often, I try not to take everything personally" (T3).

At the beginning of a career, the relationship with university lecturers is important for professional development, as the research participant states, they support the young teacher through personal relationships: "It was very interesting to find out that before coming to university they were also teachers in schools, they told me about their memories and the difficulties they experienced. They gave me good advice on how to manage the class and how to keep them interested during the lesson. I tried a lot of things" (T14).

A sign of professional development is also the developed ability to learn reflexively, discuss activities with colleagues, and learn from personal and others' experiences. T2 states: "The most helpful thing for me is that simple daily reflection, when, after each lesson, I think in my mind about what worked, what could have been better, and what else I would do differently. But feedback is also very important, when you observe the reactions of students, you see what works, what doesn't work, and the alternatives. Conversations with colleagues are productive because such conversations help me evaluate my work, look at it from a different perspective, and discover different solutions." The experience of growth stirs even stereotypical young teachers' views about career. They refuse gender stereotypes. According to the young teacher, "Curiosity led me to the sphere of pedagogy. I wondered if I could and if I managed to be a teacher. At first, I thought that teaching was

more for women, but I was wrong. There are quite a few men in my work environment who are just as good at teaching and empathizing with children as women" (T14).

The aspects of professional development highlighted in the study are consistent with the importance of systematic reflection for teachers' professional growth, emphasized by Gröschner et al. (2018), as well as with the insights of Carroll et al. (2021)'s study on teacher psychological well-being and its impact on the quality of work.

3.1.5. Sense of Career Meaning

The theme "Sense of career meaning" includes the statements that emphasize the value of working with people, the possibility of self-realization, and a strong sense of meaning associated with teaching. This topic has 4 subtopics: "Fulfilling the need for relatedness", "Opportunities for self-realization and growth", "Responsibility for the meaning of teaching", "Formation of one's own vision as a teacher".

The sense of meaning in the career of young teachers is strengthened by the opportunity to realize one's talents, reveal personal qualities, and adhere to values at work. A young teacher perceives the fulfillment of the need for relatedness through the prism of values, stating: "One of my personal values in life is love, connection, and friendship. And it is precisely these values that I can satisfy the most when working with children, because you always get a lot of love in return, a strong connection, you feel appreciated in their eyes" (T9).

Young teachers associate the meaning of their work with a sense of responsibility, that they are needed for the all-round development of their students. A research participant emphasizes this, stating: "When we sit in a circle at the end of the day and reflect, when a child says that he liked one thing or another, that it made him feel good, and that is very inspiring. Children's sharing is a real gift. <. . .> Sometimes you want to feel that you are doing something good. And when you see a child's progress, not only academically, but also socially, when you see that he is better at controlling his anger, becoming braver, making contact with others more easily. For me, this is a real achievement, a personal achievement" (T9).

Young teachers associate meaningfulness with opportunities for personal development and self-realization, especially conditions for their creativity to unfold: "I have never considered myself very creative, but when working with primary school students, creativity is simply necessary, it exists everywhere" (T9) or with organization and time management: "the skill of self-control also emerged. Before, it often seemed that time simply melted away, I was late everywhere or did not have time. Now I have learned to manage time, control myself, and say "yes" or "no" on time" (T2).

A sense of meaning is closely related to professional commitment and longer stay in the profession (Savickas, 2013; Litvinaitė, 2024). This allows us to assume that experiencing professional meaning helps maintain motivation and achieve long-term goals in a pedagogical career.

Young teachers overcome their doubts at the beginning of their work and eventually notice their perspective in the teaching profession and form their own vision as a teacher, like the participant in this study: "I thought I would work as a teacher for a while while I was still studying and save money, but I think I will stay here for a longer time, . . . because I like it here and I can't imagine myself anywhere else" (T14), or very consistent and detailed, encompassing its influence not only in the microenvironment, but also at the meso level: "I want children to feel that they have not only learned letters or numbers, but also experienced love, support, and self-confidence. I dream of an educational comprehensively. I also believe that creative activities and spiritual practices will complement pedagogy and give it a broader horizon" (T13). Young teachers emphasize that the opportunity to help

students, to be a part of their lives, and to have a positive impact on others are among the essential sources of meaning in their careers.

3.2. Environmental Factors Determining the Career Dynamics of Young Teachers

Environmental factors shaping the career dynamics of young teachers include those that affect their well-being, professional identity formation, and career-related decisions. Four themes emerged: "School microclimate", "Support from managers and colleagues", "Infrastructure and working conditions", "Perception of education policy" (Figure 2).

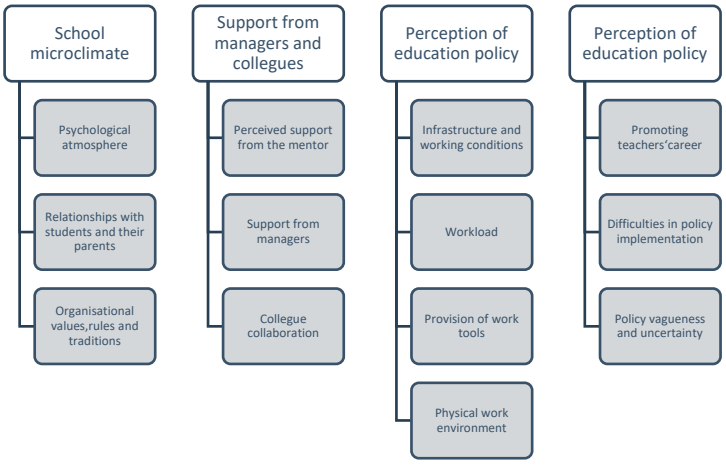


Figure 2. Environmental factors determining the career dynamics of young teachers.

3.2.1. School Microclimate

The theme "School microclimate" includes the statements in which young teachers reveal the influence of the school microclimate on their professional well-being, engagement, and the continuity of their chosen teaching career. Three subthemes emerged: "Psychological atmosphere", "Relationships with students, their parents", and "Organizational values, rules and traditions".

The study participants note that the prevailing psychological atmosphere at school determines job satisfaction and influences their career-related decisions. The negative, stressful school routine and poor communication habits of colleagues strengthen the young teacher's intention to leave: "There are days when it's fun, but more often the atmosphere is very tense. A large team, a lot of gossip and dissatisfaction. Sometimes it seems like you don't even have the right to be sick, because if a colleague has to teach your lessons, then a wave of dissatisfaction will begin. . . This makes you want to quit everything and look for another way" (T10). However, the study participants greatly notice and emphasize the positive psychological atmosphere and even try to create it themselves: "It's nice that everyone greets you, supports you, asks how you're doing" (T5); "the general microclimate is acceptable to me. I understand that our goal is to make sure that the children have a good time at school. And this common goal is more important to me than personal ones" (T9).

An important part of the school microclimate is the relationships among teachers, students, and their parents. Young teachers note that communication with parents is the most difficult area of their work, because the understanding of the teacher's role is being reconciled with the understanding of the parents/guardians of students: "There, their own experiences, personal hurts, and emotions are very often intertwined. And this is really a challenge, because not all parents understand that a teacher is not a service staff. A teacher is an educator, not the person who carries out orders. This is the most difficult area for me so far, but I try to find ways to create a relationship that is as warm and as mutual as possible" (T9). On the other hand, by building good relationships with parents, the

teacher gains support and assistance in achieving educational goals. For example, T8 tells about the determined creation of relationships and the successful deserving of trust from parents: "I am very lucky that the parents are active, have organizational skills, offer ideas themselves, and are willing to get involved. Of course, from the very first days, I clearly set boundaries for what I expect from them and what they can expect from me. And that helped a lot. <. . .> Now that those meetings have become self-evident, it feels like we have known each other for a long time. You come, say hello, talk. And it doesn't matter whether the meeting is about a problem or about good things—they always take place without tension, with trust."

Young teachers also claim to build warm, trusting relationships with students, and this is their professional strength and a source of career satisfaction: "I am very good at communicating with students, I have managed to establish a connection with everyone. As I mentioned earlier, they seem like my children to me. When they are sick, when something goes wrong or, conversely, they succeed, I am happy and sad as if it were my own child, although I do not have my own children" (T7).

Aspects of organizational culture, such as shared values, rules, and traditions, strengthen the sense of career meaning and the involvement of young teachers in school life. The study participants note that it is important to them which values are fostered and which rules are followed in their work environment: "School rules are clear and logical, they help maintain order" (T1).

A favorable school microclimate and clear value direction strengthen emotional involvement and reduce the risk of professional burnout (Hulme & Wood, 2022). Balyer et al. (2015) note that active communication, community, and trust among colleagues are key elements in fostering a school culture favorable to professional growth. Considering this, it can be assumed that a supportive organizational culture serves as a source of security and empowerment for young teachers.

3.2.2. Support from Managers and Colleagues

The theme "Support from managers and colleagues" includes statements describing the support and assistance young teachers experience in their first years of teaching. Three subthemes emerged: "Perceived support from mentor", "Support from managers", and "Colleague collaboration".

Mentor support at the beginning of teaching is particularly important for the formation of young teachers' professional identity and self-confidence as teachers. The study participants shared both positive and negative experiences of communication with mentors. T9 says that she greatly values her strong emotional connection with her mentor: "I have a wonderful mentor. She is like a guardian angel to me. She takes care of me a lot, encourages me, supports me, warmly welcomes me, listens to my insights, and helps me in everything. She not only protects me and helps me, but is also a great example as a teacher. I learn from her every day. I observe the methods she uses to work, how she communicates with children, how strong the bond between them is, and how she communicates with colleagues and parents. She is a real professional inspiration to me. <. . .> I am very happy to have her by my side. And to be honest, I do not wait for our mentorship to end, because her support is extremely important to me." T4's experience is not so positive: "After a few more difficult situations, I went to consult with my mentor, but I didn't get any really useful, deeper advice. After that, our relationship cooled down quite quickly." However, both positive and negative mentoring experiences are presented as important by the study participants, and young teachers expect professional advice, human connection and support from mentors: "Working at school evokes many emotions: you want to be happy about something, be proud of it, but there are also dark things that scare you, you don't

know how to manage certain situations. Therefore, it is very important when there is a person nearby who advises you" (T7). Another prominent factor in the dynamics of young teachers' careers is relationships with school leaders. The study participants particularly highlight the strengthening, creating conditions for staying and supporting role of the school principal at the beginning of their career. It is important for young teachers to feel the support of the school principal: "I am a young specialist working in a small town <. . .>. In such places, they want to retain specialists; thus, conditions need to be created for them to stay. And that wish to retain them is manifested through evaluation, listening, attention, care and help. Now I really feel very strong support, I feel like I am at the raer of them. And I am very happy about that" (T9). The school principal's help and attention are even cited as a decisive factor in young teachers' career-related decisions. T3 says: "One of the reasons why I stayed at this school was the former principal. His contribution was really great". Distant, only demanding principals act in a completely different direction. Relationships with them are mentioned as occurring negative experiences, especially if young teachers feel that they do not receive the necessary help from school principals: "From the administration's side, I more often feel a demand than support. Very often, only orders or requests come, but no support, encouragement, or just a good word" (T4). These observations show that constructive feedback and interest in the teacher's well-being act as motivating factors, increasing self-confidence and professional commitment.

Young teachers also emphasize collaboration with colleagues as an important factor in career development. T1 states: "There are colleagues who will always support you, <. . .> with whom you can talk and share sincerely. And if you stumble, you can speak up, not being afraid. They share their experience and advice. I really feel strengthened by my colleagues." It is the help of colleagues that becomes the main source of solving everyday challenges: "it was very helpful when another teacher shared his or her experience on how to solve the problem of classroom management" (T6). These statements show that the school's internal community and informal support network help young teachers overcome uncertainty, develop confidence, and adapt to the challenges of the profession.

Social support is one of the key factors determining the engagement and job satisfaction of new teachers (Hulme & Wood, 2022; Lander, 2022; Daly et al., 2023; Sincock et al., 2026). Daly et al. (2023) emphasize that a culture of mentorship and collegiality is essential to ensure a smooth entry into the profession and reduce early teacher attrition. In this regard, it can be stated that a strong microclimate, constructive leadership, and a collaborative teacher community are essential conditions for ensuring the sustainability of the professional careers of beginning teachers.

3.2.3. Infrastructure and Working Conditions

The topic "Infrastructure and working conditions" includes the statements that reveal how the level of infrastructure and working conditions affects the emotional well-being and job satisfaction of young teachers. Three subthemes emerged: "Workload", "Physical work environment", "Provision of work tools".

Working conditions—workload distribution, amount of additional activities, side responsibilities—influence not only the teacher's work efficiency, but also his/her professional satisfaction and long-term intention to remain in this profession. Young teachers admit that the workload is often too high, leading to overwork, burnout and even dropping out of the profession, because they simply lack experience: "The workload is very high, I have 5–6 lessons every day. All of them require long and serious preparation, because this is my first year of work, I do not have the experience of previous years. And plus, additional activities, which are often unpaid. Towards the summer, my strength is running out, I have to somehow survive until the holidays" (T4). Others talk about negative emotions due

to excessive workload that work in several directions—not only does the young teacher experience severe anxiety, but the quality of his/her work also decreases, and relationships with students suffer: "In the second year of teaching, I experienced a heavy workload of work and studies, a lot of anxiety. This was also reflected in my work. My relationship with students collapsed, and I felt dissatisfied with the quality of my work" (T12).

The physical working environment is important for young teachers. Newly equipped educational spaces that meet modern standards act as a factor that supports motivation to teach and remain in the teaching profession, for example: "In the first year, when I came to work, I took 3D photos of what my classroom should look like for fun and sent them to the principal. For fun. . . so if you went there now, you would see that it is so. It is really great fun, comfortable to work" (T5). If such an environment is lacking, then young teachers experience a degradation of their professional status: "When it comes to the classroom, I work, one could say, in the worst school classroom" (T10); "The classrooms are not adapted for my lesson. Walking from one classroom to another is particularly unsuitable" (T3).

The participants of the study claim to be faced with a lack of necessary work tools, which makes them disappointed in the work of a teacher: "schools are short of a lot of things, especially when it comes to more modern tools—tablets, smartphones, educational books or games. And such everyday things as a printer, paper, pencils, and pens could be available to everyone. Unfortunately, I always buy a lot of things—all kinds of sheets, paints—myself" (T6). On the other hand, providing the necessary tools helps to ensure a high-quality educational process and reduces daily stress: "if it were not necessary to produce teaching tools at the expense of free time and sleep, more energy would be left for education, for building relationships with children" (T2).

Infrastructure, class size, resource availability, and work organization practices influence not only the effectiveness of a teacher's work but also their professional satisfaction and long-term intention to remain in this profession (Ladd, 2011). These conditions also include workload distribution, the number of additional duties, the availability of technical equipment, the suitability of educational spaces, and the scope of administrative tasks (Toropova et al., 2021). Based on the study participants' insights, it can be assumed that the quality of material conditions is closely related to emotional security, motivation, and professional satisfaction. Therefore, infrastructure is not only a physical space, but also an important factor that forms the general background of the quality of work and satisfaction with education at the beginning of the career of young teachers.

3.2.4. Perception of Education Policy

The topic "Perception of education policy" includes the statements that discuss the influence of the country's education policy on teachers' professional everyday life. Three sub-themes emerged: "Promoting teachers' careers", "Policy vagueness and uncertainty", "Difficulties in policy implementation".

Young teachers see positive changes inspired by education policy. They acknowledge that changes in education policy, although they cause challenges, also open up opportunities for professional growth and encourage the search for creative solutions: "In Lithuania, teachers are required to spend at least 30 h a year improving their professional qualifications. If it weren't for this requirement, I probably wouldn't have found the time to participate in various trainings and seminars, but now I know that it is necessary, there is no other choice. This is how I learn and bring truly valuable knowledge to the classroom" (T9). The study participants also notice and positively assess the state's decisions directly related to increasing the attractiveness of the teaching profession and the financial well-being of teachers: "Yes, I see that some are trying to improve the conditions of teachers, I appreciate

that. A significant and gradually increasing salary is very important to me and determines the motivation to further improve my qualifications and stay in school" (T2).

The study participants perceive education policy as vague and feel uncertain about decisions that only seem to complicate their work, therefore this perception raises doubts about their further career intentions for young teachers. They claim that they feel that politics is distant from the real needs of the school, which causes uncertainty and additional tension: "sometimes it seems that politicians do not know what is happening in a real school" (T3). Young teachers note that the lack of justification for political decisions and constant educational reforms suppresses motivation for their careers: "When I don't understand why I have to do something all over again, abandon all the lessons I created in the first year and start from scratch again, my motivation immediately decreases" (T8). The study participants state that their work is particularly complicated by the filling in of excessive documentation and constant changes in accountability procedures: "by the time you fill in all the tables, surveys, reports, there is no time and energy left for direct work" (T4); "there are so many procedures that it is difficult to understand what is expected of me" (T3). Such a context, as Hulme and Wood (2022) argue, reduces job satisfaction, where efforts seem pointless, and can contribute to early teacher retirement from the profession. Young teachers face difficulties related to the implementation of educational policy at school. After the general education programs have changed in recent years, the study participants discuss difficulties related to updating the educational content: "There are no textbooks, there is no single guaranteed source, it is very difficult for students to learn and for teachers to work" (T5). It is also noted that the implementation of updated educational programs is difficult due to the characteristics of today's generation of students: "Considering the fact that modern children are different, they are more active, it is more difficult for them to concentrate, maintain attention, the program requires a lot of effort from the teacher" (T6).

Problems at the system level have emerged that may affect teachers' retention in the profession or their decisions to leave it. Education policy is an important external factor that directly influences teachers' working conditions, motivation, and career dynamics. Policy stability, clear goals of the education system, national requirements, and solutions implemented at the school level are particularly relevant for young teachers. As researchers point out (Didžiulienė, 2023; Ladd, 2011; Hulme & Wood, 2022), teacher satisfaction and career continuity intentions are determined by the extent to which systemic reforms are understood, supported, and implemented at the community level. Education policy also includes the systems of assessment, remuneration, educational planning, and the development of pedagogical competencies, which are often regulated by external institutions, but it is up to school administrations and teachers themselves to interpret them.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This study aimed to answer the problematic question: what factors determine the career dynamics of young teachers from their own perspectives. We analyzed the factors of young teachers' career dynamics based on the conceptual framework of the study, which was developed by analyzing the interaction of pull (enhancing engagement and retention in the profession) and push (promoting withdrawal) factors (De Vos et al., 2020; Procter-Legg et al., 2025; Redding & Henry, 2018) from an ecological system perspective, according to which teachers' careers develop contextually, depending on various micro, meso and macro-level conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The findings of the study highlight that young teachers' intentions to remain in the profession and to leave (Van den Borre et al., 2021; Räsänen et al., 2020) are only partially independent processes. Young teachers have reported operating in a "field of tension" in which they simultaneously experience both a commitment to the profession and emotional exhaustion or doubt about their choice

(Bellibaş et al., 2023). Positive professional experiences, a deepening sense of meaning in teaching, or good relationships with students do not necessarily cancel out the impact of negative experiences. In other words, motivating experiences and stressors work together—their relationship determines a specific career trajectory.

4.1. The Role of Personal Factors: Between Emotional Well-Being, Resilience, and Exhaustion

One of the essential components of young teachers' career dynamics is emotional well-being, which acts as a key psychological mechanism determining their professional decisions.

The emotional state of young teachers experiences significant fluctuations: from financial anxiety and desperation due to overwork to the joy of being with students and the awareness of their own resilience. As can be seen, it is closely related to self-efficacy, praxis shock, and burnout (Ballantyne & Retell, 2020). Recent research (Angelini et al., 2026) emphasizes that the relationship between these factors determines which aspects of well-being become most important at different stages of a career.

The study showed that emotional imbalance, stress, and burnout drive the intention to leave the teaching profession. Previous research (Madigan & Kim, 2021) confirmed that burnout is one of the strongest indicators of teacher departure, associated with signs of exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decreasing sense of accomplishment. In our study, a young teacher, worried about her financial situation, took on several jobs and many responsibilities, and noticed that she was depleting her emotional resources; her ability to prepare for lessons decreased, and disagreements with students and their parents began. She experienced what is called a vicious cycle of anxiety: emotional exhaustion reduces self-efficacy, and the lack of self-efficacy further increases stress (Cels et al., 2023; Madigan & Kim, 2021). The participants in the study emphasized that the tension between pre-existing expectations about the work of a teacher and real experiences is one of the critical situations in the formation of professional identity. This defined state of dissonance (Pillen et al., 2013) leads to internal conflicts: some teachers begin to doubt their choice, whereas others, by contrast, strengthen their professional connection, making sense of career challenges as an opportunity for development (Cobb, 2022). For some of the young teachers in our study, stress and crisis situations served as catalysts for professional growth, promoting reflection and resilience. Emotional tension served as a turning point for some young teachers; upon reflecting on their experiences, they found support, applied self-regulation strategies, and integrated challenges into professional development. Other participants in the study felt disappointed that they had made the wrong choice, and the sense of calling never came. Thus, these findings are consistent with the conclusion of other studies that the perception of difficulties experienced at the beginning of a career depends largely on the psychological and social resources available to a teacher to cope (Daly et al., 2023; Lander, 2022).

Another important factor in the career dynamics of young teachers is the development of professional identity. Teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004; Stenberg & Maaranen, 2021) plays a mediating role between experience and decisions about career continuity. This study has shown that young teachers' experience is not in itself a determinant of decision-making—it is the meaning given to it that determines it. Some participants in the study emphasize their suitability for teaching: "I think I'm sitting in my own sleigh" (T8), while others, even when describing their good feelings in the profession, refrain from acknowledging their identity as a teacher: "while feeling very good, deep down I still wonder if I'm really going to stay here for a long time" (T11). Identity allows a teacher not only to associate themselves with professional roles but also to provide a meaningful framework through which they interpret successes, failures, or tensions. Studies of young teachers' identity formation (Cobb, 2022; Pillen et al., 2013) have found

that the tension and negative emotions experienced during role adaptation encourage the use of problem-oriented adaptation strategies. Opportunities for novice teachers to use personal initiative are very important for the formation of teachers' professional identity (Stenberg & Maaranen, 2021).

One of the strongest pull factors in young teachers' careers is motivation to teach and a sense of professional meaning. Our study revealed that some young teachers entered the profession guided by a value relationship with the educational mission—the desire to have a positive impact on children's lives. As one participant stated, "I studied to be a teacher because I wanted to change my community" (T2). Experiencing meaningful acts as a psychological buffer, protecting young teachers from stress and adverse working conditions (Dik et al., 2012). At the same time, these findings are consistent with Savickas's (2013) view, which emphasizes the importance of values for career intentions. The content of these values in our study consisted of fulfilling the need for connectedness with students and the possibility of self-realization and growth. The findings of this study are consistent with data that relationships with students are a source of teachers' enthusiasm (Kouhsari et al., 2024). Such values encourage young teachers to consciously construct a sense of meaning in teaching and to consciously take responsibility for it: "For me, the most important thing is direct work with children, it is my work, my responsibility, my meaning. And it seems to me that if you yourself go with an open heart, very often others respond in the same way" (T9). This attitude is conceptualized in scientific literature as a voluntary commitment associated with intrinsic motivation, when the reward comes from the activity itself and successful results, and not from conditions controlled by others (Bellibaş et al., 2023). The perception of professional identity, intrinsic motivation, and sense of professional meaning in our study allowed the young teacher to formulate his vision as a teacher: "In the future, I see myself as a teacher who is able to combine pedagogical knowledge with a creative and holistic approach to education" (T13). A supportive environment is needed for a teacher to realize their ideals in their professional activities.

4.2. Environmental Factors: The Importance of the Micro and Meso Levels

From the perspective of ecological theory, the career development of young teachers strongly depends on the interaction of their immediate environment—school, colleagues, and administration. In line with Daly et al. (2023), Hulme and Wood (2022), Sincock et al. (2026), we state that our research findings confirm that social support is one of the most important factors encouraging young teachers to remain in the profession. Peer support, mentorship and a positive microclimate not only reduce stress, but also strengthen professional identity and job satisfaction (Daly et al., 2023; Hulme & Wood, 2022): "The school's values are very similar to mine—respect, sincerity, cooperation <. . .> I am also glad that the goals of education are not only results, but also human growth" (T9).

Peer support helped our study participants compensate for structural shortcomings, such as an inadequate payment system or a high workload: "He talked me into it, showed me that I could do it, inspired motivation and self-confidence. This was very important for my decision" (T3). It was also noted that informal professional networks (Sincock et al., 2026), which help young teachers feel part of a community, are particularly important for their engagement, as is mentoring. The study data revealed that mentoring is one of the key factors in adaptation and professional growth (Ben-Amram & Davidovich, 2024; Lander, 2022). It affects young teachers' intentions to remain in the profession through two channels: professional development and emotional support: "without the support of colleagues, I would probably have quit this job" (T8). Teachers who had a mentor or a formalized support system felt more prepared for challenges and more confident in

themselves. This is in line with the OECD's (2020) recommendations, which state that the introduction of a mentoring system is one of the essential factors in retaining new teachers.

The study participants discussed macro-level (systemic) factors as an important layer of career dynamics. The instability of education policy, the change in reforms, the bureaucratic burden and the insufficient provision of working conditions for young teachers lead to disappointment in the profession and reduce motivation: "Sometimes it is even annoying to hear what education politicians say, how they present it, pass laws, but do not prepare the entire necessary support system, do not think through the base, do not look at everything from the ground up. Then your hands get weak, and you want to quit everything" (T6). Such factors do not necessarily directly encourage exit, but when transferred to school practice, they modify micro-level experiences—from administrative pressure to workload distribution (Hulme & Wood, 2022). Macro-political decisions can also manifest themselves through the impact of performance assessment systems (Redding & Henry, 2018). However, young teachers who reflected on their experience of the Lithuanian education system in the study did not report the influence of the assessment results, their timing, or transparency on their professional satisfaction and retention. From an ecological perspective, the findings on teacher career promotion, policy uncertainty, and the difficulties of implementing reforms demonstrate the interdependence of teachers and their intentions to remain in the profession. Policy decisions acquire meaning only through organizational mediation—i.e., how school management interprets and applies them in daily activities.

In summary, the career dynamics of young teachers is a complex, ecologically conditioned system in which personal resources are developed, overcoming difficulties and interacting with the institutional and political environment. Personal factors—self-efficacy, emotional resilience, teacher enthusiasm, identity crystallization and commitment to one's profession—are necessary, but they are in the state of development, formation, change and only in combination with environmental factors—social support, a balanced workload and infrastructure system, a favorable school microclimate, emotionally responsive leadership, capable of stabilizing national policy changes at the school level—create a solid foundation for the sustainability of intentions to remain in the profession. Such a holistic approach allows us to better understand why some young teachers with high intrinsic motivation still leave the profession, while others, despite the challenges, stay and improve.

4.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The findings of this study should be viewed in light of several limitations. First, the qualitative research method allowed for a detailed exploration of young teachers' experiences, based on self-reported and retrospective narratives, but given the potential for memory and personal interpretation biases as they reflect on emotionally complex experiences and ongoing career decisions, longitudinal studies would be useful to capture the evolution of career trajectories over time and to better understand how early experiences shape long-term professional decisions. Second, the study focuses on the beginning of a teacher's career and therefore does not reveal the impact of the identified factors and their change over time. Therefore, future research would be relevant to assess the sustainability of young teachers' intentions to stay or leave the profession and their relationship to competing career options, for example, one young teacher said that he still had the option of changing careers: "I don't know how I see myself in the future. Maybe I will fulfill my old dream of becoming a pilot someday, or maybe I will remain a teacher, I don't know." Finally, although the study relied on an ecological model, macro-level influences were examined mainly through the participants' perceptions, which limits the ability to assess their structural effects. Having considered these limitations, future research integrating mixed

methods would combine the depth of insights with a broader generalization. In addition, intervention studies focusing on teacher enthusiasm, commitment to the profession, mentoring, organizational support, and teacher well-being could provide valuable international evidence to develop effective strategies for retaining young teachers in the profession.

Furthermore, from an educational science perspective, it is crucial that future research would go beyond career decisions and would link more clearly teachers' experiences to core educational processes. In particular, further research should examine how young teachers' professional identity, emotional well-being, enthusiasm, and motivation to teach are expressed in classroom practice at the beginning of their careers, and how these processes affect the quality of teaching and student learning outcomes. Such an approach would allow for a better understanding of teacher development as a factor in engaging the profession. By assessing teacher retention in relation to teaching quality and student learning, future research could help strengthen the overall quality and sustainability of the education system.

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