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Posiciones identitarias del profesorado frente a situaciones de emergencia social. Aprender en tiempos de crisis

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Resumen

Este estudio explora cómo una situación de emergencia social, en tanto incidente crítico, puede impactar en la identidad del profesorado, analizando qué aspectos de esta identidad se despliegan como respuesta a la crisis y qué posiciones del yo (PY) facilitan/impiden el cambio y la resiliencia. Se trata de un estudio cualitativo interpretativo que recoge información a través de entrevistas en profundidad a profesorado de 29 centros públicos españoles de educación primaria y secundaria, considerados de alta complejidad. La investigación revela la intersección de diferentes factores que afectan a las experiencias del profesorado durante situaciones de emergencia social y crisis. Muestra como su bienestar se ve afectado por el aumento del estrés, la sensación de riesgo, el miedo y la incertidumbre. A pesar de estos retos, las PY activadas predominantes, en particular en educación primaria, funcionan como facilitadoras, permitiendo afrontar la situación de forma eficaz y promoviendo el aprendizaje a diferentes niveles. Sin embargo, en estas situaciones, la ausencia de espacios para el diálogo pone en riesgo la permanencia de algunas de las PY que desempeñan un papel resiliente durante episodios críticos, lo que resalta la necesidad de generar nuevos espacios colectivos de reflexión que sostengan los aprendizajes logrados.

Palabras clave

Identidad docente; emergencia social; educación primaria y secundaria; incidente crítico.

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Identity positions of teachers facing social emergency situations. Learning in times of crisis

Abstract

This study explores how a situation of social emergency, as a critical incident, can impact on teacher's identity, analyzing which aspects of this teachers' identity are deployed in response to the crisis and which identity positions (IP) facilitate/hinder change and resilience. An interpretative qualitative study gathers information through in-depth interviews with teachers from 29 Spanish public primary and secondary high-complexity centres. The research reveals the intersection of different factors affecting teachers' experiences during situations of social emergency and crisis. It shows how heightened stress levels, sense of risk, fear, and uncertainty affect teachers' well-being. Despite these challenges, the prevailing activated IPs, particularly in Primary Education, function as facilitators, enabling effective coping with the situation and promoting learning at different levels. However, in this situations, the absence of spaces for dialogue jeopardizes the permanence of some of the IPs that play a resilient role during critical episodes, highlighting the need to generate new spaces for collective reflection that sustain the learning achieved.

Key words

Teacher identity; social emergency; primary and secondary education; critical incidents.

Introduction

Periods of social emergencies, such as the recent global health crisis, profoundly impact the school lives of millions of students. These situations compel governments worldwide to seek urgent solutions in the educational sphere, often necessitating a thorough review of the organizational and managerial models of educational institutions (Delgado et al., 2020). Such measures have clear implications and challenges for teachers in general and for school leadership teams in particular.

The impact of prolonged health crises on education and schools has been extensively studied, with numerous works focusing on their effects on teachers. For instance, some studies highlight the somatic burden of addressing social emergencies, including the stress and emotional exhaustion experienced by teachers (Huarcaya-Victoria, 2020; Molina-Pérez & Pulido-Montes, 2021). In this regard, Collie (2021) emphasizes that key elements protecting teachers' well-being include school leadership, the establishment of support networks, and the creation of a positive working environment. Other studies underscore teachers' adaptability to new contexts and their assumption of new roles in response to the challenges of these periods (Hollweck & Doucet, 2020).

Solé et al. (2021) highlight that one such challenge is balancing the transmission of curricular content with attending to students' needs and well-being. Teachers are tasked with adapting to "new normalities" and redefining the roles and responsibilities of the school community. According to these authors, the new role of care and protection adopted by teachers in such situations influences how students and their families perceive the evolving school environment, facilitating their adjustment. Social crises thus have a profound impact on teachers' roles, thrusting them into new, challenging scenarios that require rapid adaptation to uncertain circumstances. These challenges constitute what Monereo et al. (2013) term a "critical incident" (CI)—an unexpected, time-limited event with a significant emotional

impact that compels a shift in the course of actions (Everly & Mitchell, 1999). Addressing a CI becomes a cornerstone in the construction of teachers' professional identities, often perceived during such crises as a significant source of stress and a challenge to their professional self-conception (Beijaard, 2019).

The focus of this article is on teachers' professional identity and how it evolves in response to uncertainty, such as that caused by a health crisis. We approach identity construction from a narrative perspective, understanding individuals as cultural subjects and meaning-makers (Solé et al., 2021), while recognizing the dialogical, contextual, and dynamic nature of identity (Monereo & Hermans, 2023; Weise & Rojos, 2024). This perspective assumes that individuals are influenced by the contexts in which they participate (Cole, 1999), meaning identity emerges from the internalization of social and cultural content, formed by diverse I-positions (IP) in constant dialogue and confrontation (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995).

When discussing I-positions (IP), we refer to the different personal and contextual perspectives individuals adopt in various situations, each with its own voice. The self engages in dialogues among different IPs, which may align or conflict with each other. Each IP carries its own set of voices, serves as a meaning-making entity, and is driven by intentions related to the specific situation in which the person is involved (Hamman et al., 2010; Hermans, 2003). For example, teachers might engage in a dialogue between their Authoritarian-Self and their Flexible-Self to address classroom discipline. In this vein, the learning process is interpreted as the ability to adjust or create new IPs suited to changing contexts (Liesa et al., 2022). Collaboration and dialogue among existing IPs generate new positions; for instance, in the previous example, the creation of an Equitable-Self to address disciplinary issues. Ultimately, this results in a continuous flow of integration and disintegration of the self, reconfiguring the relationships among various IPs and impacting teachers' professional identities—that is, their ways of understanding, feeling, acting, and giving meaning to their teaching activities (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Monereo & Hermans, 2023).

To understand the formation and management of teachers' identities (Liesa et al., 2022; Weise & Rojos, 2024), the concept of CI is essential. CIs are not always extreme situations but invariably demand critical interpretation and reflective processes. Monereo et al. (2009) note that CIs destabilize teachers' self-perceptions, creating a state of crisis that can lead to changes in their professional identity. From this perspective, CIs are privileged moments to access potential changes in teachers and provide insight into professional development processes (Bilbao & Monereo, 2011).

In this study, we explore how a CI, such as the COVID-19 health crisis, has impacted teachers' professional identities by analyzing how they construct their responses and redefine their identities within this challenging context. By doing so, we aim to shed light on the complexity of professional identity during crises (Hurst & Brantlinger, 2022) and highlight how the teaching community responds and learns in extreme situations, fostering inclusivity and resilient communities. We invite professionals to reflect on their practices within schools as shared spaces traversed collectively (Nicastro, 2020), showcasing their ability to confront extreme uncertainty, transform trauma into learning, and pave new paths for continued growth (Cyrulnik, 2019).

In summ, the objectives of this study are: a) to describe how teachers experienced the crisis generated by the pandemic and the meanings they ascribed to this CI; b) to analyze the IPs that facilitated or hindered their coping processes, exploring differences across educational levels; and c) to examine how these coping strategies impacted teachers' professional identities and what learning or setbacks emerged.

Methodology

Design

The study is part of a broader research project focused on educational change processes and resilience mechanisms in vulnerable schools during the global COVID-19 pandemic crisis and their contribution to educational inclusion. Within this framework, this article conducts a qualitative interpretative analysis (Patton, 2015) exploring the aspects of teachers' identity that were activated in response to the situation generated by the crisis.

Participants

The selection of participants was based on a purposeful sampling of schools following three criteria: public schools; schools classified as high-complexity or hard-to-staff (with a high percentage of Romani and immigrant students); and schools with teachers who were part of active leadership teams since the first year of the pandemic (2019–2020). School leadership teams from potential centers were contacted by mail and phone to confirm their participation.

The study was conducted in 29 public schools, including primary schools (PS) (16), secondary schools (SS) (11), and combined primary-secondary schools (PS+SS) (2) located in Catalonia, Andalusia, and Aragon. In each school, a teacher who was a member of the leadership team was interviewed.

Participants were informed about the objectives of the project and provided written consent. To ensure confidentiality personal data were anonymized and stored on secure university servers. In compliance with the protocol of the 2013 Declaration of Helsinki, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (CEEAH6272).

Instruments

The interview was designed based on a prior systematic review of the literature, addressing various topics related to the impact of the pandemic on schools, considering both the confinement period and the post-pandemic phase. This study focuses exclusively on information related to teachers (organization, mental health impact, changes, needs, and challenges, among others).

The interviews lasted between one and a half and two and a half hours and were audio and video recorded. They were later transcribed using the Amberscript 2.0 software and reviewed by the interviewers before being coded by the authors using Atlas.ti 22.

Procedure

A thematic analysis was conducted using predefined codes included in the interview script, following a deductive-inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Libarkin & Kurdziel, 2002; Patton, 2015). To ensure consistency, Guba's (1981) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were applied. An initial blind coding of one-third of the interviews was performed by three teams of coders. Based on the agreements reached during this first phase, the categories were refined, and the remaining data were individually coded.

Data collection and subsequent analysis were consistent across the broader research project. However, for this specific study, two researchers re-coded the interviews from the larger study, focusing on all excerpts previously coded as referring to teachers. This process identified the interpretation of the CI and the IPs, applying a dual coding approach:

characterizing the IPs and assessing whether they were facilitating or obstructing, as well as identifying the resulting learnings or regressions (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Emergent Categories

Category	Definition
Academic IP	Teachers who implement actions and strategies focused on learning and the fulfilment of academic responsibilities and homework.
Creative/Flexible IP	Teachers who implement creative and original actions to deal with difficulties, unusual in previous contexts.
Committed IP	Teachers who over-exert themselves and going beyond their assigned tasks or responsibilities.
Caring IP	Teachers who implement actions, strategies aimed at the protection and care of others in order to protect the bonds.
Inclusive IP	Teachers who develop actions and take decisions with a clear intention to provide differentiated or specific attention to vulnerable populations in order to avoid further exclusion.
Resistent IP	Teachers expressing difficulties or resistance in dealing with change and little willingness or commitment to embrace new initiatives.
Vulnerable IP	Teachers describing situations or perceptions of being at risk or putting themselves at risk. These descriptions are accompanied by a sense of fear of what might have happened to them.
Facilitating IP	Teachers who are proactive, collaborative, welcoming, solution-oriented and supportive of the community.
Hindering IP	Teachers who develop paralysing, obstructing, limiting actions or generate situations of incommunication, withdrawal, defence, isolation or lack of protection.

Results

The pandemic as a Critical Incident

The confinement period caused by the health emergency was experienced by teachers in leadership teams with great uncertainty. Initially interpreted as a temporary and short-term situation, it became increasingly unsettling as it was perceived to be a prolonged event. According to the participants, this period had a significant emotional impact and was described as "a shock," "hell," "tremendous stress, I don't know how we endured it," "very hard, very hard," "chaotic," and "devastating." These descriptions reflect a widespread sense of surprise, discomfort, and overwhelm.

According to the participants, three factors amplified these feelings. First, the precarious conditions of the schools, students, and their families. Participants expressed having to "juggle" to "reach the families," showing concern as they became aware of the difficulties and deficiencies faced by schools in responding to the emerging challenges:

We thought it would be a 15-day closure, but it ended up being 100 days. (...) The pandemic hit, and we weren't prepared. We didn't enhance digital education at the pace required, and we had families who lacked the skills to support their children in learning at home. (SS-1)

Second, the intense questioning of their teaching role, which altered methods, strategies, relationships, and even their professional training, confronting them with an overwhelming set of new demands to fulfill their "new" professional role:

[We felt] overwhelmed. Your way of working is interrupted; you have to reinvent yourself in a short time when you already have a very demanding job of planning, and

suddenly, it's no longer valid, and you have to change again in a short time. All this has worn us down a lot (...) we are no longer who we were. (SS-2)

Finally, participants noted a significant impact on their personal lives, adding complexity to the already difficult situation in schools. They reported feeling "overwhelmed with their [our] families, with their [our] children," which heightened feelings of risk, lack of control, vulnerability, and the need for care.

I-positions (IP) to cope with the critical incident (CI)

I-positions (Hermans, 2003) help to identify ways of positioning oneself regarding the events that occurred during the pandemic. In the context of this study, these I-positions are considered facilitative when they involve the assumption of agency, i.e. they encourage action, contribute to positive coping, and promote resilience. When these I-positions were limiting and obstructed the development of appropriate responses, they were termed hindering.

Overall, the data showed that, throughout this CI, as an unfamiliar and complex event, teachers deployed different I-positions to manage it. According to the teachers, this coping was mostly positive, predominantly activating Facilitating-IP (see Figure 1). Teachers were proactive, took initiative, developed collaborative strategies, and significantly contributed to finding solutions and providing support to the community.

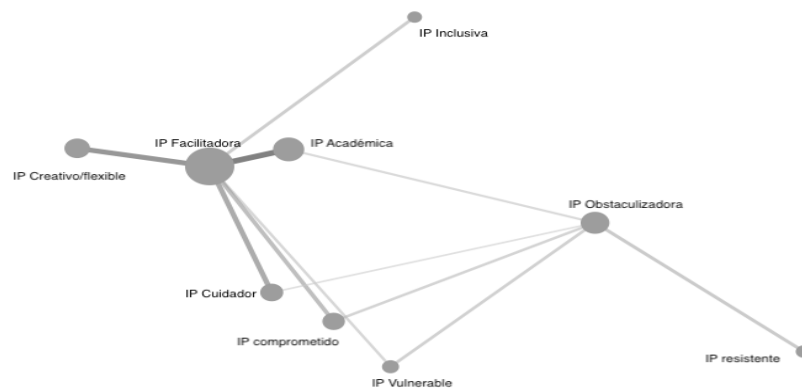


Figura 1. Emergent I-positions in response to the pandemic

However, there were also I-positions activated that worked in the opposite direction, leading to paralysis, limiting initiatives or actions that would have been necessary to face the challenges of the pandemic, and generating numerous situations of miscommunication, withdrawal, defensiveness, isolation, or lack of protection. In this group of I-positions, individualistic actions were identified that hindered the search for solutions-oriented toward the collective interest.

The I-positions that always operated in a positive direction were the Creative/Flexible IP and the Inclusive IP. The Resistant-IP, on the other hand, always operated negatively. This refers to teachers' difficulties in dealing with change, their reluctance and unwillingness or lack of commitment to take initiatives in response to emerging needs.

The remaining I-positions - Academic-IP, Carer-IP, Engaged-IP and Vulnerable-IP - acted either positively or negatively, depending on the specific situation. In some cases, the activation of these positions helped overcome difficulties, while in others, it hindered the development of actions.

Among the I-positions identified in the narratives analysed, the Academic-IP one stands out. This refers to an overriding concern for performance, progress in content or the achievement

of academic goals. In these cases, the main motivation and intention focused on ensuring learning and development of school content.

Tabla 2.

IP deployed against the pandemic by levels

Cicle	PEC		SEC		
Type de IP	Facilitating *	Hindering *	Facilitating *	Hindering *	Total**
Academic-IP	15%	2%	42%	6%	27%
Creative/Flexible-IP	27%	0%	2%	0%	19%
Committed-IP	10%	0%	10%	15%	15%
Caring-IP	11%	2%	19%	2%	16%
Inclusive-IP	7%	0%	4%	0%	6%
Resistent-IP	0%	10%	0%	0%	7%
Vulnerable-IP	6%	8%	0%	0%	10%
Total by IP Type	77	23	77	23	100%
Total by Cycle		100		100	

* Calculated based on the total number of mentions per cycle (PEC n=96, SEC n=48); ** Calculated based on the total number of mentions (n=144)

Despite the predominant character of the Academic-IP, the Creative/Flexible-IP and the Committed-IP also emerged strongly, leading to shifts in how the teaching role was perceived and enacted. These two I-positions mobilized resources that the teachers had not previously utilized, focusing on personal and vocational commitment. The Caring-IP and Vulnerable-IP also appeared, connected to the need for protection and the recognition of one's own emotional impact. To a lesser extent, we also identified the Resistent-IP, which prioritized self-protection and more conservative actions.

Now, in the overall data, we found significant differences according to the cycle. In the PS, we saw that the majority of I-positions activated were Creative/Flexible-IP, Academic-IP, and Caring-IP, and furthermore, whenever they were activated, they were always in a positive direction, facilitating the attention to needs:

The class schedule was not exclusively in the morning; there was a lot of flexibility. Some colleagues taught at 4:00 PM, others at 6:00 PM, 9:00 PM, or 12:00 AM. Total flexibility. And as we said before, inter-level. (PS-7)

Although, in most cases, these I-positions resulted in actions consistent with the challenges, in some instances, they acted as Hindering-IPs, as happened, for example, with the Academic-IP, which placed academic interest above other more immediate needs:

What we did was send tasks, with the best possible intention, but obviously, they were excessive and without follow-up. A closeness and emotional support is what I believe should have been present in that situation. (SS-11)

Another example can be seen in the Caring-IP, which, at times, became counterproductive due to excessive concern that led to ineffective and unsustainable actions:

I personally went to the house and asked, 'What's going on with this one? We've been looking for the children for a week, they were a bit out of line because there was a

little bit of a story involved.' And we all noticed that there was fatigue, and many people said, 'I'm done doing this'. (SS-5)

The Vulnerable-IP was not identified in the SS, nor was the Resistant-IP, which was very significant in the PS, though with a clear hindering role in addressing the situation:

[Many teachers] didn't like that change. Some don't mind, (...) generally, they are seen as not willing to do it. It's obvious that if it were up to them, they wouldn't. They shut themselves in their classrooms as it has always been, close the classroom door, and at two o'clock, they go home. (PS-7)

Unlike in the PS, the teachers in the SS mostly positioned themselves from the Academic-IP, followed by the Caring-IP and the Committed-IP. The Creative/Flexible-IP, dominant in the PS, is virtually non-existent among the secondary education teachers, indicating that they did not resort to seeking and creating resources in the same way, nor did they have as much flexibility to adapt to the requirements of the moment. Additionally, in the SS, the I-position that activated the most hindering responses was the Committed-IP, which seems to suggest that teachers felt more affected by the demand for an extra effort that they were not fully willing to make.

The Inclusive-IP is a minority in both cycles, which is striking given that these are high-complexity schools. This would suggest the absence of specific references to vulnerable populations that regularly require particular attention, but not necessarily the absence of inclusive actions, as we can find them in many of the Facilitating-IP.

La resiliencia en las escuelas: aprendizajes y retrocesos

According to what was reported by our participants, the period of the health crisis was challenging but generated learning at multiple levels. First, the results point to the impact of new technologies on the teachers' identity, leading to a shift in the work environment, strategies, tools, and the conception of the teaching-learning process:

I believe that one of the best things that the pandemic brought was the ICT revolution in the school, and being able to involve the mothers in the topic (...) And of course, the progress the students have made since the first year of secondary school, working transversally across all subjects. (SS-6).

Undoubtedly, the advancement in digitalization and the use of technologies constituted a learning experience that participants described as irreversible. However, a less obvious but equally important was the visibility of issues that shifted the priorities perceived by the teachers. These included the recognition of the digital gap; the importance of students' economic, familiar, and emotional well-being as essential prerequisites for learning; "collaborative forms between older and younger students"; the importance of mutual support; and personal interactions. According to our participants, all of these aspects shifted the traditional centrality of content as a priority element toward the well-being and care of students and their families.

The health crisis also led to a change in teachers' perceptions of the role and involvement of educational actors. For instance, they learned to listen more to students' learning needs and interests, as well as to perceive their capacity for "self-management," which allowed them to learn new strategies from the students:

We observed the strategies they sought to teach each other. It was a very cool moment, and we started to work by Communities. (PS-5)

Regarding families and the community, they highlighted the positive collaboration experiences and the need to connect with their daily lives:

The educational institution can no longer just be where Physics and Mathematics are taught, which is also important, but they need to be as references in the area where they are located and support the local issues, collaborating with others. (SS-4)

As for the conception of the teaching role, the changes were also significant, emphasizing the need to develop a different listening attitude to manage uncertainty, be flexible, be prepared for changes, and become better informed:

[We learned] to listen differently, (...) to be able to adapt to the situation and to be clear that today we are like this, but tomorrow we don't know how we will be. To be aware that we are very vulnerable, and we need to adapt calmly. (SS-2)

The health crisis also made visible the teachers' need to foster a constant attitude of innovation and learning to overcome the difficulties triggered by the situation. In this vein, teachers pointed out that projects' development and innovations, such as inter-level groups, reducing class ratios, or co-teaching, would not have been possible in a "normal" context.

Finally, the pandemic also produced organizational insights about the functioning of teaching teams and school management teams, highlighting the role of "pedagogical leadership" and the value of coordinated teamwork: "Now it is mandatory to do joint planning and share it," as well as developing "improvement plans" for schools, and, very particularly, caring for teachers' emotional well-being.

It should be noted, however, that learning was uneven across schools and that there were also significant setbacks and losses. In particular, the overexertion and stress to which teachers were exposed led to demotivation, frustration, physical and emotional exhaustion, fatigue, hopelessness, and a generalised perception of loss, with a longing to return to 'normality' while emphasising the need to process what had happened in order to deal with the impact of the pandemic.

Discussion and conclusions

Undoubtedly, we can affirm that a health crisis constitutes a major critical incident, as defined by Monereo et al. (2013). They involve unforeseen events that completely change the course of the school's actions, with a very high emotional impact that sometimes leads to unplanned responses, forcing teachers to use resources that they would not have used in 'normal' circumstances. However, these situations have a massive and multidimensional impact that goes beyond the acquisition of new skills or sensitivities. Significantly, there is an increase in uncertainty and a sense of vulnerability among teachers (Collie, 2021), which undoubtedly affects their coping strategies in these critical periods. Furthermore, the shift to the virtual environment generated by these situations also has significant impacts on teaching (Beunoyer et al., 2020; Huarcaya-Victoria, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

Changes in teachers' I-positions in response to a health crisis (CI) appear in various areas, both personally and professionally, affecting how teachers perceive themselves, the intention behind their actions, the prioritization of central aspects of their practices, and the use of strategies (Hamman et al., 2010; Hermans, 2003). This context, therefore, becomes a crucial element in shaping teachers' identity (Monereo & Hermans, 2023; Weise & Rojas, 2024). These changes are reflected in the reconfiguration of teachers' I-positions, with new I-positions emerging that would not have arisen under "normal" circumstances, thus opening up avenues that might not have otherwise been explored (Liesa et al., 2022).

The I-positions activated in response to these CI underscore the dynamic nature of identity and its multiple voices, sometimes in harmony and other times in conflict (Hermans &

Hermans-Jansen, 1995). As previously illustrated, this tension manifested when professional responsibilities (Academic-IP) conflicted with teachers' personal concerns (Vulnerable-IP), leading to either the facilitation or hindrance of learning and change processes (Bilbao & Monereo, 2011).

Our study also aimed to identify differences in teachers' I-positions in primary and secondary education in response to a CI. As previous studies indicated, the conception of the teacher's role differs between the two educational stages, as does their background and career paths. In secondary education, teaching tends to be less vocational, and the emotional relationship with students is usually less central (Cuadrado & Fernández, 2008). This could explain, for example, the lower presence of the Committed-IP or Caring-IP in this cycle. However, the connections between identity changes in each specific context should be explored in future research.

Finally, the learning generated in crises reveals the richness of the process, with the crisis serving as an opportunity for change (Hurst & Brantlinger, 2022; Liesa et al., 2022). It is evident, for example, that the Creative/Flexible-IP, Caring-IP, and Vulnerable-IP are directly connected to the learning that occurred in these circumstances. These reflect shifts in positioning regarding the role, priorities, methodologies, or work within the school (listening to students, taking responsibility for their well-being, being flexible, anticipating and accepting changes), promoting greater collaboration and creativity, and also reflecting the organizational resilience of the school itself (Cyrulnik, 2019; Solé et al., 2021).

Although this study did not explore this in depth, we argue that, in addition to reinforcing the I-positions that helped teachers navigate the CI, new I-positions emerged that are crucial for sustaining the changes. I-positions such as Virtual-IP, Innovative-IP, Leader-IP, and Self-educating-IP, among others, resulted from the learning experienced in these circumstances. The role of these I-positions in consolidating changes should be further examined in future research.

However, despite the magnitude of the learning that occurs in crises, not all outcomes are positive, and the sustainability of this learning remains uncertain. Beyond the consolidation of digitalization, there seems to be some fragility, partly due to the difficulty in consolidating teaching and management teams (Martínez-Lozano et al., 2023), which threatens the persistence of some I-positions. The widespread exhaustion and impacts on teachers' mental health and working practices, as Molina-Pérez and Pulido-Montes (2021) already pointed out, undoubtedly emerge as a relevant issue. The prolonged exposure of teachers to stress and overexertion has taken a toll, and there is a longing for normalization, perceived as a return to the previous state, to security, and comfort, reflecting a tension between I-positions that embrace new learning and those that prefer the comfort of familiar practices.

In conclusion, the data provided highlights how teachers experienced a health emergency that constituted a CI and the meanings they constructed around it, which influenced their teaching practice and affected their identity. This led to the reconstruction of new forms of self-perception, organization, and work, showing resilience but also revealing the scars that such periods can leave and that need to be addressed.

Ethical statement

The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Animal and Human Experimentation Ethics Committee (CEEAH) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (reference number CEEAH6272, approval date 12/2/2022).

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