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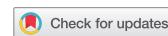
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## Language teacher trainees' sense of professional agency in practicum: cases from Turkey, Portugal and Poland

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### ABSTRACT

The concept of professional agency has recently been predominating in the field of teacher education. Despite this considerable attention given to exploring professional agency embedded in different contexts, there is still scarcity in research on teacher trainees' agentic roles. To this end, this study focuses on exploring the impact of practicum teaching on the construction of a professional agency of teacher trainees in three countries. Eleven teacher trainees (four from Turkey, three from Poland and four from Portugal) prepared reflection reports responding to 12 open-ended questions focusing on factors that contribute to or detract professional agency. The reflection reports displayed supporting and detracting factors about professional agency as self-related (responsibility, perseverance and sense of belonging to the profession), mentor-related (rapport, modelling, being a team member and decision-making, constructive feedback, allowing adequate space) and classroom and student-related issues (authenticity, role in students' eye, discipline and classroom management).

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EFL teacher trainees; teacher trainees; practicum; practice teaching; professional agency

## Introduction

Practicum teaching has had a prevailing place in teacher education for a long time. The empirical evidence displays that practicum teaching provides the teacher trainees (TTs hereafter) with real classroom experiences, supports socialization in the teaching community, evaluates teaching ability, stimulates the construction of effective teaching skills, throws the first seeds of teacher identity formation, provides a supportive field for experimentation, aids learners in gaining insights into new teaching perspectives, and increases motivation to continue studying (Hascher, Cocard, & Moser, 2004).

The efficiency of the practicum teaching experience at schools depends on some variables including the way students get feedback from their mentor and supervisor, the cooperation with the class and other teaching staff, as well as the cooperation between the institution of higher education and the school (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). It is of significance to note that pre-service teachers try to construct the concept of professional teacher agency within this complexity. To this end, the first pillar on which this study is

based is the practicum teaching experience that pre-service teachers undertake whereas the second pillar is the professional teacher agency which determines the teachers' active role in teacher learning.

Learners' active and agentic role in the construction of knowledge has had a profound impact on the development of learning theories for decades (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). For instance, learners' active and agentic roles have always been the core of constructivist theories. However, the recent socio-cultural theory on learning is not merely considered as learners' active construction of knowledge, but also as social participation of learners in communities to construct identities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Becoming an active professional agent entails being an active learner, who can take the responsibility of their own learning process; make decisions and reflect on the experiences with motivation to develop professionally (Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhältö, 2016; Turnbull, 2005). The concept of agency is also associated with other concepts such as creativity, motivation, well-being, happiness, autonomy, self-fulfilment, inclination to change and resistance to structural power (Casey, 2006; Welzel & Inglehart, 2010).

Despite the increasing interest, there is still scarcity in research done on 'professional agency'. However, there are some empirical studies investigating the emergence and enactment of professional agency in different stages of a teacher career. The previous studies reveal the multifaceted characteristics of professional teacher agency as it appears in different forms and educational settings during a teacher's professional career (Toom, Pyhältö, & Rust, 2015).

### ***Teacher professional agency***

The notion of teacher agency is used to portray teachers' active efforts to take intentional actions and to make choices so that they create a significant difference. Teachers have multifaceted jobs, dealing with more than one thing at the same time. They are required to adapt to their teaching environment, negotiate with both their colleagues and with parents, make choices about classroom practices, and interpret collegial understandings. Through these efforts, teachers try to build an inspiring and positive environment for their students, their colleagues as well as themselves in their professional contexts (Toom et al., 2015). This intricate relationship between the above-mentioned issues shows the complexity of teacher learning (Pietarinen, Pyhältö, & Soini, 2016). That is why, teachers' professional agency is affected by professional interactions (Bolhuis & Voeten, 2004; Greeno, 2006). Professional agency makes teachers deliberately use students and colleagues as a resource for learning (Edwards, 2005). Spilt, Koomen, and Thijs (2011) make a remarkable note supporting this view and conclude that teachers who have positive relationships with students are found to be more effective, competent and agentic, which enables meaningful teacher learning.

In most research, professional development emerges in a context which depends on situational, social and personal factors (Pietarinen et al., 2016). These factors are viewed as workplace conditions, professional relationships with colleagues, pupils and parents, leadership and organizational climate (Bakkenes, Vermunt, & Wubbels, 2010). The flip side of the coin displays the manageable features of professional teacher agency, which implies that besides being influenced by their working environment, teachers can actively take part in changing this environment. This is the case as the concept of agency comprises

teachers' ability to create an effective learning environment through collaborative work and reflective practice to learn in and from classroom experiences (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2015; Soini et al., 2016). This displays the deliberate personal intention of a teacher to take on responsibility and make alterations in her/his instructional practices.

### ***Factors affecting professional agency***

Collaborative working environment and a positive professional climate where teachers can rely on each other naturally lead to an increase in teacher motivation. Studies show that teachers can learn more efficiently from others when there is collegial interaction (Edwards, 2007) and when teachers share supportive climate (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2014; Pyhältö et al., 2015). This means that teachers are active facilitators sharing collective responsibility to construct knowledge and regulate learning in the classroom within the professional community (Soini et al., 2016).

It has been found that teachers with no experience of collegial interaction and collaborative work are less likely to be supportive in the classroom. This results in teachers having less capacity to make modifications in teaching depending on different learning groups and to take learner feedback into account to adjust instructional practices according to learner needs (Edwards, 2007; Soini et al., 2016).

Soini et al. (2016) found that teachers having positive dispositions towards work and having empowerment in their work can use more reflective and problem-solving strategies to cope with stressful interactions at school. Similar to this finding, Pomaki, DeLongis, Frey, Short, and Woehrle (2010) found that teachers who get high levels of support are less likely to leave the profession than those who receive support at lower levels.

As mentioned earlier, one of the strongest claims for agency development is being able to apply reflective practices within the classroom and growing professionally by deducing lessons from the specific teacher actions. This shows us the significance of classroom practices within the framework of professional teacher agency. For instance, Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen (2010) note that methods which teachers apply to solve a problem in the classroom contribute to what teachers learn. Having a tendency towards self-regulated learning and a habit of reflecting on teaching experiences enable teachers to learn from their own teaching behaviour (Edwards, 2007; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Soini et al., 2016).

Pyhältö et al. (2015) summarize the factors that are involved in professional agency, and claim that "teacher learning in terms of professional agency in the professional community consists of several elements including: skills, efficacy beliefs, and motivational factors, which entail transforming one's teaching practices, experiencing collective efficacy, constructing positive interdependency, the mutual agreement, and using active strategies of help-seeking" (p.824).

### ***Agency in practicum teaching***

Teachers are ideally expected to be active agents in their professions. Hence, it is essential for pre-service teachers to develop professional agency as beginning professionals (Turnbull, 2005). Very few studies investigated the professional agency operating in practicum teaching. Turnbull (2005), in her study, set a few criteria for the

emergence of professional agency, then the factors contributing to the professional agency and detracting from professional agency of early childhood pre-service teachers were analyzed. According to the criteria, professional agency signifies that pre-service teachers

- feel capable of acting competently within the practicum environment,
- critically reflect upon practice,
- exercise moral choice in applying pedagogical principles,
- work as a team member and engage in collaborative work,
- are free from 'feelings of dominance, dependence or compliance' (p. 197).

The above-mentioned study implies that welcoming the TTs into the practicum, and accepting them as team members; supportive mentor teachers, professional knowledge, reflecting on practice, establishing mutual respect are contributing elements to the professional agency development whereas negative attitude of staff members, dominance of mentor teacher, lack of interpersonal relationships, lack of appropriate feedback are some of the elements that detract from professional agency development.

## Method

### *The purpose of the study*

With the aforementioned background knowledge in mind, the study aimed to investigate the effects of practicum on TTs' sense of professional agency in language teacher education (LTE) contexts. As a part of an international project which aimed to promote the interaction among the international research groups in line with social and scientific advancements, three different LTE contexts (Turkey, Portugal and Poland) were involved in the study to provide a more comparable and deep investigation on professional agency. In this regard, the study aimed at investigating the effects of practicum in TTs' sense of professional agency in Turkish, Portuguese and Polish teacher education contexts. To this end, the following research questions are addressed:

- (a) What are the factors that contribute to TTs' sense of professional agency in practicum?
- (b) What are the factors that detract TTs' sense of professional agency in practicum?

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were 11 TTs of LTE programmes in Turkey, Poland and Portugal (four from Turkey, three from Poland and four from Portugal). Convenient sampling was employed to collect data which enabled the researchers to gather data from practically available participants (Perry, 2005). All participants signed consent forms to ensure confidentiality of their voluntary participation. They were informed that they were free to opt out from the study any time they liked since this study depended on their voluntary contribution. The TTs chosen for the study were at their practicum period which provided them opportunities for observation and teaching

**Table 1.** Demographics of the participants.

	Gender		Age Range	Practicum School
Turkey	M-1	F-3	22–25	High School
Portugal	-	F-4	22–55	Primary School, Secondary School, High School
Poland	M-2	F-1	24–27	Secondary School

practices. The requirements and experiences of the TTs during the practicum period are described in detail below in the research context section. Table 1 shows that female participants outnumber male counterparts, which is a common gender ratio in LTE programmes. The participants were aged between 22 and 25 in Turkey, between 24 and 27 in Poland and between 22 and 55 in Portugal.

### **Research context**

Practicum is an indispensable process in any teacher education programme as it allows the TTs to bridge the gap between the theoretical knowledge and the art of teaching (Koerner, Rust, & Baumgartner, 2002; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Stoynoff, 1999). TTs view the practicum as the most beneficial and valuable component of their training (Campbell-Evans & Maloney, 1995) since they develop interpersonal skills and integrate well into the work environment; continuously develop competencies through participation in practical experiences; test their commitment to teaching; evaluate progress and identify areas where further personal and professional development is needed (Daresh, 1990).

All in all, a number of studies indicate that TTs' experience in schools was the best and most important part of their initial teacher education and that the practicum is where they learned to teach (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). To this end, the practicum context of three different countries involved in this study (Turkey, Poland and Portuguese) were investigated thoroughly to gain insight about the TTs' adventure of turning into language teachers. The following section presents a brief overview of the practicum procedures in these three different LTE programmes:

### **Turkey**

LTE programmes in Turkey last for 4 years at BA level and practicum takes place in the last year. The participating university in Turkey implements practicum in two terms of the 4<sup>th</sup> year: the 'School experience' course in the first semester and the 'Teaching Experience' in the second semester. Each term lasts 15 weeks. The TTs are supposed to regularly attend practicum in primary or secondary schools, complete the observation tasks and prepare lesson plans and practice teaching.

During the first semester (School Experience course), pre-service language teachers are supposed to attend the lessons of the mentor teacher 4 h a week for observation and an additional 1 h for any task the mentor teacher may ask them to do such as helping prepare worksheets. They are supposed to complete an observation task each week and submit it to their teacher trainer at the university. The observation tasks are about classroom management, assessment, language teaching materials, interaction and so on. They also have weekly sessions with their teacher trainer at the university when they hand in their observation reports and have discussions about the procedures.

During the second semester (Teaching Experience course), TTs teach at least 2 h a week in the class the mentor teacher arranges. They spend an extra 4 h at the school, either observing other TTs teaching or doing tasks the mentor teacher asks them to do such as grading exams and preparing materials. Teacher trainers are supposed to set the practicum (matching TTs and mentor teachers), prepare official documents for the school and the faculty, give observation tasks and hold discussion sessions in the first term. Teacher trainers also go to schools to observe TTs while practice teaching in the second semester and give feedback on their performance.

### **Portugal**

Teacher training in Portugal functions as an MA programme. It lasts for either three or four semesters, depending on the programme. There is a common core that universities adapt, however, each one has the freedom to organize their degrees accordingly, with their own elective classes. In the participating university in Portugal, The English for Young Learners MA (aimed for teachers who will be teaching at a primary level) lasts for three semesters. In this case, the practicum takes place in the first and second semester. It is implemented in two terms: 'School experience' course in the first semester and 'Teaching Experience' in the second semester. The English Language Teaching and another foreign language (French, German or Spanish) MA programme targeted at upper basic and secondary education (7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades) lasts for four semesters. In this case, the practicum takes place in the second and third semesters. It is implemented in two terms: 'School experience' course in the second semester and 'Teaching Experience' in the third semester.

The TTs go to a school that their teacher trainer has arranged, either a primary or upper basic/secondary school, depending on their MA.

In both MAs, during the School Experience TTs are supposed to attend the lessons of the mentor teacher 4 h a week. In the first phase they just observe, in the second phase they participate in the planning process and actually carry out small sequences in class, and in the third phase they already plan and teach a didactic unit and participate in the elaboration of assessment materials. They also have weekly sessions with their teacher trainer at the university when they hand in their observation reports and have discussions about the procedure.

The Teaching Experience is 4 h a week. In the first phase, they observe classes, participate in the planning process, and carry out small sequences in class. The second phase consists of planning a didactic unit, and in the third phase they actually teach the unit and create their own teaching and assessment materials (minimum of 450 min). They also have weekly sessions with their teacher trainer at the university when they hand in their observation reports and have discussions about the procedure.

### **Poland**

In order to become teachers in Poland, TTs have to finish either a three-year BA study with teaching specialization, which entitles them to teach in primary schools or a two-year MA study with teaching specialization, which entitles them to teach in secondary schools. Teacher training practicum is differently organized, but it has to involve 60 h of general practicum (staying in school surroundings) and 120 h of English teaching at school.

The three-year BA programme requires TTs to attend practicum in a primary school, whereas in MA programme it has to be a post-primary school. The general practicum of BA studies takes place in the fourth semester and language teaching practice in the last two semesters (the fifth and sixth).

Analogously, in the participating university in Poland, the general practicum of MA studies takes place in the second semester and language teaching practice in the last two semesters (the third and fourth). TTs should have their practice from 1 November to 31 May. The TTs choose schools (primary when pursuing a BA or secondary when MA). Teacher trainers may suggest schools, but it is TTs' responsibility to find one.

For the first 30 h, they are supposed to attend and observe the lessons of their mentor. At this stage, they keep a reflective diary on their experience. Their diaries usually refer to the topics they are covering in methodology classes but could also be reflections on what is happening in the observed classroom.

After that, they are supposed to attend and assist the mentor teacher in conducting the lessons for another 30 h. The assistance can assume the form of test preparation, assistance in grading, materials preparation, etc. Following their assistance, they are supposed to be ready to deliver 30 lessons on their own. Finally, they have 30 h for working on compiling documentation, such as evaluation of lesson plans, stamps, signature, and the like. After all that, they hand in their documents and make an appointment with a teacher trainer to discuss their placement.

### **Data collection**

The present study aims an in-depth investigation of factors that affect professional agency. In order to understand both contributing and detracting factors, a qualitative research design, which focuses on participants' perspectives through an inductive approach, was employed (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). To this end, reflection reports were used to collect qualitative data:

### **Reflection reports**

Qualitative data were collected through reflection reports. The reports consisted of 12 open-ended questions about the factors and instances that supported or detracted their sense of professional agency in terms of their relationships with the mentor teacher and the classroom experiences. (Appendix 1) Each TT was asked to write these guided reflection reports at the end of their practicum period by keeping all experiences throughout two terms in mind.

### **Data analysis**

The data collected through 11 reflection reports were analyzed qualitatively based on grounded theory. Grounded theory is an inductive methodology that provides systematic guidelines for gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing qualitative data (Boeije, 2002; Charmaz, 2006). Two coders analyzed the reports with an inductive content analysis approach to uncover emerging themes and to ensure the trustworthiness of data analysis process and coding. The coders used both a vertical analysis, in which each participant's reports were analyzed separately; and later a horizontal

analysis to explore similarities and differences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coders also had meetings to discuss themes and develop a shared coding scheme. To measure inter-rater reliability, the percentage of agreement between the raters was calculated by using percentage agreement statistics as it was a directly interpretable way for reliability among raters (Tawney & Gast, 1984). Agreement was .92, which indicated a high level of consistency between raters. The qualitative data were presented with examples of extracts from TTs' reports for better insight into the practicum process.

## Results

### **Reflection reports**

The qualitative data from TTs' reflection reports (n.11) reveal supporting and detracting factors about their sense of professional agency in three main domains: (i) TTs as individuals, (ii) the mentor teacher and other teachers in the practicum school, and (iii) the classroom and the students:

#### **(i) TTs' personal dispositions**

The reflection reports of TTs indicated that they assumed responsibility for their own professional development and were active in benefiting from practicum process. Similarly, the perseverance and willingness to be active agents as personality traits of the TTs appeared as individual contributing effects to professional agency. A successful practicum experience helped TTs feel that teaching was their profession and thus greatly contributed to their sense of professional agency.

### **Responsibility**

Almost all of the TTs acknowledged their responsibility to improve themselves professionally making the best out of the first authentic teaching and learning context – practicum.

Most of the TTs (10/11) stated that they used every opportunity to benefit from mentor teachers and other language teachers. To do this, they asked the mentor teachers (and other teachers) questions primarily with the aim of benefiting from their experience. They participated in discussions and were very attentive in their observations of the mentor teachers in the classroom with students. Extracts from TTs' reports revealed that they assume that developing professionally was their primary responsibility. Two TTs reported this as follows:

I wanted to learn as much as possible because I tried to be better. (TT 3 Poland)

I tried to update myself with new and better methodologies and didactic strategies. I definitely felt very supported by my mentor teacher and other colleagues and that I have learnt immensely through this experience. (TT 4 Portugal)

Several TTs (6/11) also mentioned the advantages of utilizing teacher dialogues in the staff room as it is an intersection point where different classroom experiences meet. As one TT commented:



moreover, I like to pay attention to what the teachers discuss in the teachers' room since all of them bring different experiences after each class. (TT 1 Portugal)

TTs (11/11) saw the collaboration with their mentor teacher as an important resource for developing professionally. It is obviously seen that TTs had considerable agency when mentor teachers supported them and acted as a role model. The following extracts indicate this view:

In my opinion I paid an active effort to improve myself professionally ....My aim was to gain as much experience and information as it is possible. To do that I tried to be flexible. I mean, I tried to ask many questions about teaching, students' behaviour (how to manage the discipline during the lesson) and general many questions about school, rules, and many many more. I asked various questions not only my mentor teacher but almost all the teachers working in my practicum school. (TT 2 Poland)

I was especially curious about how to interact with the high school students as a teacher because our ages were not that far apart. So I observed the mentor teacher, how she behaved to the students- as their friend type of way or keeping a distance as a strict teacher. She had little bit of both so I tried my best to apply the same type of teaching strategy as well as keeping it my way. (TT 1 Turkey)

It appears that the TTs regarded practicum as an opportunity to link theoretical knowledge and pedagogical skills and assumed that it was primarily their own responsibility to exploit it.

### ***Perseverance***

The reflection reports revealed that the personality of the individual TT was an important variable in taking action and being an active agent in the teaching environment. Most TTs (9/11) stated that it was their personality to not give up easily when confronted with difficulties. The extracts indicated that TTs considered the challenges they confronted during their practicum as a natural consequence of the process and they preferred to take action act with perseverance. Some TTs described this as follows:

I am a kind of person who never gives up, especially in this case (teaching). Even if some day I face a problem with a student, I am sure I will do all possible to overcome it . TT 3 Portugal)

Normally, I don't feel frustrated. When there is a problem I have to face and solve it. (TT 2 Portugal)

I don't feel frustrated and give up when I face difficult and uncooperative students. (TT 1 Turkey)

I never give up because I am aware that a teacher's work is not easy and there will always be more challenging situations. (TT 1 Poland)

### ***Sense of belonging to teaching profession***

When TTs were asked about factors that contributed to or detracted from the feeling that teaching was their profession, several TTs (6/11) expressed that they felt they

belonged to the classroom though some were not so sure at the beginning of practicum. A successful practicum experience that helped TTs felt they belonged to the classroom greatly contributes to sense of professional agency. The following extracts indicate the positive feelings towards teaching:

*Teaching is definitely my occupation. I see it now, when I have more and more satisfied students, and more work, and still find myself creative, understanding, sociable, and cheerful teacher. I found my own way of being a teacher, and against all appearances, I learnt a lot from this practice time. I know who I don't want to be—I hope I will always gain pleasure from what I do, and I won't get burned as quickly as some of the teachers I met in my career'. (TT 1 Poland)*

*I truly can say teaching is my occupation, even if sometimes I have hard days. I enjoy teaching others and it make me feel satisfied and happy'. (TT 2 Poland)*

*I felt good in the classroom and I felt that it was my place. (TT 3 Poland)*

*Lastly, I never felt that I didn't belong in the classroom because I love teaching and learning. I believe this could be the best thing I will have done in my life. (TT 1 Turkey)*

*I love this job and I want t pursue it as a career. The practicum experience has made me feel teaching is exactly my occupation. (TT 3 Turkey)*

*When I first entered this Masters (teacher training course), I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do... yet when I started actually teaching in my internships, I found out that I really like to teach... yet I only fully understood it fully after starting acting as a teacher and it is a wonderful feeling. (TT 1 Portugal)*

The negative feelings regarding the practicum hindered some TTs (5/11) from feeling empowered and influenced their sense of belonging in the teacher community. The extracts display that TTs found coping with misbehaving students and managing the class challenging. The following extracts report that some TTs had difficulties in feeling the sense of belonging:

*When students do not cooperate and misbehave for any reason and it is difficult to control and manage the class, it is very frustrating and the thought comes to my mind for a few seconds. However, it does not last for too long because there is nothing I would rather be doing than being a teacher. (TT 4 Portugal)*

*I actually feel like I am good at teaching English and I do belong in the classroom. However, I haven't made up my mind yet if this will be my job or not. I am a person who likes to experience different things which makes me think that teaching will not be a permanent job for me. Although I do believe that I will be an English teacher at some point in my life, I also know that I will be trying different things related to the English language and improving myself in various aspects. (TT 2 Turkey)*

## **(ii) The mentor teacher and other teachers in the practicum school**

When asked about their relationship with the mentor teacher and other colleagues in the practicum school, Most of the TTs (9/11) in three countries reported generally positive remarks about their relationship with the mentor teachers and some of the other teachers in the school.

Though their comments were mostly positive, two TTs mentioned some aspects that relatively need to be developed. Only one TT from Poland stated that he did not benefit from the mentor teacher at all because they did not get along.

### **Rapport**

The rapport built with the mentor teacher appears to be the most influential factor for TTs to learn from the mentor teacher. A good relationship and understanding between the mentor teacher and the TT was necessary for lowering tension and creating cooperation for involvement and learning.

The mentor teacher was also the most influential factor to make TTs feel welcome into the practicum environment. The way other teachers treated the TTs was also influential in feeling comfortable and accepted. When supported by the mentor teacher, the TTs felt comfortable to ask for advice and help. Some TTs reported this as follows:

I don't think I could feel more welcome than the school of my practicum. The staff was amazing and treated me as if I was already a teacher. The other teachers treated me as a fellow colleague and more than happy to help me whenever I needed it'. (TT 1 Portugal)

He made me feel very secure and at ease with the class and with the rest of the teachers in every meeting. (TT 3 Portugal)

TTs saw the supporting behaviours of mentor teachers played an important role to exercise professional agency. Though they were not actual teachers of the classroom, the welcoming and approving attitudes of the mentor teachers and other collaborating teachers made TTs feel agentive. One TT described this as follows:

Our mentor teacher was very kind and nice to us in every way. She actually treated us as if we were real teachers. We sat in the teachers' room and other teachers were nice to us as well. She even insisted that we put our coats and bags inside the teachers' cabinet, so we did. This may sound silly to be grateful of, but even that made me feel special and a part of the teaching team. (TT 1 Turkey)

It was not merely the positive remarks, but also the negative comments that indicated the degree of rapport. The unwelcoming behaviours of the other practicing teachers and not having been introduced as a teacher in the classroom resulted in frustrating experiences. The following extract indicated this:

Our mentor teacher was very nice to us from the beginning; however, she didn't introduce us as teachers to the class.... Some teachers didn't want us in the teachers' room and they treated us like outsiders that shouldn't be there. They didn't consider us teachers, which was very frustrating to me. (TT 3 Turkey)

There was an extreme instance which could be accepted as a valuable source that showed the lack of rapport between the mentor teacher and the TT. The following extract showed the discrepancy between the mentor teacher and TT which ended in mentor teacher's feeling offended:

At the end of my teaching practice at that school, when I gave her my "register", she read some frank opinions about herself which were only for me, for my improvement, I didn't aim to offend the teacher or make my notes public, and she didn't want to give me a mark and a signature, because she didn't agree with my notes. Moreover, she accused me of

elevating myself beyond more experienced teachers ... That was a very hard time. From that moment I know that teachers in public schools, after some years of teaching, settle and get stuck in a rut of their coursebooks. (TT 1 Poland)

### ***Accepting as a team member and in decision-making***

The mentor teacher was the key person in making TTs become a team member in the practicum school and develop a sense of belonging. As for having a word to say in the decision-making process, Most TTs (9/11) felt involved and active agents as much as their views and suggestions were valued by the mentor teacher (and other teachers) in the practicum school. Most TTs mentioned their mentor teachers liked novelty and open to learn new techniques in language teaching. A few examples of TTs extracts are as follows:

As we got used to each other over time, she asked us for help. We helped her check the exams and we gave suggestions about the course... I feel our views and suggestions were really valued by our mentor teacher. (TT 4 Turkey)

My mentor teacher liked novelty and loved my idea of introducing App Plickers and used it with the students. She will use it with other classes. (TT 1 Portugal)

I had lots of different ideas and I wanted to share it with the teacher. She always appreciate them so I felt that my suggestions were valued. (TT 3 Poland)

However, it was detracting when their views were not taken into consideration. Two TTs commented as follows:

Not really. We were just spectators for the class. We didn't have any impact on the class. (TT 3 Turkey)

My contacts with my mentor was rather limited... She didn't support me as much as I expected and I didn't have that sense of belonging... I don't really feel that I improved myself and gained any profits from my practice time at school...observing teachers who do not want to be observed and who act in a different way in the classroom... Every time I entered the teachers' room, I didn't feel welcome... I didn't have many occasions to suggest ideas. I felt that they wouldn't be valued by other teachers. I am just a young student who knows nothing about being a teacher. (TT 1 Poland)

### ***Model for teaching***

Most TTs (9/11) stated that they had a lot to learn about classroom management from the mentor teachers. Even when they thought the mentor teacher was adhering to the course-book too much and thus the classes might be too monotonous, they still mentioned they had a lot to learn from the mentor teacher particularly about classroom management. The TTs made their own decisions in what to pick up and incorporate into their future teaching practices. One TT reported that her mentor teacher used different methods and techniques which broadened the TTs horizons. The comment is provided below:

Mentor teacher was using many methods which were interesting for students. I tried to do the same and it had a good effects. I have learnt a lot. I am still in touch with my mentor teacher from practicum school and I can always count on her. (TT 3 Poland)

The following extracts were provided as they reflected both positive and negative comments about mentor teachers' behaviour.

Our teacher was an average model for us in my belief. I can't say that I have learnt new and different teaching techniques or methods from her. However, I can say that she was a great model in terms of managing the lesson and the students. The balance of being strict and also being like their friend was actually great to observe and learn from. (TT 1 Turkey)

Comparing teachers from my past and teachers I've met to this day, my mentor teacher was not a brilliant model for teacher. He provided the lesson almost always according to the book what was not interesting for students. But on the other hand, he did not have many problems with the discipline. I think there were many things which I can learn from my mentor teacher and many things that I would do in another way. (TT 2 Poland)

All in all, the TTs acknowledged that they benefited from the experience and practices of mentor teachers though the mentor teachers did not fully live up to their previous expectations.

### **Ongoing constructive feedback**

When the feedback the mentor teacher provided after observation process was assessed by the TTs, several of them (7/11) expressed that the feedback received from the mentor teachers was important. These TTs reported that they benefited from ongoing constructive feedback. The extracts below indicate the positive views of the TTs:

We always discuss the classes I give after each of them and she usually points out where I did best and where I should improve. Perhaps her biggest focusing point was with me finding a way to control the students when they are being unruly. (TT 1 Portugal)

I was fortunate to have a very lovely, kind and supporting mentor, who made my experience a very positive one. (TT 4 Portugal)

After classes he gave me tips, told what I did good and wrong, what I could do better. He also gave me lots of information about teaching and the discipline in the classroom. (TT 2 Poland)

She listened to us carefully and gave feedback about our lessons. I am satisfied with the quality and the content of the feedback generally. (TT 4 Turkey)

However, in few cases, TTs were not satisfied with the quality or content of the feedback. In one case, the lack of rapport and understanding with the mentor teacher caused the practicum process to be an unpleasant experience for both parties. Furthermore, a TT focused on the mentor teacher's inadequate concern on the areas that needed improvement. The related extracts are as follows:

I felt under pressure because I thought my mentor were not speaking the same language. Unfortunately, criticisms were quite harsh.

Very little feedback, mainly what was wrong or what I should improve. I know there must be some constructive criticism, and I am definitely not the best teacher in the world, I still learn, but surely there was something I did well. (TT 1 Poland)

### **Adequate space**

For TTs to develop a sense of professional agency, they need to be able to make decisions on their own and have adequate space in decision-making in practice teaching. In most cases, the TTs expressed content that the mentor teacher let them make their own decisions about materials and classroom procedures. Few TTs (2/11) mentioned partial control over their practice.

*When I once whistled loudly to catch the students' attention, she found it really funny and it actually worked, even though it is an unconventional method that others might not approve of. (TT 1 Portugal)*

*'My mentor teacher was not too dominant. She gave me lots of space in practice teaching and it was really exciting for me' (TT 3 Poland).*

On my first teaching day, my mentor teacher sat at the back of the class and watched me teach. She gave me the whole lesson and she didn't interrupt or anything like that. On my second time, she trusted me with the lesson and she left me alone with the students which was a great experience. (TT 2 Turkey)

Our mentor teacher is an actually dominant character, but she never tried to dominate us in the classroom. (TT 1 Turkey)

All in all, TTs appreciated space and trust for experimenting their own practices in the classroom. It is also concluded that they had a strong sense of agency in making decisions and taking actions about classroom practices.

### **(iii) The classroom and the students**

When asked issues about the classroom environment and the students, the factors supporting or detracting professional agency were as follows: authenticity of the classroom environment, TTs' role in the students' eye, discipline and classroom management and feeling that teaching is their occupation.

#### ***Authenticity of the classroom environment***

When asked how the real classroom contributed to TTs professionally, all of them mentioned that real teaching practice was beyond the theoretical knowledge gained in the LTE programmes. They highlighted the invaluable contributions of the practice experience with real students when compared with microteaching. Two sample extracts are below:

Everything seems possible out of the books and articles..., yet the reality within the classroom is entirely different... We can never predict the student reactions to the things we expose them to, which is something that the books cannot fully transmit. (TT 1 Portugal)

It helped me understand that some of the theoretical aspects need to be adapted and how to adapt them. (TT 3 Portugal)

The TTs also stated that experience with students helped them modify their theoretical knowledge. The reflection reports indicated that the practicum contributed to

developing greater confidence in teaching and is an indispensable part of teacher education.

At the beginning I was quite nervous that I will not manage with the class, with the materials. ... When I stood in front of the class for my first time, I felt surprisingly good. It was a new experience and my first classes went, I would say, very good. Of course, there were situations where I did not know what to do (especially with students' behavior), but my mentor teacher helped me then to solve the problem... I am not afraid of coping with students anymore. (TT 2 Poland)

The interaction with real students had a great effect on my thoughts. Until the practicum, I had no idea how a real classroom would be like and how the students would act'.(TT 4 Turkey)

It appears that a successful practicum experience has helped build up confidence in managing the classroom and coping with difficulties.

### **TTs' role in the students' eyes**

When asked about TTs' role as regarded by the students, pre-service teachers cited a number of changing roles from the beginning of practicum to the end: *just a candidate teacher, an elder brother or sister, a friend, a guide* and finally *a teacher*. In line with the procedures of the practicum, from observation to practice teaching, their role evolved from being a helper or student teacher to being a real teacher, which boosted their professional agency. The TTs in the three countries were appreciative to be regarded as 'teachers' by students in their practicum schools. The extracts below indicate how TTs built confidence when they had a positive view in students' eyes:

At the first weeks, I was just a candidate teacher because I was just observing the class and leaving after it. I had no interaction with the students... However, they started to see me as a teacher after I taught English to them in their class... Now, they welcome me in front of the class. They give their pens and pencils willingly without asking for it... I think that these behaviours and attitudes represent love and respect for me and I am pleased about it. (TT 1 Turkey)

I believe that at first they saw us as some university students coming to observe. But as we interacted, they slowly adapted to see us as teachers. They asked us questions and also began calling us teacher. (TT 2 Turkey)

They look at me as a second teacher that is there to help them with English. (TT 1 Portugal)

My role in their eyes was to guide and teach them. All the students treated me as a teacher and accepted me as a teacher. They respected and followed all my instructions. (TT 2 Portugal)

I am sure that they saw a candidate teacher in me, taking into account the fact that I was always with the mentor teacher, she always observed my lessons. (TT 1 Poland)

In my opinion, I was both a teacher and a friend for the students. They felt some respect for me because it was I who can teach them something. (TT 2 Poland)

It seems that incidents about being addressed as teachers and being successful in teaching or classroom management contributed to their sense of professional agency.

### **Discipline and classroom management**

The reflection reports also revealed that incidents of achievement in handling discipline issues and self-content with classroom management contributed considerably to most TTs' (9/11) sense of professional agency. However, failure in controlling the class detracts their sense of professional agency. The extracts that indicate the significance of success in managing the classroom is as follows:

I try to be patient and I try not to give up when I meet some obstacles in my way. Uncooperative students are annoying and it is difficult to teach them, but we should not give up—we should rather look for other methods and ways in our teaching. (TT 3 Poland)

I observed especially one student who almost never participated. When my other friend was teaching one day, I sat next to this student and asked him how I can improve my lessons and my teaching. I didn't directly ask him why he wasn't participative. But I said that sometimes lessons can be boring and I wanted his opinion on how I could improve my lessons. He just opened up to me and said that he actually likes English and he gets good grades up to 90 and above. But the fact that his level is higher than the lesson was the actual problem. I thanked him for his opinions. I shared this with my friends and we prepared a game for the upcoming lesson just to test if everybody including the non-participating students cooperated and yes they did which was a great experience.(TT 4 Turkey)

It is prevailing that the uncooperative students negatively influenced TTs' classroom management skills. Furthermore, it is significant that one of the TTs from Turkey detected the underlying reason for a student's indifference and solved it by gathering ideas from his/her peers. This indicates how the problem-solving strategy boosted TTs' sense of professional agency.

The students didn't want to learn nor did they want to be in class. I tried to make it easier for them and introduce more dynamic classrooms in order to catch their attention, but they were really just uncooperative to the point that I just snapped at them. (TT 1 Portugal)

As can be seen from the above extract, failure to cope with the discipline problems caused loss of temper and detracted the sense of professional agency.

### **Discussion**

The findings of the study suggest that the practicum might contribute to developing a sense of professional agency more than any other course or procedure in teacher education programmes.

As for the qualitative data, reflection reports were analyzed and factors that contributed to or detracted from TTs' capacity to develop professional agency in practicum were gathered. The categories contingent on TTs' reflection reports indicated that professional development emerged in a context which was dependent on situational, social and personal factors (Pietarinen et al., 2016). To this end, the relationship between the agentic behaviour and three main factors were categorized as 1. active effort of TTs, 2. relationship with mentor teachers, 3. the classroom practice and students. The findings for each category are discussed below:

The TTs stated that they assume that it was their primary responsibility to be actively involved in the practicum process in order to develop as teachers. They took part in discussions with their mentors or other colleagues and attentively observed them in the classroom with the deliberate intention to benefit from their experience. The TTs also preferred to take action and act with perseverance when confronted with difficulties. Those displaying milder perseverance, that is those who did not assume much responsibility in their learning and developing as teachers showed a relatively lower sense of professional agency. The positive dispositions of trainees towards teaching comprise considering teaching as their ideal job, gaining pleasure from teaching, and feeling competent when they lead an effective course. Adverse dispositions from trainees emerge when they encounter frustrating experiences and feel that they could be easily burned out as teaching might not be their ideal job.

In the reflection reports, establishing a good rapport with the mentors, therefore, appeared to be of substantial importance. When this rapport failed, both parties were distant and defensive, which detracted TTs from developing professional agency. On the other hand, positive feelings led to a positive image of the mentor teachers in the eyes of TTs. The TTs made their own decisions on what to pick up and incorporate into their future teaching practices based on their mentor teachers. Forming their own set of pedagogical procedures indicated that they were developing professional agency. Most of the TTs reported they were welcomed into the teaching environment and accepted as a team member. Reported incidents of being accepted and getting involved in the decision-making process contributed highly to TTs' sense of professional agency. Receiving quality feedback also contributed to professional agency. TTs acknowledged that they were still learning; however, constructive feedback improved confidence and professional agency. Incidents about negative feedback caused TTs to think they were unfairly evaluated and that in turn harmed professional agency.

When TTs suggestions were taken into account and valued, they felt more confident. It was also suggested that the feeling of belonging to a teaching team contributed to TTs' professional identity formation within the practicum. However, in the three practicum contexts, there were some detracting factors. Some TTs had to cope with the negative attitudes of teacher staff members. Therefore, in some contexts, there was an invisible barrier between the teachers and TTs. This supported the importance of an inspiring and constructive teaching environment (Toom et al., 2015; Turnbull, 2005).

The space mentor teachers provided for TTs in terms of individual choice and decisions in their classroom practices developed their professional agency to a considerable extent. TTs appreciated being given the space to take action and make decisions about classroom practices.

All in all, the impact of collegial interaction and collaborative support could also be deduced from TTs' reflection reports as they highlighted the importance of establishing a good relationship with the mentor teacher and mutual respect, and they valued suggestions and rapport established between their mentor teacher (Edwards, 2005; Turnbull, 2005). This finding also corroborates the studies of Pyhältö et al. (2015) and Soini et al. (2016), which signal the importance of collaborative work among colleagues for the development of professional agency.

The practicum was also cited as invaluable by TTs because it provided an authentic teaching experience with real students, which could not be realized in microteaching

sessions in teacher education programmes. Some of the TTs emphasized the significance of experiencing authentic environment and real student reactions and feedback in the classroom. This highlighted the implication for the reflective practice in a genuine setting and thus the TTs learnt from their own teaching behaviour (Edwards, 2007; Soini et al., 2016). Furthermore, TTs attached importance to how learners perceived them. This view also helped them construct a positive inclination towards teaching. Positive relationships with students contribute to instructional practices in the classroom (Spilt et al., 2011).

## Conclusion

This study examined how the agency of TTs shaped their practicum experiences in three different countries. This study is significant as it incorporates the voices from three dissimilar countries as a part of an international LTE research group; Portuguese, an EU country; Poland, formerly a part of the Soviet Union and Turkey, an EU candidate. Though the educational contexts are different, it is revealed that contributing and detracting factors are found to be common.

This study indicates that a positive and welcoming teaching environment in practicum contributes to TTs' commitment to the teaching profession. It is also concluded that negative experiences can be detrimental to the development of professional agency. For instance, TTs felt confident as long as they could manage the classroom effectively; conversely, their sense of professional agency detracted when they failed to cope with misbehaving and uncooperative learners in the classroom. The findings also supported that trainees became more confident and agentic when they felt empowered and had an active role in the decision-making process. These observations supported the view of Soini et al. (2016), who identify these teachers as being more reflective and having holistic problem-solving strategies to cope with stressful interactions at school.

These positive and negative effects necessitate the continuous professional development not only for the TTs but also for the mentor teachers. Furthermore, developing agency should always be born in mind in designing professional development as agency might act as a powerful tool to be motivated, committed, and efficient teachers.

All in all, practicum appears to be an invaluable component of teacher education, in that it is the first genuine teaching and learning setting for TTs. With regard to professional agency, those TTs who have a sense of perseverance, a sense of belonging to the occupation, agency and responsibility for developing themselves benefit the most from practicum. This is especially the case when they cooperate with supportive, constructive and welcoming mentor teachers who provide a good model and adequate space for their teaching practices. To sum up, all this suggest that besides supportive mentor teachers, TTs need high self-esteem which will maintain perseverance and foster teacher autonomy, and classroom management skills which will result in confident teachers in students' eyes.

## Limitations and further study

The findings may function as a point of reference for researchers who are investigating changes in the professional acts of TTs. Considering the findings of this study, new

empirical research on teachers' and TTs' professional agency could be done. Similar studies can be applied in different contexts to elaborate the discussion about factors related to professional agency. Several other LTE contexts in the countries may include different implementations. Language teachers and administrators can also utilize the findings for developing teacher education programmes where TTs are empowered and can take more responsibility in educational matters and classroom incidents. During their university studies, TTs might be encouraged to develop agentic behaviours by their trainers. Furthermore, the concept of professional agency could be a component of methodological courses at undergraduate level.

The study has some limitations in terms of the number of TTs and mentor teachers. The number of TTs and mentor teachers was limited in the study due to accessibility and proximity problems in each country. Also, the study is limited to the reflection reports collected once at the end of the practicum. Further studies can be done through a longitudinal approach with more reflection reports collected at intervals.

The factors that increase TTs' sense of agency in the practicum does not guarantee they will be agentic teachers in their careers. One should bear in mind that the work environment, collegial interaction, learners, and teachers' own beliefs will influence their agentic behaviours in the rest of their teaching life.

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## Appendix 1 Reflection Questions

1. Do you believe you pay active effort to improve yourself professionally and benefit from the mentor teacher (and other colleagues) in the practicum school? If yes, please specify your efforts.

2. Do you feel welcome into the practicum environment? Or are there any negative attitudes of some staff members? Please specify.
3. Does the mentor teacher support you and accept you as a team member? Do you feel belonging to the teaching team in the practicum school? Please give a specific incident/example.
4. Does the mentor teacher provide you with adequate model for teaching? Do you think there is a lot to learn from her/him? Please specify.
5. Do you receive ongoing feedback from your mentor teacher? Are you satisfied with the quality and content of the feedback? Please specify.
6. Are you comfortable with asking for help from the mentor teacher about your questions or problems during practicum? Please give a specific example, if any.
7. Do you feel you have a word to say in the decision-making processes in the practicum experience? Do you feel your views and suggestions are valued by your mentor teacher or other colleagues at practicum school? Please give a specific example.
8. Does the mentor teacher give you adequate space in practice teaching? Or is he/she too dominant? Please give specific examples.
9. How does interaction with real students in actual classrooms contribute to you professionally? Please give specific examples.
10. What is your role in the eyes of the students? (teacher, candidate teacher, guide, friend, another student?) Please specify.
11. Do you feel frustrated and give up when you face difficult and uncooperative students? Or do you take action and overcome the problem? Please give an example, if any.
12. Does practicum (observation and teaching practice) ever make you feel you do not belong in the classroom (teaching is not your occupation)? Please give a specific example, if any.