



Becoming agentic teachers: Experiences of the home group approach as a resource for supporting teacher students' agency



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HIGHLIGHTS

- First-year teacher students' agency was investigated in TE home groups.
- Emotional safety and support from peers and teachers were key facilitators.
- Unequal treatment and unofficial power relationships may restrict students' agency.

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the experiences of first-year teacher students in a Finnish teacher education department regarding ways in which studying in stable “home groups” supported or restricted their agency. The findings of the interviews with 22 teacher students suggest that perception of home groups as emotionally safe and offering opportunities to break traditional authority relationship supported teacher students' agency, which was manifested in identity negotiations and active participation. Perception of inequality and tensions within home groups restricted students' agency. The findings underline the need for keen awareness of factors affecting teacher students' agency when applying the home group approach.

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1. Introduction

The concept of agency has been raised as a highly relevant construct in studies addressing active learning at all school levels, as well as in teacher education and work life (Davydov, Slobodchikov, & Tsukerman, 2003; Edwards & D'arcy, 2004; Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Rainio, 2008; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). Agency translates to being in control of and able to influence one's life instead of experiencing things as just “happening” without the possibility of affecting them (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010). In theories of learning, agency has a key role in the process with which individuals actively construct knowledge and their identities as they participate in socioculturally determined learning communities (Packer &

Goicoechea, 2000; Wenger, 1998). However, previous studies have indicated that although teacher students learn to effectively deliver the curriculum, they learn less about how to respond to complex classroom situations and how to strengthen their own and their pupils' capabilities for life-long learning (Edwards & D'arcy, 2004; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010). Advancing teacher students' agency is also crucial for their professional identity development as future teachers, as they actively construct their teacher identity while participating in learning communities and having opportunities for autonomous and responsible action (Eteläpelto & Saarinen, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010; Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016).

Thus, a key task in teacher education, in addition to developing teacher students' content knowledge and pedagogical practices, is to support their growth into agentic professionals who are able to act accountably and responsibly, acquire skills to support their future pupils' agency, and collaborate with their colleagues across professional boundaries (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Soini,

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Pietarinen, Toom, & Pyhältö, 2015; Toom, Pietarinen, Soini, & Pyhältö, 2017). It has been suggested that the focus should be shifted from predetermined pedagogical content to teacher students actively engaging in, reflecting, and reconsidering the processes of teaching and learning (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016).

The present study focuses on the agency of first-year teacher students and the ways in which their agency is supported in teacher education. Support for teacher students' agency is needed from the beginning of their education (Soini et al., 2015) when students undergo key learning experiences and changes that affect the students' professional identities (Ahonen, Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2015). Recent quantitative studies have shown that university students' agency is affected by factors in the learning environment such as experiences of trust and support from peers and teacher educators (Jääskelä, Poikkeus, Vasalampi, Valleala, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2017; Soini et al., 2015; Toom et al., 2017) and opportunities to influence, make choices, and participate actively (Jääskelä et al., 2017). It has also been shown that dialogical construction of learning environments and distributing authority can enhance teacher students' learning and agency (Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Thus, previous studies have indicated that characteristics of the learning environment may have a considerable impact on teacher students' agency, but research on teacher students' views of these factors and the processes supporting reflection leading to professional identity is still limited. In the present study, teacher students' experiences of their learning environment were studied to deepen understanding of the resources and restrictions of agency in teacher education.

The context of this study is a Finnish teacher education department in which the first-year studies of teacher education take place in stable small groups, referred to as “home groups.” A shared assumption behind the home group approach is that it allows learning to be structured in ways that activate students, providing them with opportunities to make choices and engage in collaborative learning. The study content comprises a broad range of phenomena, for example, psychological, societal, and sociocultural questions in education and their pedagogical implications. The home group teachers each lead a group of approximately 16 students for the whole year, and together with the students they select the specific themes and tasks that the group considers further. Thus, the home group activity is based on sociocultural views of teaching and learning, emphasizing students' reciprocal interactions and the interactions between the teacher educator and the students (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). The home groups aim to function as “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998), which give teacher students opportunities to learn about the rights and responsibilities in a group, participate in reciprocal interaction, and engage in reflection on who they are and who they want to be as future teachers (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010; Wenger, 1998).

The community of practice or the “learning community” approach has been employed internationally in teacher training programs to enhance pre-service teachers' learning and professional development. For example, Hou (2015) showed that online communities of practice supported Chinese teacher students' professional growth and learning during their school placement, and the hierarchical relationship between teacher educators and students was weakened in these learning communities. Based on studies in Australian universities, Le Cornu and Ewing (2008) advocate setting up learning communities in teacher education to facilitate teacher students' reflection and taking responsibility of their own and peers' learning. In the home group activities, teacher students are expected to take responsibility for their own and their peers' learning, and to deepen their thinking regarding teaching and learning with others. In this research, we examine how the

teacher students experience their home groups and whether, and if so how, the home group approach serves as a facilitator for teacher students' agency.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Teacher students' agency

The abstract and multidimensional concept of agency necessarily requires a definition of its nature and boundaries (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). Terms that have been associated with agency include will, purposiveness, choice, intentionality, and freedom (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), as well as active striving, taking initiatives, and influencing one's life (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Agency has also been construed as resisting or changing existing practices, transforming the object of the activity, and becoming a responsible member of a learning community (Rainio, 2008).

This study addresses teacher students' agency from the socio-cultural perspective. According to the sociocultural theory, learning and development take place in the interactions between people and their social, cultural, and physical contexts (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). People's relationships to their environments are seen as manifesting through human actions (Wertsch, 1991). In the sociocultural framework, teacher students' learning and development are not merely seen as acquiring content knowledge and pedagogical skills, but ontological questions about being and acting in the world are seen as equally important (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). In this study, we focus on the latter type of questions concerning teacher students' agency and professional identity construction: how they act in their learning community, how they take responsibility for their own and their group's learning, and who they want to become as prospective teachers (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000; Wenger, 1998). Agency is here understood and referred to as teacher students' active participation in their learning community and having authority and ownership over their learning and development of professional identity as future teachers (cf. Eteläpelto & Saarinen, 2006; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Jääskelä et al., 2017; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010, 2011; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016).

The contexts where learning takes place, the “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998), are seen to play a critical role (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). Previous research suggests that teacher students' agency and identity can best be developed in learning communities providing opportunities to participate actively in theoretical reflection and practical problem solving (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014; Toom et al., 2017). Agency is always negotiated in relation to the prevailing conditions, which may promote or restrict agency (e.g., Ahearn, 2001; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Jääskelä et al., 2017; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Rainio, 2008). For example, the power relationships and distribution of authority in educational settings affect students' agency (Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Pace & Hemmings, 2007), as do structural factors, such as the curriculum, course aims and content, and students' opportunities to influence these (Jääskelä et al., 2017). Students' agency is constructed through their interactions with their learning groups, where they are responsible to others and for their own learning (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010).

Prior research has shown that teacher educators' actions can support teacher students' agency if the educators create interactional spaces for learning without direct teacher control, thus providing opportunities for teacher students to take initiative and change the course of activities (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011).

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