



Research paper

How does the learning environment in teacher education cultivate first year student teachers' sense of professional agency in the professional community?



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Student teachers' professional agency consists of complementary components.
- Social support, equality, climate and recognition are keys of learning environment.
- Learning environment in TE contributes to student teachers' professional agency.

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated Finnish first year student teachers' (N = 244) sense of professional agency in the professional community, their perceptions of teacher education as a learning environment, and the interrelation between these two. Student teacher's professional agency in the professional community consists of motivation to learn, efficacy beliefs of learning, and intentional strategies for promoting school development and student learning. The results showed that student teachers' sense of professional agency in a professional community consisted of the complementary components of utilization of feedback, appreciation of collective efficacy, sense of community, striving for developments, and seeking help actively. As the characteristics of the learning environment, social support, equality, climate and recognition were emphasized.

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1. Introduction

In order to engage in continuous professional development, carry out pedagogical innovations and enhance student learning, future teachers need to maintain and develop their sense of professional agency not only in the classroom, but also in their professional community. *Professional agency* refers to student teacher's intellectual and behavioral capacity to prepare the grounds for

intentional and accountable management of learning in various contexts of teacher's work. It requires motivation to learn, efficacy beliefs of learning, and intentional acts for promoting school development and student learning (Pietarinen, Pyhältö, Soini, & Salmela-Aro, 2013; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini 2015). Hence, professional agency is an integrated concept comprising teacher's cognitive, motivational and attitudinal resources as well as skills and abilities to promote and manage learning in multiple professional contexts, especially in the classroom with pupils and in the professional community. Accordingly, professional agency – as human agency more generally – is continuously constructed and re-constructed depending on the context, object of activity and prior learning experiences (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Greeno, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011).

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The quality and degree of the resources as well as skills and abilities to promote and manage learning is referred to as *the sense of professional agency*. It differs across individuals and alters over time, for example in the different phases of a teacher's career. For student teachers, teacher education provides an essential learning environment for starting to build their sense of professional agency (Cohen & Hill, 1998; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Turnbull, 2005; Wenger & Snyder, 1999). Still, there exists surprisingly little empirical research on student teachers' professional agency, especially in terms of the professional community and in relation to the characteristics of teacher education (Toom, Husu, & Karvonen, 2013). This study focuses on first year primary student teachers' sense of professional agency in a professional community. Moreover, the associations between student teachers' perceptions of the learning environment in teacher education and their sense of the professional agency are explored. Thus, this study particularly aims to investigate this dynamic reciprocal relation between quality and affordances of learning environment and becoming an agentic member of professional community.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Student teachers' sense of professional agency in the professional community

Professional agency within the professional community entails active and intentional efforts to promote learning in the community including educational practitioners of school such as teachers, special education teachers, school assistants, school psychologists, school nurses and social workers. It consists of the interrelated components of motivation to learn, efficacy beliefs in terms of learning, and intentional activities and behavior to manage new learning (Soini, Pietarinen, Toom, & Pyhältö, 2015; Edwards, 2005; Sachs, 2000; Turnbull, 2002, 2005). For student teachers, their peers and teacher educators often simulate the professional community in which they can learn how to utilize their own capabilities to facilitate reciprocal co-regulative learning (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Kwakman, 2003; Rogoff, Matusov, & White, 1996). Accordingly, student teachers' professional agency in the professional community embodies student teachers' abilities to simultaneously facilitate both their own learning, and the learning of the others around them during teacher education.

In order to become active professional agents student teachers are required to take an active and responsible stance for their learning, motivation to develop their own expertise (Sachs, 2000; Turnbull, 2002; 2005), and perceive learning as an integral part of teaching (e.g. Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Van Eekelen, Vermunt & Boshuizen, 2006). Intentional regulation of learning, and context-dependent on-task action strategies steering professional development provides answer to the questions, such as how could I get better in what I do (Soini, Pietarinen, Toom, & Pyhältö, 2015)? This is closely related to their evolving teacher identity and their reflections and conceptions of themselves as future teachers in promoting other's learning and transforming their own practices as teachers (cf. Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Jääskelä, Poikkeus, Vasalampi, Valleala, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2016).

In the context of teacher education, the sense of professional agency refers to the degree of student teachers' will and their quality of ability and skills to adopt such a stance towards a teacher's work in which colleagues and pupils are understood as crucial resources for individual and reciprocal collaborative learning processes (Hakkarainen, Paavola, & Lipponen, 2004; Soini, Pyhältö, & Pietarinen, 2010). Moreover, student teachers' sense of professional agency in the professional community is realized as being responsible for their own and other's learning, intentionally

building a professional community, and facilitating collective efficacy entailing student teachers' beliefs of their collective abilities in terms of professional learning, especially among other student teachers. This entails intentional collective learning that aims to make a difference both at the individual student teacher level and the level of the entire student teacher community. It even entails enacting transformative efforts when they are necessary for promoting new learning (cf. Sannino, Engeström, & Lemos, 2016). Thus, the sense of student teachers' professional agency in a professional community is related both to the characteristics of individual student teachers and the reciprocal relationships with peers and teacher educators in any given community (Greeno, 2006; Rainio, 2008). Thus, it is situative for instance also in the sense that due to a personal and contextual conditions, not all the resources and possibilities for new learning can always be effectively utilized.

A strong sense of professional agency is manifested in having the understanding and will to collaborate, build a community, develop through shared professional work for the best of student learning, solve problems and challenges together via discussions, utilize feedback received from the peers, support others as well as the ability to be supported (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2015; Väisänen, Pietarinen, Pyhältö, Toom, & Soini, 2016). When student teachers are challenged and offered opportunities to experiment with and learn these kinds of transformative practices during their teacher education, they are more likely to promote them in their work as teachers (Ketelaar, Beijaard, Boshuizen, & Den Brok, 2012). The extent and the way in which student teachers adopt a strong sense of professional agency in the professional community already during teacher education is related to their future abilities to act as empowering professional agents within their future professional community (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011).

Findings of few prior qualitative studies suggest that the sense of professional agency in a professional community is an important element for teachers' responsible involvement in their work with students, but also in facilitating school development and the learning of others within the community (Arnold & Clarke, 2014; Pyhältö, Soini, & Pietarinen, 2012; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2014; Edwards, 2015; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). Teacher's strong sense of professional agency in the professional community is related to reduced levels of stress (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2015), a willingness to engage in school development, and being more open to new ideas (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; Linnenbrink-Garcia, Kempler Rogat, & Koskey, 2011). On the other hand, student teachers without experience of generating and testing new ideas, coordinating ideas with one another, planning the implementation of innovations, supporting each other throughout the process, and monitoring their collaborative efforts (e.g. Hakkarainen et al., 2004) have been shown to be less able to promote collaborative learning in school contexts. Accordingly, teachers' capacity to take intentional and collective actions to transform their work seems to be crucial in terms of initiating and maintaining professional collaboration in a school. Hence, student teachers need to be able to build a strong sense of professional agency during teacher education in order to be able to carry out and facilitate collaborative learning in their professional contexts later on.

In the beginning of teacher education studies student teachers' sense of professional agency, especially in the context of professional community might be quite fragmented, and students may nurture ideals and conceptions of themselves as collaborative professionals without any ability to cultivate these practices (cf. Soini, Pietarinen, Toom, & Pyhältö, 2015). A reason for this may be that they do not necessarily have any prior experience of even witnessing such professional behavior when they attended school

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