Scrutinizing the Professional Agency of EFL Teachers: Identifying the Contributors and Manifestations[1]

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Abstract

In today's educational system, teachers are highly accountable for implementing policy-driven changes in student learning and the development of the quality of educational institutions. The present study aimed to expand this research area by investigating the contributors as well as the manifestations of teachers' professional agency. To this aim, first, ten EFL teachers were selected based on convenience sampling from ten high schools from Mashhad, Iran. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The researchers recorded, transcribed, and analyzed interview data. Regarding the contributors to EFL teachers' professional agency, the participants' responses were classified into three main groups, including authority-related factors, teacher-related factors, and learner-related factors; each group is composed of two or more sub-factors. Concerning authority-related factors, the participants' responses indicated that the principal's trust and support played important roles in extending the teachers' professional agency. Respecting teacher-related factors, teachers' experience of pre-service education in line with their professional competencies and motivational attributes (motivation, goal orientation) were found significant in constructing professional agency. Regarding learner-related factors, learners' willingness toward teachers' innovative activities was highlighted in shaping teachers' professional agency. Moreover, the results proved that professional agency was manifested mainly at three levels, namely curriculum designing, school level, and classroom level. Finally, implications were provided in the realm of teacher education and teacher practitioners.

Resumen

En el sistema educativo actual, los docentes son altamente responsables de implementar cambios impulsados por políticas en el aprendizaje de los estudiantes y el desarrollo de la calidad de las instituciones educativas. El presente estudio tuvo como objetivo ampliar esta área de investigación investigando los contribuyentes, así como las manifestaciones de la agencia profesional de los docentes. Con este objetivo, en primer lugar, se seleccionaron diez profesores de EFL en base a un muestreo de conveniencia de diez escuelas secundarias de Mashhad, Irán. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los investigadores registraron, transcribieron y analizaron los datos de las entrevistas. Con respecto a los contribuyentes a la agencia profesional de los docentes de EFL, las respuestas de los participantes se clasificaron en tres grupos principales, incluidos los factores relacionados con la autoridad, los factores relacionados con el docente y los factores relacionados con el alumno; cada grupo está compuesto por dos o más subfactores. Con respecto a los factores relacionados con la autoridad, las respuestas de los participantes indicaron que la confianza y el apoyo del director desempeñaron un papel importante en la extensión de la agencia profesional de los docentes. Con respecto a los factores relacionados con los docentes, se encontró que la experiencia de los docentes en la educación previa al servicio en línea con sus competencias profesionales y atributos motivacionales (motivación, orientación a objetivos) fue significativa en la construcción de la agencia profesional. Con respecto a los factores relacionados con el alumno, se destacó la disposición de los alumnos hacia las actividades innovadoras de los docentes en la configuración de la agencia profesional de los docentes. Además, los resultados demostraron que la agencia profesional se manifestaba principalmente en tres niveles, a saber, el diseño del currículo, el nivel escolar y el nivel del aula. Finalmente, se proporcionaron implicaciones en el ámbito de la formación docente y los docentes en ejercicio.

Introduction

Policymakers tend to view educational achievement as yardstick for teacher responsibility, performativity, and measurability (Luke, 2011; Gu, 2014). This top-down approach to school reform leads to increased stress and pressure for teachers and may keep them away from professionalism (Benesch, 2018; Furlong et al., 2008; Priestley et al., 2012). Moreover, to progress in their fields and to obtain the professional recognition from authorities, teachers should perform based on the demands and expectations made by the authorities (the ministry or the inspectors) (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). Under these conditions, teachers do not have enough freedom to goals, particularly related to learners' accomplishments, and as a result, they may burn out and abandon the teaching profession (Gu, 2014).

To decrease the pressure of accountability and measurability of teachers, considerable attention has been given to teachers' agency since it is the teachers' duty to implement reforms while teaching students (Gelfuso, 2017; Ruan et al., 2020). In this vein, despite the attempts of teacher education programs to enhance teachers' agency (Hökkä et al., 2017), several factors including power or workplace culture may reduce it (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Concerning the critical role of teachers, Toom et al. (2015) mentioned that few empirical findings had been obtained about the link between educational success and teacher agency. Little attention has also been paid to providing teachers with a comprehensive view of contributing factors as well as manifestations of teachers' agency. This matter has inspired the researchers to explore the configuration of teacher agency and its manifestations in teachers' functioning among Iranian EFL teachers.

Review of Literature

Teacher's professional agency

Agency is essential for enriching both individual and shared work activities (Pyhältö et al., 2015). Professional agency is understood as an individual's capacity to exert an effect, make choices, and take stances (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). Agentic attempts can lead to the modification of working contexts, by, for example, forming current work conditions and adopting new strategies (Ursin et al., 2020).

Agency can be represented through resisting external educational norms and plans when they do not match academically justifiable activities (Toom et al., 2015). A variety of desirerable and innovative factors, including school leaders' attitudes toward teachers as professionals, aligned with their desirable, innovative implementation (Lawson et al. 2017; Wilcox & Lawson, 2018), and teachers' values, prior experiences, attitudes, social expectations, and demands are influential in teachers' professional agency (Toom et al., 2017).

Understanding teachers' agency could contribute to describing how teachers attempt to make choices and how these choices lead to a significant difference in their professional performance (Toom et al., 2015). In this vein, Toom et al. (2015) extended the concept of agency to orient teachers to go beyond knowledge boundaries. Teachers can make an effective change by implementing committed actions and resisting authority plans (Toom et al., 2015). However, making these changes is limited by teachers' professional competence and social atmosphere (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 23).

Several studies have examined teachers' agency from various lenses or theoretical approaches (Anderson, 2010; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Lasky, 2005). One of the dominant theoretical frameworks in this field is the ecological approach proposed by Priestley et al., (2015). This model includes three perspectives: the past or iterative perspective, the present or practical evaluative perspective, and the future or projective perspective. The first perspective concerns an individual's past achievements, beliefs, and behaviors. The contribution of iterative aspect to teachers' agency is related to the personal values, individual capacity, and beliefs grounded in an individual's past experiences but presented in the teachers' day-to-day relationships with co-workers in schools. The projective perspective focuses on teacher's intention to create a different future from the past and the present. The practical-evaluative perspective focuses on the present where the agency can be exercised and affected by both past and future.

Priestley et al. (2012) suggest basic principles of teachers' professional agency: (1) Teacher's agency contributes to increased changes in their activities; (2) To obtain teacher's agency, ecological conditions such as social structure, cultural forms and the material environment are important; (3) In exploring professional agency, teachers' past experiences and present experiences should be considered. These three principles are connected to their conceptualization of agency. Priestley et al. (2012) assumed that "agency and change [were] synonymous and positive" (p. 191) and teacher agency has been regarded as an essential construct in the studies on educational change. They conceptualized agency as a phenomenon as something "achieved and not as merely…a capacity or possession of the individual" (Priestley et al., 2012, p.197). In this vein, ecological conditions such as the social structure and cultural forms are significant in their ecological approach toward teachers' professional agency. Moreover, teachers' agency is influenced by the past or iterative perspective, the present or practical evaluative perspective, and the future or projective perspective of their experiences.

From another perspective, Pyhältö et al. (2015) viewed the professional agency as an integrated concept composed of three resources: cognitive, motivational, and attitudinal, aligned with teachers' abilities to increase and handle learning in various professional contexts. The quality and level of the above-mentioned

resources and teachers' abilities to enhance learning shape the sense of professional agency. They also commented that teachers' professional agency is flexible and changeable over a teacher's professional life.

A considerable number of studies have focused on important constructs in shaping teachers' agency (Toom et al., 2017). One of the influential factors in determining teacher's agency is the type of school reform (Pietarinen et al., 2017). Regarding school reform, a number of studies have highlighted the critical role of a country's national education system for the effectiveness of curriculum reform through which the reform is implemented (Priestley et al., 2011; Ramberg, 2014). Two fundamental approaches to school reform strategy have been proposed by scholars in this field: top-down and bottom-up (Fullan, 2007). In the top-down approach, Wilcox and Lawson (2018) considered teachers as *implementation puppets*. This approach is supposed to decrease and limit professional agency. While in the top-down model, schools and teachers are regarded as enactors and consumers of policy plans, the bottom-up model is highly dependent on the capacity of schools and teacher communities to provide learners as well as teachers with a creative and innovative learning atmosphere (Leana, 2011; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008). Each of them has its own benefits; the top-down approach has been welcomed in implementing reforms, but the effectiveness of the approach is not high (Fullan, 2007; Pietarinen et al., 2017). The bright side of the bottom-up approach is that its effectiveness has been more convincing (Ramberg, 2014). Via the lens of this approach, change starts from how the school community makes sense of the new reform, which better covers teachers' needs and professional activities.

Scholars have advocated integrating the strengths of both approaches to have sustainable and effective changes (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Petko et al., 2015). Strategies and approaches with the focusing on adaptive integration during policy enactment are supposed to promote professional agency (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018). In this integrative approach, teachers welcome professional discretion and the way they can match their preferred activities and their learners' needs. In order to increase an adaptive integration of teachers' agency, some issues are important including: the distributed leadership of a school and its organizational atmosphere filled with trust (Wilcox & Lawson, 2018).

In language teaching, Dubiner et al. (2018) carried out a study on language teachers' agency. Their finding highlighted the significant relationship between participants' agentic actions, reflective instruction, and increased awareness. Dubiner et al., (2018) and Lieberman and Miller (2008) referred to the interaction between agency and reflections as a way of empowering teachers to obtain their goals.

Although education reform may constrain teachers' agentic positions through evaluating teachers' performance based on outcome factors, it cannot completely control the interaction between teachers and context, which enhances teachers' agentic action (Simpson et al., 2018). This issue of developing professional agency in both classroom and professional community is of utmost significance among student teachers since it is critical for future teachers to engage in continuous professional development, to implement innovations, and to foster student achievements (Toom et al., 2017).

Agency and identity

Individuals' consideration of how and why to act provides them with the maintenance of the negotiation of who they are (Duff, 2012). In this sense, professional agency can be a resource in cultivating an individual's professional identity (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). Following this, Vähäsantanen (2015) argued that the implementation of the agency is effective in shaping professional identity, its maintenance, and transformation. Two forms of agency can be implied in this view: while the first form deals with an individual's participation in the professional community, the second one refers to the capacity to employ experiences and community involvement to develop professional identity. The term identity-agency refers to the latter (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016).

To extend the link between teacher's agency and identity, Davies and Harre (1999) put emphasis on the social construction of identities and the world through discourse. The term discourse has been defined differently across disciplines. The most well-known definition, reported by Kayi-Aydar (2015), is that it refers to "language in use" (p. 95), which is shaped by the multiple selves of the people who created it, and while, at the same time it in turn shapes the creators' multiple identities. Kayi-Ayder conducted a study focusing on how three language teachers' identities would be extended or limited relative to a position. The results indicated that they positioned themselves to enact obligations because of their job duties. However, they had a sense of effectiveness, caring, and accountability in their teaching. In the classroom setting, Yoon (2008) argued that a teacher's position orients teacher-learner interactions. In this process, teachers'

conceptions play a decisive role in both teachers' performance as well as learners' performance. In a study conducted in a sample of 90 EFL teachers, teachers' conceptions of effective factors in learners' language achievements were shown to enhance the participants' academic goals (Royaei et al., 2020).

A number of studies related to teacher's professional agency have been conducted in an Iranian context. For instance, Rostami and Yousefi (2020) carried out a qualitative study on implementing agency among 15 novice English teachers who were selected based on snowball sampling. They found that participants exercised agency by using dialogic feedback, positioning, and critical incidents. In another study, Sahragard and Rasti (2017) analyzed the exercising agency of two high school teachers based on the framework proposed by Priestley et al. (2015). They conducted research through semi-structured interviews and follow-up data collection. In analyzing their participants' agency, the researchers found that the iterative perspective of Priestley et al's. framework was represented in both teachers' practicing agency. For example, Haleh's father was an army officer (Haleh was one of the participants). He had a lot of discipline at home and this feature had an influence on Hale's punctuality in her career. The practical-evaluative and projective perspectives of Priestley et al.'s framework was also reflected in both teachers' exercising agency. With respect to practical-evaluative, Halleh used a metaphoric conception of a textbook and mentioned "somebody must do something" (p. 158). Also, the researcher found the projective perspective in participants' agency. For instance, Haleh tended to talk about her future plans for further professional development with her friends on an online group they had. Their findings confirmed the model proposed by Priestley et al. (2013) in the Iranian central educational system. Moreover, they realized the concept of situated nature of teachers' responsiveness and action highly existed among participants.

The current study

Due to the growing changes in today's educational systems, teachers are expected to manage the challenges of educational reforms (van der Heijdena et al., 2015), to understand and to make sense of change from 'inside' (internal force to reflect) and 'outside' (meeting external challenges), both personally and in groups of school colleagues (Fullan, 2013). Previous findings indicated that individuals do not tend to be involved in situations in which they feel powerless (Rex & Schiller, 2009) and teacher educators are recommended to understand conditions in which student teachers do not feel agentic (Kayi-Ayder, 2015). To extend these lines of research, the present study aimed to delve into the concept of professional agency among teachers by scrutinizing the facilitative factors of professional agency and its manifestations in teachers' functioning.

Research questions:

1. *What are the contributors to shaping an EFL teacher's professional agency?*
2. *How is professional agency manifested in an EFL teacher's professional performance?*

Method

Participants

Ten Iranian teachers from ten public high schools served as cases in this study. To select the participants, the first researcher explained the aims of the current study to principals of several high schools and asked them to invite the teacher whose decisions mattered the most in that high school. The criterion for choosing the participants was that the researchers wanted to examine the professional agency of full-time teachers. The reason behind selecting full-time teachers was that their teaching accountability was higher than that of part-time teachers and that they encountered a variety of conditions representing the school culture and had more interaction with the school principal. The organizational structures of all high schools were similar. Five of the participants were female, and five of them were male. Their teaching experience ranged from 17 to 23 years. The participants' consent was obtained before data collection, Moreover, they were assured that their responses would only be used for the objectives of the present study. The first researcher recorded all the interviews with the teachers' consent. The average length of interviews was 120 minutes (range: 105-145 minutes).

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews: In this phase, the participants were asked about their professional experiences regarding their perception of authority norms, the role of principlal and their freedom to act, modify, or oppose those rules. In other words, we attempted to gain insight into the facilitative factors, teachers' reactions, and manifestations of the professional agency. In doing so, the researchers tried to cover the

crucial elements over time from their initial teacher education program to when they get experienced teachers. The interview was conducted in English. The core questions of semi-structured interviews were:

1. How many years have you taught English as a fulltime teacher?

2. Have you seen any educational changes during your teaching? For example, changes in textbook, teaching style, or type of assessment?

3. What are the important factors in making educational change?

4. If I want to classify the domain of my professional agency into three levels (classroom level, school level, and curriculum design level), which level do you think is best suitable for you?

Data analysis

To analyze the data, the first researcher took the following steps: first, for the aim of preliminary coding, the data was examined. Following this stage, based on similarities between participants' quotes, the researchers classified them and put similar quotes in a specific group and then she coded them. Then, she checked these categories several times to make sure no new content would be obtained, that the categories were saturated. As an approach to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggested that researchers give the qualitative outcomes to participants themselves for feedback on whether findings match and fit their cases or not. She did it as the last step in analyzing transcribed data and all the participants confirmed the findings.

Results

RQ1: Contributors in shaping teachers' professional agency

With respect to the first research question, investigating the contributors to shaping teachers' professional agency, the researchers found several themes: the role of principal, learners' attitudes, teachers' experience of pre-service education, teachers' motivation and goal orientation, teachers' own professional values, and teachers' competencies. The citations of teachers' quotes have been indicated in parentheses (participant's code, the number of the line where the quote begins in the interview transcript).

The role of principal

The findings of the qualitative data analysis documented that the role of a principal is at the top of the list of contributors to teachers' professional agency. The participants stated that the principal is the authority who can implement policy rules in a context that can extend or shorten teachers' agentic capacity. As an illustration of this, a teacher used a metaphor:

> I think the role of a school principal is like a gatekeeper. If she allows teachers to modify changes made by authorities, teachers use creativity, innovations, and anything required for better learning. However, if she persists in implementing authority rules thoroughly, teachers have to act exactly what has been imposed on. Based on the principal's expectations, the workplace can be susceptible to a variety of teachers' orientations. So, the role of a principal is critical in teachers' performance. (T2, L5)

Learners' attitudes

Qualitative analysis identified learners' willingness and individual features in line with teachers' teaching abilities as the contributors to teachers' professional agency. The teachers stated that their educational innovations were influenced by learner features and attitudes toward teachers' own teaching techniques and activities. One teacher elaborated that:

> In my point of view, successful learning is composed of two parts: one part depends on the teacher himself and the other one depends on learners' attitudes and abilities. As a teacher, I should consider learners' needs, interests, and abilities at first. Then, I should prepare an appropriate context for what I design and develop. I think these considerations would be effective in examining innovations, particularly these days that we observe many technological achievements in education and learners are very enthusiastic in doing assignments with the help of technology. (T4, L4)

Another teacher stated that:

> You see learners' attitudes is important in a teacher's decision since they're the final receivers of educational changes created by authorities. And it is important to view learners as cooperators in implementing educational changes although they have less knowledge and understanding than a teacher. All these

considerations can be influential in learners' sense of efficacy, value, and more importantly in building who they are and what are their roles in a learning. (T1, L11)

Or

Making a right decision is to some extent dependent on how well you know your students, their needs, their abilities, and everything that you think is important in an effective teaching. You cannot avoid such things because if so, you are not successful in implementing educational innovations. When you focus on learners you can see the results is high. (T8, L5)

Teachers' experience of pre-service education

Qualitative analysis indicated that teachers' experience of their pre-service education including their professors' instruction, materials, and as a whole, what they have learned there (the institution where they got their degree) affect significantly their professional agency. As an instance, one teacher elaborated that:

The period of pre-service was full of valuable experiences represented in teachers' professional lives. One of the practical elements of my pre-service period was learning how to reflect on my performance appropriately. The right way of evaluating a teacher's performance is very important in a teacher's future functioning. When I have learned how to evaluate and reflect on my practices during a term, I'm capable of making progress and managing the ups and downs of my job. (T1, L15)

Along this line, another teacher stated:

The things that you learned in pre-service teacher education period are dominant in your teaching. In fact, a part of your teaching belongs to what you acquired in the past, or it would be better to say that your acts are like a mirror that reflects them. For instance, one thing that impressed me was how to pay enough attention to learners' constructive role in their learning and how a teacher can be effective in assisting them to accept responsibility in learning process such as doing term projects. When learners feel they can do class activities, they find many aspirations to continue independence, and that's significant in their achievement. So, the importance of pre-service should not be ignored in teacher education programs and workshops. (T5, L4*)*

Teachers' motivation and goal orientation

Findings indicated that teachers' motivation and goal orientation could be considered critical factors in determining their professional agency. Most participants believe that motivation in line with goals and determination contributes to teachers' better involvement in implementing reforms (when they have positive views towards reforms) and to teachers' patience, tolerance, and solutions to the dark sides of implementing reforms (when they do not value reforms). As an illustration, one teacher elaborated that:

Motivation and a clear goal make you be prepared for unpredictable challenges in your teaching. Teaching is one of those jobs that need continuous interest, and if a teacher loses it, he or she faces burnout. Motivation can pave the way for effective teaching. When there is enough motivation in one's job, he or she goes towards creativity, innovations, and even challenges, and it is here that a comprehensive picture of one's teaching has been emerged. (T6, L9)

Teacher's professional value

Teacher's own professional value is the element that was directly identified. Professional values refer to teachers' priorities in their career as they attempt to achieve them. Some participants stated that some of their agentic roles were influenced by professional values, and this matter is significant among teachers who are motivated and committed in their career, and professional values. One teacher mentioned that:

Even if I feel disappointed about learners' behavior, I don't prefer to express negative feelings in front of my learners since sustaining supporting and motivating learners are the things that I highly value in the growth of my job; so, I don't want to lose them. (T3, L6)

All teachers mentioned that they have experienced frustration and emotional fatigue in some parts of teaching, but they tried their best to cope with difficulties. Devaluing failures is very vital in job satisfaction. As participants claimed, disregarding failure is like removing obstacles in their profession and because of this view, it does not impede them from making progress. For example, one teacher elaborated on this as follows:

Agentic teachers would like to make new change in their classroom to avoid routine; for example, when they have to teach a textbook for several years, they provide learners new supplementary sources. Examining new teaching styles and teaching materials might be aligned with failures but these teachers

seem to be motivated to take a risk and implement innovations in their teaching. I enjoy and support new educational change because I like to make a change and enhance learners' achievements. (T1, L 14)

Teachers' competencies

Qualitative analysis indicated that teachers' competencies, particularly transferability, can be regarded as critical factors in shaping their professional agency. As participants stated, teachers with high levels of agency tend to transfer their knowledge and textbook content in such a way as to promote critical thinking, cultivate a sense of accountability toward learning, and present ideas freely among their students. As an illustration, two teachers elaborated that:

I believe that it is essential to develop features such as having a voice when working with others, being independent, a sense of accountability since they are important in building learners' personality and learning achievement. To do so, I start from my own instruction, particularly in teaching productive skills, speaking and writing in that learners are required to have the ability to demonstrate their knowledge, to persuade others, and to reach an agreement. In this respect, teachers have an important role. If I as a teacher can teach students these abilities via transferring my skills and knowledge, they learn how to transfer and present knowledge in their own tasks. (T3, L7)

In increasing teachers' agentic capacity, teachers' own capacities and competencies are of utmost importance. Among teaching competencies, the transfer of what a teacher aims to follow is very effective in learners' achievement. Teachers are assumed to be an appropriate model for learners. In fact, it's a matter of having trust and emotional connection between teacher and learners. (T1, L5)

RQ2: Manifestations of professional agency in teachers' professional functioning

The second research question focuses on the hierarchical levels of the manifestations of teachers' agency in their professional functioning.

Curriculum level

Qualitative analysis showed that designing materials, activities, and course books were at the top of the list and that only a few teachers achieved this level of professional functioning. It is the level that teachers have much power in making decisions about implementing policy rules as well as reforms. As an illustration, one teacher said that:

A considerable number of suggestions have been made regarding the changes in textbook. Learners' needs were understood fully but some of the book activities have still needed more considerations. Of course, the reading activities have been well-designed but listening ones require some facilitators to practice in the classroom. (T1, L4)

and

As a teacher who is a member of designing curriculum materials, I put stress on teachers' ability, school facilitators, learners' needs. Having an effective role in authority level requires some qualifications such as being a successful teacher in students' achievements in exams taken in a large-scale (national or province domains), in authority evaluations of teachers' performances (Generally new in-service teachers are evaluated based on some standards), in dealing with teaching challenges. (T5, L1)

School level

The present findings indicated that school level was in the second rank in exercising agentic capacity. This level includes enhancing the effectiveness of teachers' learning community. For instance, it highlights the significance of teachers' relationships with their principal, colleagues, learners, and learners' parents. In this vein, two teachers said that:

When you feel free in acting and expressing what you think is effective, you stretch your agency to move beyond teaching performance, to go closer to your connections with other staff in your work community and influence your relationships. The teaching community requires strong relationships and trust among teachers. (T1, L4)

and

Acting in a context beyond classroom requires how you understood your school and the relationships among teachers. I try to have a voice to impress others, to take regular participation in school decision-making meetings, to find a way to increase my engagement in school, for example, how I can cooperate with the principal and how the principal supports me (T3, L9).

Classroom level

The qualitative analysis documented that classroom level, including regulating learners' activities as well as assignments, is the level via which all the participants implement agentic actions. As an illustration, one teacher stated that:

> *Teachers who have a strong sense of agency have better functioning in classroom activities, particularly interactive activities, discussion, and team works. They direct their interaction to the point that the learner himself or herself can find the answer or find enough motivation to continue engagement in group activities without having the anxiety to express ideas freely.* (T4, L9)

Discussion

The current study first investigated the contributors of experienced teachers to the construction of professional agency from multiple perspectives. Regarding the first research question, investigating the contributors in shaping teachers' professional agency, the results indicated that there were six contributors: the role of principal, learners' attitudes, teachers' experience of pre-service education, teachers' motivation and goal orientation, teachers' own professional value, and teachers' competencies. With respect to the role of principal in building teachers' professional agency, the participants argued that the way their high school principal approached educational changes influenced how they followed these changes, whether they could modify or implement the changes as enacted by authority. Almost all participants stated that they had this option to add extra elements or to make necessary adaptations to these changes based on students' needs, abilities, and school contexts. They said that when teachers had a clear understanding of effective teaching and the principal provided them enough professional space to orient their professional functioning toward high school quality, they could obtain the desired outcomes. This is significant because teachers are evaluated based on learners' achievement and principal's satisfaction of teachers' performance. In fact, this study suggested that one of the main factors in constructing the quality of teachers' agency is how much a principal provides teachers with an appropriate context to employ what a professional teacher considers important for learners' achievement. This finding supports the previous studies, which found that the school leader's support of teachers' job needs has increased the teachers' willingness to enact educational change in the context of classroom and school (Abós et al., 2018). Moreover, one of the main constructors of teacher's agency is principal (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). Principals can increase or decrease teachers' role in their professional growth. Their contribution highlights the *situated achievement* (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 29) concept of agency and its effects on educational outcomes. Priestley et al. (2012) conceptualized agency as a phenomenon/doing, as something "achieved and not as merely…a capacity or possession of the individual" (p. 197). They focused on the role of social factors. As the findings of the present study indicated, the role of school principal was important in teachers' agency.

With regard to the learners' attitudes, the present finding indicated that learners' attitudes toward educational reform were influential in teachers' use of innovative strategies or approaches. In this vein, learners' background, ability, and motivation were critical. As the participants stated, when learners had enough familiarity with the teaching methods or the type of assessment that a teacher used in a classroom, they could cooperate better with the teacher. In this vein, learners obtained more achievements and as a result, this cooperation increased the learners' feelings of accountability, efficacy, and agency in the learning process.

Another contributor to building teachers' professional agency was teachers' experiences of pre-service education; as participants mentioned, the period of being student teachers was important for a successful future. In this vein, as most participants argued, through observing their mentor's responses to the challenges of teaching, they learned about the appropriate reactions that may occur in their future performances. It is in line with Toom et al.'s (2017) claim that teachers' professional agency is affected by the experiences that teachers have acquired in pre-service time. Like other students in other fields of study, EFL student teachers need a model for effective teaching functioning and since Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) is a multidisciplinary subject by nature and as participants argued, providing EFL student teachers with a model could be beneficial since student teachers could find a more comprehensive picture of the reality of a multidimensional atmosphere, such as the EFL context.

The findings of the current study highlighted the prominent role of teachers' individual factors in shaping a teacher's professional agency. According to participants' claims when they had enough motivation, they strived to do their best in their job; for example, through finding the best way to present materials, interacting effectively with learners, updating their knowledge, and managing their classrooms.

Subsequently, these things affected teachers' sense of efficacy, engagement, and creativity in their reflective practices.

These findings substantiated the study conducted by Pietarinen et al. (2013) which suggested that for effective professional agency, teachers' motivation to learn , their sense of efficacy in learning, and deliberate behavior for enriching school development and student achievement were needed. The present findings highlight Siciliano et al's (2017) contention that teachers' positive attitudes towards policy reforms leads to better implementation of new reforms. Moreover, implementing educational innovation requires a variety of teacher receptivity, whether teachers are engaged in innovations and reforms with high amount of enthusiasm and motivation or not (Lam et al., 2010). Research has shown that teachers' agency during their career enables them to select and to establish their own goals, to put pressure on educational systems, to enrich their individual development, and to exert desirable influence on the educational context (Zhang & Shen, 2012). Moreover, this finding can be justified in light of Priestley et al's (2015) contention that in order to have successful management of external demands, the role of teachers' own expertise, including their attitudes and knowledge, seems significant.

Together, the analysis of participants' interviews indicated that these EFL teachers' agency was shaped and reshaped by their individual attributes, the school constraints, and the opportunity that their principal provided them. Building upon previous studies and the findings of the current study, it seems that these EFL teachers' agentic actions were affected by individual variables such as motivation and goal orientation (Royaei et al., 2021) and social factors such as the role of principal. This can exert an effect on dimensions such as the EFL teachers' instructional behavior, employment of new teaching styles, and even the dynamic interaction with their learners.

The second research question of this study aimed to explore the manifestations of the professional agency among teachers. The results indicated that there are hierarchical levels of agency among EFL teachers: the classroom level, school level, and curriculum level. The classroom level is the lowest level at which all participants had high levels of engagement in agentic actions including learners' activities as well as assignments. Then school level where six out of ten participants had agentic actions. As these participants stated that they were given enough power to make a decision about the quality of school. As an example, they mentioned how they could enrich their professional learning through sharing their experiences with their colleagues, the principal of schools, and students' parents, proposing innovations, and giving appropriate solutions to unpredictable challenges. Regarding the highest level, the curriculum level, only three out of ten participants had an agentic role at this level. To achieve this position (e.g., engagement in implementing policy reforms) they claimed that they had indicated high rates of students' achievements in national examinations, managing instructional problems, and high levels of commitment and discipline.

A detailed analysis of participants' responses showed that the level through which they had different agency was significantly influenced by a variety of factors including both teachers' personal factors (e.g., having success in their instruction and their students' learning) and school factors (e.g., how much the school principal supported the teachers' plans). The current findings are supported theoretically by Gagne's and Deci's (2005) claim that workplace conditions are the key determinants of an individual's job performance. Following this, Nie et al. (2015) indicated that how much a supervisor supports their teachers is influential in sustaining their motivation to have optimal functioning. In a situation where teachers perceive that their decision and choice are effective in their professional performance, they become more involved in teaching practices (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

Conclusion and Implications

The present study contains some implications in the domain of teacher agency. The findings of the current study indicated the conceptualization of teacher agency as "individually varied … and both socially and individually resourced" (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p. 1) in an EFL context. In other words, it was found that these EFL teachers' agentic actions were affected by a combination of individual characteristics (their motivation and interest) and social characteristics (the role of principal of high school). This can affect dimensions such as EFL teachers' instructional behaviors, employment of new teaching styles, and even the dynamic interactions between teacher-learners.

The findings of the current study suggested that the period as a student teacher was critical in the teachers' future job performance. This point should be emphasized in the emotional perspective of teaching since the role of a teacher, as Hosotani and Imai-Matsumura's (2011) argued, is an important factor in decisions

related to classroom emotional management in that the teacher is the only person who could decide quickly when an emotional problems arose. Concerning this, teacher educators as well as policy makers are recommended to devote a considerable amount of attention to mentors, materials, and type of evaluation during the teacher education period. EFL textbooks have been changing constantly. In this vein, preparing EFL student teachers and empowering them to respond appropriately to unavoidable changes can contribute to their decisions regarding the enactment of educational reforms and changes.

As the findings of the current study indicate, in an EFL context as other contexts, the professional agency is a construct that is influenced by a variety of teachers' individual factors (e.g., motivation) and school factors (e.g., the principal's feedback) (Toom et al., 2015) and previous learning experiences (e.g., their teacher education courses) (Greeno, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). In this regard, policymakers and teacher educators in the field of EFL are recommended to consider a comprehensive view of teachers' professional lives, especially the side effects of teaching. Side effects of teaching can sustain or stop both EFL teachers' as well as EFL learners' engagement in an academic performance. In this case, the researchers mean issues which have not been the objectives of an instructional training course. For example, a teacher training course has a 20-hour teacher training workshop aimed at teaching some new teaching styles. After ending the course, in addition to obtaining some new teaching styles, teachers participating in that workshop may find motivation and inspiration to become more engaged in their performance. We refer to this considerable amount of inspiration and energy as side effects of a well-designed teacher training workshop.

Another implication highlights the significant role of the high school principal. Due to the highly documented role of a principal in configuring teachers' professional agency, it is suggested that workshops for extending principals' awareness of weaknesses and challenges of teaching in an EFL context be held. As Ovando and Ramirez (2007) argued, providing teachers with appropriate feedback about their teaching methods by principals cultivates teachers' professional competencies.

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