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## Abstract

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine teacher students' agency. In this study agency was defined as the students' possibilities and resources to influence their studies, pursue goals, make choices, and act autonomously and responsibly. The main aims were to find out what kind of agency teacher students experience in their studies and what kind of factors they perceive as supporting and constraining their agency. The pilot also aimed to ascertain suitable methodology for investigating student agency. The data were collected with teacher education students' interviews (n = 2) and written self-reflections (n = 3). The analysis indicated that teacher students' agency was manifested as self-realization as the students created meaningful study paths and as influencing and participating as they took initiatives and participated actively in their learning environment. Opportunities to influence and take initiatives and emotional safety in the learning environment were significant factors supporting students' agency.

**Keywords:** Agency, teacher students

## Creating Learning Paths, Influencing, Participating: A Pilot Study on Teacher Students' Experiences of Agency in Their First-Year Small Group Studies

### 1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on teacher students' agency in their studies. In discussions on good education, there has been a longstanding assumption that education should help people to develop their capacities for agentic and autonomous action (e.g. Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Ecclestone, 2007; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Pupils should be supported in developing their capabilities for active and autonomous learning in schools, which presents a challenge for teacher education. How can teacher education support teacher students' agency, so these new teachers can support their pupils' agency later on in their work (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010, 2011)? Fostering teacher students' agency development is also crucial for the growth of their professional identity as a teacher (Eteläpelto & Saarinen, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010). In addition, capacity for autonomous action is a key to a teacher's professionalism (Heikkinen, Tynjälä, & Kiviniemi, 2011).

Agency is not, however, only important for teacher students to become good teachers; agency is also crucial for individual students' well-being (Kumpulainen, Lipponen, Hilppö, & Mikkola, 2014; Welzel & Inglehart, 2010). Agency meets the human need for self-actualisation, and, thus, increases life satisfaction and well-being (Welzel & Inglehart, 2010). Agency appears to the subject as a feeling of being in control of one's life, being able to do and influence things in one's life, instead of the person experiencing things as just "happening," without the possibility of affecting whatever occurs (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010). Children's agentic experiences have also been found to be important in promoting children's socioemotional well-being, as the changing and complex environments of childhood challenge children's sense of agency (Kumpulainen et al., 2014). Schools and teachers are important in supporting children's agency and well-being (Johnson, 2008; Kumpulainen et al., 2014) and, therefore, future teachers should experience support for their agency in teacher education. Agentic experiences of teacher education, should also support future teachers' well-being in order for them to be able to transfer these kinds of practices to their future work (see e.g. Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010).

In Finland, the teaching profession is highly appreciated, and Finnish teachers have quite a high level of professional autonomy (Heikkinen et al., 2011). How, then, does teacher education support students to become autonomous and agentic teachers? What kind of

practices are helping or hindering student agency? These questions also lead to the Kantian pedagogical paradox; education should help people become agentic and autonomous, but how is it possible to support someone else's autonomy while influencing them with education (Heikkinen et al., 2011)? The wider study, as well as the pilot study presented here, aim to shed light on these questions from the teacher student perspective.

This study was the pilot phase of a doctoral dissertation focusing on the agency of preservice teachers during their university education. The purpose of the pilot was to find out what kind of agency first-year teacher students experience in their studies, and what kind of resources and obstacles they encounter. The aim of the pilot was also to ascertain whether written or spoken data were more suitable as methods for investigating student agency. In this article we report on the findings from the interviews and students' written self-reflections and on the value of using multiple methods as a means of accessing student experiences.

## **2 Theoretical Frameworks and Conceptual Roots**

### **2.1 Theoretical Background of Agency**

The concept of agency has been defined in various ways, depending on the theoretical frame through which it has been studied. This study draws on sociocultural, social cognitive, and life-course frameworks on agency. According to sociocultural theory, learning and development take place in interaction between people and their social, cultural, and physical contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; see also John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). In sociocultural theory, human action is a fundamental concept, as people's relationships to their environments are manifested through actions (Wertsch, 1991). According to Ahearn (2001, 112), agency is an individual's "socioculturally mediated capacity to act." Furthermore, within the sociocultural research tradition, agency has also been construed as resisting and changing existing practices, transforming the object of activity, and becoming a responsible member of a learning community (Rainio, 2008). Agency results from the interplay between an individual's strivings and resources, on one hand, and contextual factors, on the other hand, which may both promote as well as restrict an individual's agency (e.g. Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Jyrkämä, 2008; Vähäsantanen, 2013). Experiences, knowledge, and competencies function as individual resources for agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Eteläpelto et al. (2013) propose in their in-depth review of multidisciplinary views and definitions of agency that professional agency should be studied from a subject-centered sociocultural approach. Their approach comprehends individuals from a lifelong and developmental perspective, emphasizing

individuals' active agency in their work and learning while simultaneously seeing agency exercised and manifested in certain sociocultural conditions (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

In Bandura's (1989; 2006) social cognitive theory, the duality between an individual's agency and social structures is rejected; people are not seen as autonomous agents, nor are people's actions seen as determined solely by environmental factors. Instead, people are seen as producers as well as products of their social environments, and human action is seen as a result of the interplay of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 2006, 165). In social cognitive theory, agency is based on an individual's self-efficacy, a belief about one's capabilities to act (Bandura, 1989).

From the life-course perspective, agency is realised in individuals' attempts and abilities to influence their life trajectory in the long run (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). The temporal dimensions influencing agency are apparent in the life-course perspective: past experiences of the individual and the resulting expectations influence both current actions and future orientations, as well as judgments about different alternative ways to act (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

As is evident from these sociocultural, social cognitive, and life-course notions on agency, the concept of agency has been defined in many ways and has several terms associated with it, e.g. will, purposiveness, initiative, choice, intentionality, and freedom (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), as well as active striving, taking initiatives, and influencing one's life (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). Concepts such as autonomy, empowerment, and emancipation are also often seen as closely related to agency, or they are used to determine agency. For example, Ecclestone (2007, 121) describes agency as people's "capacity for autonomous, empowered action," and Biesta and Tedder (2007, 133) refer to "agentic and autonomous action." The concept of agency has also received criticism for its lack of a clear definition, which has led some researchers to answer this criticism with in-depth reviews on agency (see e.g. Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). The abstract and multidimensional nature of agency requires researchers to define what they mean by the concept in each case (Eteläpelto, Heiskanen, & Collin, 2011). In this research, we acknowledge this dilemma, and we have aimed to respond to it by explaining the theoretical roots from which agency is understood in this research (see Section 2.2 below).

## **2.2 Teacher Students' Agency**

Despite the acknowledged need for supporting agency development among teacher students, only a few studies have been conducted on teacher education and agency (Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010, 2011). As many consider agency to be constructed in the interaction between people and their sociocultural environments (e.g. Bandura, 1989; Eteläpelto et al., 2013), teacher students also exercise their agency in certain sociocultural preconditions. For example, the traditional authority relationships in educational settings affect students' agency (Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Pace & Hemmings, 2007), as well as structural factors, such as the curriculum and course aims. Students' agency is also constructed through their interaction with their learning groups, where they have responsibilities to others as well as to their own learning (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010). In that sense, students are not "autonomous agents" (Bandura, 1989, 1175), able to do whatever they wish in their studies. However, much research has found a positive relationship between teacher students' agency and ownership over their learning instead of pressure to produce favorable learning outcomes to please an external authority (Engle & Faux, 2006).

Prior research has shown that teacher educators' actions support teacher students' agency by creating interactional spaces for learning and preventing the educators from controlling the learning sessions, thus providing opportunities for teacher students to take the initiative and change the course of activities (Lipponen and Kumpulainen, 2011). Researchers have argued that the structuring of learning situations in ways that take into account and value teacher students' initiatives, opinions, and experiences fosters agency (Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Teacher education further supports agency through opportunities for students to transform and cross the traditional teacher-student boundaries, in which the teacher is the authority and expert and the students are novices at the receiving end of information (Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Emotional safety without any threats concerning personal integrity also serves as an important factor in group-learning contexts (Eteläpelto & Lahti, 2008).

Based on these findings on teacher students' agency, and in line with the sociocultural, social cognitive, and life-course notions on agency presented earlier, in the present study agency is defined as teacher students' possibilities and resources to influence their studies, pursue goals, make choices, and act autonomously and responsibly (e.g. Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010, 2011).

### **3 Aims, Data, and Methods of the Study**

The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate teacher students' agency in their first-year studies. As the main interest was how the practices of the teacher education unit foster students' agency development, this study focused more on the resources and constraints encountered in the learning environment than on the students' individual resources. We address this interest with the first two research questions. As a pilot study, we also wish to critically consider the appropriateness of our selected methodology (cf. van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2002) leading to question three. The specific questions of the study were:

1. what kind of agency do teacher students experience in their first-year small group studies?
2. what kind of resources and restrictions do they perceive as supporting and constraining their agency?
3. how suitable is a mixed methods approach as a means of data collection?

### **3.1 Data Collection**

The data were collected in the spring of 2013 in one department of Finnish teacher education. Participants were first-year teacher education students. The data for this article collected during the pilot study consist of students' interviews ( $n = 2$ ) and written self-reflections ( $n = 3$ ). The more extensive data collection for the doctoral study includes twenty-five interviews, seven written self-reflections, and a questionnaire to approximately 135 students. The five student participants in the pilot study all volunteered to participate in the interviews and written self-reflections. The interviewed students belonged to one small group and those who wrote the self-reflections belonged to another small group. The interviews and written self-reflections consisted of open-ended questions that focused on the students' experiences and perceptions of agency in their small group studies, which constitute a major part of their first-year course work in education (a total of twenty-five credits divided into five courses with lectures in the large auditoria, small group meetings and one supervised practice period). After being accepted to the program, the students are assigned to stable small groups of approximately sixteen students (with some exceptions, e.g., students with prior studies). The same teachers lead the small groups throughout the whole academic year. The small group teacher quite autonomously leads the small group, and, thus, decides the specific contents and the teaching and learning methods quite freely. A shared assumption behind this small group approach, however, is that it allows learning to be structured in such way that it activates the student participants rather than being teacher-centered and teacher-led. Students are expected to commit to the group and be present in all of the meetings.



In this pilot study the interviews and written self-reflections served as two alternative ways to gather data. We were particularly interested to see what kind of information these two different forms of data collection produced and whether both forms of data should be used in the main data collection phase. The themes included in the interviews and written self-reflections were related to teacher students' career choices, earlier school experiences, perceptions of themselves as university students, and goals and plans for their studies and future work life. The interviews and self-reflections included identical themes, although some of the questions were shortened or merged in the written self-reflections as it was not possible to ask all of the same questions as in the interviews. In both methods, however, the students were asked to tell or write about instances when they had experienced agency in their studies and what supported or restricted it. The students were encouraged to talk or write about their own perceptions in their own words with sufficient time and space to express their thoughts as freely as possible. The two interviews lasted forty-nine minutes and fifty-six minutes, respectively. When we transcribed the interviews and converted the written self-reflections into the same written format (font size twelve, line spacing one), the lengths of the transcribed interviews were eleven and twelve pages, and the written self-reflections were two, three, and five pages (including the questions and a short instruction).

During the pilot phase, different question formats were also trialed with the aim of ascertaining what kind of questions opened the way for the student participants to most freely share their perspectives. On this basis, the word "agency" appeared in some of the questions posed to the students and the first author who conducted the interviews explained to the students what was meant by the term "agency". Our findings and observations relating to the methodological choices in the pilot will be discussed further in the results section.

### **3.2 Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data followed the principles of narrative analysis by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998). In this study, "narrative" refers to any spoken or written discourse in which individuals have an opportunity to talk about their experiences in their own words (Heikkinen, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1995). In the interviews and written self-reflections, the students told stories about what they thought about themselves, their school experiences, and their agency in their teacher education studies.

We applied the *holistic-content* and the *category-content* analyses by Lieblich et al. (1998) in line with the twofold interest in individual students' agency as a narrative whole, as well as manifestations of agency shared by the participants. The first phase of the analysis

followed the guidelines of the *holistic-content* analysis, in which a person's story is considered as a whole (Lieblich et al., 1998). The analysis started with reading the transcribed interviews and written self-reflections (subsequently referred to as stories) several times and getting acquainted with each teacher student's story individually. Then, a summary was written of each student's original story, aiming to capture their essential components. At this point interpretations were also made, but the interpretations were kept separate from the narrative summaries.

In the second phase, the analysis of the narrative summaries continued by applying the principles of *categorical-content* analysis, in which the story is divided into parts and sections that belong to different categories (Lieblich et al., 1998). We focused on the incidences of students describing experiences of agency—its resources and constraints. The theoretical perspectives of agency and the prior set research questions guided the analysis in this phase, but the analytical strategy remained open to themes raised as significant by the students, and these were taken into account. We highlighted the episodes (sentences or larger units) in which students discussed agency and examined similarities and differences. This analysis resulted in categories illustrating the diverse forms of agency that teacher students experienced in their studies, resources supporting agency, and factors restricting students' agency.

The holistic approach was a meaningful starting point for examining teacher students' agency and an integral part of getting acquainted with the data. This present chapter, however, does not present this phase of the holistic-content data analysis as the small sample size of the pilot cannot be considered representative of teacher students' agency. Furthermore, describing the individual story of each participant raises concerns about anonymity with the small population of students. The results presented below, therefore, concentrate on the categories constructed through the categorical-content analysis. The results section further discusses the methods that we chose to examine and analyse teacher students' agency in the pilot phase.

## **4 Results**

Section 4.1 describes how teacher student agency manifested in their studies in answer to our first research question. Section 4.2 addresses what kind of factors supported and restricted teacher students' agency. Section 4.3 discusses how one form of teacher students' agency manifestation was bounded with contextual factors, and how this, in turn, affected

student agency. The third research question is answered in section 4.4, which critically considers the mixed methods data collection used in this pilot study.

#### **4.1 Teacher Students' Agency Manifestations**

The manifestations of teacher students' agency in the written self-reflections and interviews can be conceptualised along two main themes: agency as *self-realisation* and agency as *influencing and participation*. Agency as self-realisation manifested in students' wishes to develop meaningful study paths for themselves and to achieve personally important goals. Agency as influencing and participating manifested in students' experiences of meaningful actions and participation in their learning community. When we considered each teacher student's individual story holistically, one of these agency manifestations was typically more prominent than the other. However, all students mentioned both kinds of agency manifestations, and, thus, we could not classify students as exercising only one form of agency or representing only one category.

##### **4.1.1 Agency as Self-Realisation**

For some of the teacher students it appeared important to be able to create their own study paths and to achieve goals that were meaningful for them. They were determined in pursuing their goals and making plans for achieving what they wanted:

*STUDENT 1: I study mainly for myself, and I make studying as fitting for myself as possible – – I participate only as much as I'm interested, and so far it has worked out fine.*

*STUDENT 2: At the moment my goal is to complete my master's degree in four years. Together with my personal curriculum supervisor we have made a plan which I believe I can follow.*

Students emphasizing agency as self-realisation tended not to participate in student activities, which they perceived as less important, and they rather concentrated on things that they experienced as worthwhile and valuable for furthering their own goals. Thus, their agency manifested in their focused actions aiming to realise what they wanted from their studies within the timetable they had set for themselves.

##### **4.1.2 Agency as Influencing and Participation**

Another theme manifesting agency in the teacher students' accounts of their first-year studies was actions and relationships within the learning environment, most typically in the

stable small groups. These narratives focused on participation and influencing one's environment rather than pursuing and reaching individual goals. Within this category we distinguished three different themes: steps towards change, active involvement in group practices, and intentional participation in students' collective actions.

Some of the teacher students took steps towards change in their learning environment as they actively made initiatives in their study context. Students' initiatives aimed, for example, at changing the course of activities, but sometimes they also transformed traditional teacher-student boundaries (cf. Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011).

*STUDENT 4: . . . if a lecturer seems to have forgotten to arrive, I am usually the one who calls them and says, "You should be here. Can you come and give us a lecture!" . . . [laughing]*

*STUDENT 5: . . . if the teacher has intended to move forward to the next topic in class, I may have said, "We were not completely finished here yet. We would like to go through this more closely," and then we may have spent more time on the topic.*

In the small groups, teacher students' agency manifested, for example, as participating actively in the group situations:

*STUDENT 2: The small group has promoted my agency, and I have utilised situations by taking a stand, telling my opinion, discussing, sharing thoughts, and listening to others.*

Some students talked a lot about their small group and the experiences the group had gone through together. These experiences seemed very important for them, and agency manifested in the ways the group members shared responsibilities and managed challenges or difficulties in the group.

*STUDENT 4: . . . we had a kind of a shared hardship in the beginning, from which we started to build our joint journey. And at that point it felt a lot like we got to influence things . . .*

Some teacher students also described participating in wider student collectives at the university level with the aim of influencing joint issues benefitting all students. They were involved, for example, in the activities of the student union or other student-initiated group activities tackling issues impeding studies.

*STUDENT 3: I started in the board of our student organisation this year, and through that I have gotten to the bottom of things, and I have been able to influence things.*

*STUDENT 4: . . . there is this group [–] which offers different perspectives to these studies, and there I've had the experience that I've been able to find out about things that I have wondered about . . .*

## **4.2 Resources and Constraints for Teacher Students' Agency**

The participants of the study described various resources in the learning environment that supported their agency. The resources fostering agency included opportunities for influence and emotional safety experienced in the small group activity. Participants considered other student members of the small group as well as the teachers pivotal in supporting one's agency. Teacher students also experienced some restrictions for their agency. The restrictions seemed to be the absence of the resources; when students did not have opportunities to influence or lacked emotional safety, they felt that their agency was restricted.

### **4.2.1 Opportunities for Influence and Emotional Safety as Resources**

Teacher students described various opportunities to influence and make choices in their studies, for example, to have a say in the selection of the modes of studying in the small groups, or in constructing the study paths for themselves. Teacher students' autonomous learning was supported, and their opinions were heard.

*STUDENT 1: I think that I can choose quite freely how I construct my studies, and I have a surprisingly clear picture of my studies in my mind.*

*STUDENT 2: Our opinions have been heard, and we have been given responsibility for planning our own learning . . .*

Emotional safety was found to be a highly important factor for supporting teacher students' agency. Students experienced the familiar peer group as an emotionally safe community allowing one to make initiatives and express opinions freely without fear of disapproval or exclusion.

*STUDENT 5: . . . if, on the other hand, there is that quite familiar group, it's probably easier – to express some kind of a wish or a comment when at least you don't feel like you get murderous looks immediately . . .*

*STUDENT 4: . . . in the small group that issue has been unraveled, and it has been discussed. There an opportunity was given to do that, and there you know that you won't be rejected.*

Students also perceived their teacher as a significant source of support for agency. Students received two different modes of support from the teacher. The teacher contributed to building an emotionally safe learning environment, but the teacher could also positioned students as experts whose opinions do count by breaking the traditional authority relationship (cf. Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011).

*STUDENT 4: . . . being interested in our opinions and valuing our views. Like when you think about the small group, there [the teacher] made it clear right away that it [the group] is for us, and that our opinions are the ones that count the most there.*

*STUDENT 5: . . . there is clearly that kind of an atmosphere between the teacher and the students where you can easily offer ideas to the teacher – of course the teachers have some kind of an idea of how they are going to proceed, but you have been able to influence it quite well.*

#### **4.2.2 Restricted Opportunities and Lack of Emotional Safety as Constraints**

Teacher students also described some restrictions for their agency that seemed to contradict the supporting factors. Some students felt that the curriculum course definitions were too strict, which, in turn, restricted students' opportunities to influence courses. Teacher students experienced restricted opportunities to have an influence when the contents and means of studying were defined beforehand.

*STUDENT 4: . . . when the rules are what they are, so that whatever the curriculum says will be covered during the course, and you can't really divert from it. If a task is intended to be taken then you have to do it. And it is a guiding principle for the teacher and for the students. Most probably if the things that are done during the course are precisely defined in the curriculum, it really restricts how the students are able to influence the contents of the course.*

Some students also perceived the opportunities to influence as superficial rather than real:

*STUDENT 3: The university seemingly encourages influencing, but if you seize something, the Faculty of Education, for example, is not always even willing to talk, but says "no" with lousy arguments.*

The lack of emotional safety also restricted teacher students' agency. Students felt that in some learning environments their opinions were not wanted, and if they questioned or challenged something they would be labelled as difficult. Students did not feel safe to express their opinions in an unfamiliar environment with people they did not know.

*STUDENT 4: . . . we are all first-year students, so nobody wants a reputation like, "That is a very difficult person," or something like that. So the situation would be quite different if we were asked what we want.*

*STUDENT 5: . . . like if I would be taking a course with, for example, fifth-year teacher students, of whom I don't know anyone, it's not in any way an unsafe environment, but I wouldn't feel comfortable to open my mouth . . .*

#### **4.3 The interplay between student agency and structures: studying as autonomous learning versus externally-guided passing of course work**

Teacher students' agency in relation to their own learning manifested as self-directed activity, but it was, however, bounded by contextual factors. Many of the students aspired to learn things that they perceived as important for a teacher's job, and they expressed high motivation and enthusiasm regarding their studies. These notions reflected intent on studying to learn, not just achieving outcomes that would seem favorable to outside authorities (cf. Engle & Faux, 2006).

*STUDENT 5: . . . so that as much as possible of the things that I think are important would stay in my mind.*

*STUDENT 4: . . . in some of the courses where we have had group work I have felt that I want to take care of these properly, and usually those have then really been taken care of properly. And by doing so, I have gotten the most out of them.*

*STUDENT 3: . . . for those courses that interest me I study better than what is required.*

*STUDENT 2: The studying has been really meaningful and inspiring. I have never been this motivated to study and learn. I feel that I'm in the right field.*

Along with experiences of agency in relation to learning, however, the students also had experiences of boring and meaningless modes of studying, which restricted their motivation and reduced the ownership of their learning. In these accounts the students perceived the

teachers as outside authorities who were also responsible for motivating students and providing tasks. When the students did not experience courses as useful, they adapted to what the teachers had planned.

*STUDENT 3: As a university student I'm very motivated, but mainly when the teacher of the course and the modes of study are meaningful and functional. Boring, dull lectures and equally useless small group sessions do not motivate to study but mainly frustrate and irritate . . .*

*STUDENT 5: Of course there are also courses which you run through so and so because you feel that you don't benefit anything from them. You just sort of go and study there somehow.*

One student's account suggested that the root of unmotivating or tedious course work (with respect to the lectures linked to the small group studies) seemed to lie in the mutual interaction between the students and their learning environment:

*STUDENT 4: . . . the feeling that probably represents it the best is when there is a kind of a collective numbness during a lecture, where nobody bothers to answer the questions and there aren't really questions presented either. You sit there because you have to.*

In these lectures the learning environment did not activate students or involve them in actively constructing their learning. Students reacted to these situations by adapting and passively carrying out the courses, even though they were not happy with the situation. It seemed that when the students were not given authority and possibilities to construct knowledge in meaningful ways, they also did not feel accountable for their learning (cf. Engle & Faux, 2006).

#### **4.4 Interviews and Written Self-Reflections as Informative Data**

The interviews and written self-reflections had different kinds of benefits in the data collection. With the interviews, it was possible to gather richer and more detailed data than with the written self-reflections. In other words, the data gathered in the interviews was more extensive than in the written reflections. The written texts, however, allow participants to write about their experiences more privately, rather than publically discussing them face-to-face with the researcher. The more private context of a written account might lead to a more truthful story, possibly making it easier to share experiences (Tuovinen, 2014). Furthermore, we suggest that the different forms of expression allow for variation in the participants'



personalities and also agency might be demonstrated more when there are different kinds of possibilities to participate in the study.

The interview and essay framework for the more extensive study have been carefully reconsidered in the light of the findings following the pilot. Through the pilot we discovered that the students describe agency in multidimensional ways. This finding has led to a more complex definition of agency for the next phases of this research project. Before the pilot, agency was mainly understood as students' possibilities to influence, make choices, take stances and also resist prevailing practices in their learning environment. Through the analysis and results of the pilot presented above, the understanding of teacher students' agency was enriched to cover also the students' "inner agency" primarily comprising agency as self-realisation. "Inner agency" might not appear as visible action in the learning environment contrary to, for example, influencing or resisting. However, it is an important form of students' agency, and, thus, it will be considered in the next phases of the research project. Furthermore, through the analysis conducted in the pilot study we were concerned that using the term "agency" in some of the questions might overly guide students' thinking and answers. There were no clear indications that this did occur in the pilot study and as the results presented above indicate, the students described their agency in multidimensional ways despite the use of the word "agency" in some of the questions. Nevertheless, we decided to neither use the word "agency" in the main data collection in the questions that were posed to students nor to explain the term to the students to ensure that participant answers are not guided in any particular direction. In the doctoral study now underway, the data collection begins with broader questions for the teacher student to answer, narrowing the focus down when/if necessary by asking questions such as, "What is important for you in your studies?" or "Who or what is guiding your studies?" instead of asking directly when the student had experienced agency in his/her studies, as was done in the pilot phase.

In answer to our third research question, we can say that through the pilot study we found that both interviews as well as written self-reflections function well as research methods in investigating students' agency. Both methods appeared to create space for the participant voices to be clearly heard and the same themes rose from the students' stories despite the different data collection methods. Having written and spoken data, however, also created the possibility for the researcher to put the different forms of data into dialogue with each other providing a useful form of triangulation. Using these different methods together in the future, however, requires careful analysis of the different data. The different data formats can only be considered complementary if the researcher is aware of whether the data was

written or spoken. It is also important to ensure that the analysis process is transparent to others.

## 5 Discussion

This chapter focused on teacher students' experiences of their agency in the first year of their university studies. The study aimed at understanding the development and manifestations of teacher students' agency and how teacher education can support it. The analysis identified two main categories of student agency: (1) agency as *self-realisation* manifested in students creating meaningful study paths for themselves, and (2) agency as *influencing and participation* manifested in students taking initiatives and engaging in active participation in their learning environment. Teacher education supported teacher students' agency with opportunities to influence; to break the traditional, authoritative teacher-student relationship; and to have emotional safety in the learning environment. Limited opportunities to influence and the lack of emotional safety restricted students' agency.

The findings considering students' agency as influence and participation are, in particular, in line with the prior research arguing that individuals exercise agency when they influence, make choices, become responsible members of a learning group, and strive to reach inner goals instead of trying to produce outcomes expected by an external authority (e.g. Engle & Faux, 2006; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010, 2011; Rainio, 2008; Vähäsantanen, 2013). Students' agency as self-realisation may mean following one's own study path without strict adherence to the expected trajectory, and educators may less readily identify this kind of agency and, furthermore, less readily support it. As Vähäsantanen (2013, 91) has suggested, agency should be understood as an *individually varied phenomenon*, and, thus, agency among students is likely to take diverse forms and to go through transformations in time. Students whose agency manifests more as pursuing individual goals than, for example, as participating in collective actions might be considered passive in some learning situations, even though that is not the case, and the students nevertheless may act very purposefully towards their goals (cf. Vähäsantanen, 2013, 91). The findings of the present study call attention to diverse "agentic paths" of teacher students and how teacher education practices can support those paths. The ensuing doctoral research will follow up on these notions.

In accordance with Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2010, 2011; see also Engle & Faux, 2006), the present data suggest that teacher students' agency is supported when the students have opportunities to influence their studies and can engage in the roles of experts whose

knowledge and opinions are significant in the learning situations. The research found an emotionally safe atmosphere very important for students to be able to express their views and opinions freely (see also Eteläpelto & Lahti, 2008). Based on the present and earlier findings (Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010, 2011), it seems important for the development of agency that the traditional teacher-student boundaries are broken and transformed in teacher education, and the students are given recognition for their ideas and opinions as well as more authority and ownership over their own learning. The interplay between teacher students' experiences of agency and the ways in which education is structured was evident in situations when the students were not actively involved in constructing their own learning and consequently did not feel motivated. Students seemed to react to these situations by passively fulfilling the course requirements to ensure passing the course instead of striving to learn for intrinsic reasons.

These findings relating to the interplay between students' agency and their learning environment are in the heart of the pedagogical paradox presented earlier: how can teacher education support students' autonomy and agency in such ways that they will become agentic, autonomous, and responsible for their own learning, without some outside authority influencing them (Heikkinen et al., 2011)? Heikkinen et al. (2011, 109) have suggested that teacher educators should use *faded scaffolding* in order to support teacher students' autonomy. Also Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2014) have considered their findings of teacher students' agency in relation to the pedagogical paradox. In their study they found that teacher students' agency manifested as *reactivity* or *proactivity*. Reactivity occurs when students are dependent on others, for example, trying to meet others' expectations or expecting others to provide what is needed for learning. Proactivity, on the other hand, occurs when students recognise that they themselves have potential and something to give to others as well (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2014). Based on their findings, Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2014) have suggested that students' proactivity might have potential in solving the pedagogical paradox, as their findings illustrated that students' proactivity was promoted when the students felt they had something to give to others or could reach something important through their activities without any outside authority.

In line with Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate (2014), the results of this study suggest that when students' agency was not supported, they did not feel responsible for their learning. Teacher education practices that give students an active role are likely to support both their learning and agency, but it is important to utilise practices that develop students' responsibility for their own learning, so they do not rely solely on external motivators (see

also Engle & Faux, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2010, 2011; Rainio, 2008). As one student put it:

*STUDENT 4: It is a lot harder to take a reluctant attitude to those things which you have planned yourself [laughing]. You can't have a bad attitude then.*

The study had also some limitations, the small sample size being the most evident one. The five students who participated in the interviews and written self-reflections volunteered to participate and were only from two different small groups, which raises questions about the representativeness of the sample. Nevertheless, an important aim of this pilot study was to examine the appropriateness of the used methodology in investigating teacher students' agency in terms of the type of data collected and the questions posed to the participants. The findings from this pilot offer useful insights into teacher students' agency and for future research. Since conducting the pilot study, we have continued to gather data from class teacher education students, special education students, and students studying education and adult education. This new data includes twenty-five interviews, seven written self-reflections, and a questionnaire from approximately 135 students collected both in the beginning of their studies (autumn 2013) and close to the end of their first-year studies (spring 2014).

In the pilot, we discovered that the narrative approach holistically examining individuals' stories is a meaningful viewpoint in analysing teacher students' agency, but the small sample size did not enable that kind of analysis of students' stories (see Heikkinen, 2010; Lieblich et al., 1998; Polkinghorne, 1995). The idea behind using the narrative approach in researching agency is that a person's life cannot be divided into a series of disconnected events (Mackenzie, 2008). When investigating agency, a person's experiences should be considered holistically, also from their life-course point of view (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2014), as prior experiences are mirrored on the contemporary agency (e.g. Biesta & Tedder, 2007). This study focused mainly on the resources and constraints of agency that students encountered in their immediate learning environment, and one key challenge in the next phases of the study is to investigate how individual students with unique backgrounds, personalities, and goals interact with their learning environment and construct their agency. Thus, in the main data collection phase the narrative approach served as a starting point, and the aim was to collect richer narrative data from a large group of students. The questions aimed to be as open as possible, providing the students with as much space as possible to talk about the issues they viewed important. The

purpose is to analyse the students' stories holistically, taking into account the students' life history experiences in order to gain a better understanding of students' agency and all the factors affecting it. The narrative approach to agency may also prove meaningful for the students participating in the study; through telling stories about their agentic experiences people can understand their experiences and agency better, and, thus, storytelling can support their agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Ecclestone, 2007).

This pilot study was a starting point for ongoing research that focuses on the practices that support teacher students' agency. Through examining students' agency, we also aim to give our contribution to supporting the agency and well-being of future teachers as well as their pupils.

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