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## Article

# Staff Members' Professional Agency within the Staff Community and the Education Policies: Supporting Integration in Multicultural and Multilingual School Communities

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, increased diversity and migration have challenged school staff members' ways of working. This study aimed to identify the challenges faced by Finnish school staff in supporting students with migrant backgrounds, and to elaborate on how they enact professional agency toward these challenges. The data consist of 15 thematic interviews with staff members across various work positions in two Finnish lower secondary schools. Based on thematic analysis, the challenges within the staff community and the education policies were found to include the following: (1) the diversification of students makes tensions more visible in the staff community, and (2) inflexible education policies restrict support processes. In these challenges, staff members practiced professional agency via a focus on their own work level, relying on certain colleagues, and trusting their own professionalism, under strong autonomy tradition. However, outside of their own work level, staff members prefer to adapt to the conditions by compromising, and they seem have not strong participation in higher decision-making. As a conclusion, it would be valuable to resource time expressly for establishing new practices, strengthen head teachers' ability to promote a culture of shared leadership, while clarifying the boundaries of pedagogical autonomy, and facilitate the participation in higher decision-making.

**Keywords:** professional agency; autonomy; integration; students with migrant backgrounds; school community



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## 1. Introduction

In Finland and globally, schools are undergoing transformation, with increased diversification due to migration and mobility. Changes to school communities and curriculum reforms may also challenge the school staff's profession and working practices. Teachers, head teachers, and other staff in schools are expected to engage in professional learning throughout their careers and raise their awareness of policy environments and school cultures, including resources appropriate for these settings [1,2]. Overall, school staff members are expected to deal with emerging situations and complex challenges in teaching and learning, and this requires them to be agentic and proactive. In this study, we address current challenges encountered in Finnish school communities when supporting students with migrant backgrounds through the lens of professional agency. Professional agency is here understood as a behavioral phenomenon, that involves influencing, for example, decision-making and opinions expressed and developed by professional individuals in ways that affect their work [3].

Migration is a demanding and stressful process, as students and their families settle down in a new country, learn a new language, and adapt to new cultural practices, or

even to a new belief system [4]. These challenges also concern school staff, considering integration as a two-way process that requires mutual involvement, learning, adjustment, and the negotiation of positions and responsibilities, and leads to changes on the part of both migrants and natives [5,6]. At the same time, we understand the inadequacy, normativity and politicization of the conceptualization of integration commonly applied in academia and public discussion, where no consensus exists regarding its definition or how it should be measured [7]. In the school context, the difficulties of integration are informed by the following: (1) students with migration backgrounds appear to have difficulty advancing through mainstream education, and are at higher risk of dropping out [8]; (2) according to the OECD's PISA survey (2015), the proportion of low-achieving migrant students exceeds that of native-born students in most participating European countries, even when control for socioeconomic status is applied [9]; and (3) students with migration backgrounds may experience bullying and peer rejection for deviating from the majority group, for example, due to language, appearance or behavior [10]. Previous research also indicates that teachers may lack the proper training or support needed to deal with diversity in schools, and teachers in Finland have expressed a need for further training to meet the demands of cultural diversity [11]. The training could address, classroom management schemes [12] and staff members' pedagogical language knowledge and collaboration, e.g., [13], since these have been seen to play a significant role in supporting students' academic performance. However, it is recognized that school reform tends to progress slowly [14].

Even though professional agency has recently been highlighted with respect to developing and transforming school cultures and shared practices [15], research on school staff's professional agency is scarce from the perspective of a multicultural school community. Furthermore, most research on professional agency in schools has focused on teachers, without encompassing other members of school communities [16]. The present study therefore advanced the following research questions: (1) What kinds of challenges do school staff members describe regarding supporting students with migrant backgrounds? and (2) How do staff members practice agency when facing these challenges?

## 2. Theoretical Perspectives on Professional Agency

With respect to professional agency, we adopt a subject-centered sociocultural approach [3]. In this approach, professional agency is seen as being in control of one's behavioral actions, such as making intentional choices based on the subjects' reflective thinking, interpretations, and motivations arising from identity commitments [17], rather than as an individual characteristic or capacity [18]. We also consider that agency is based on past experiences, is directed toward future goals, and can change over time, as well as become resourced and restricted by work environments [19].

Agency is influenced by power relations, and these appear in both official and unofficial spaces, and in both discourses and structures [3]. Hence, professional agency is shaped by interaction when staff members negotiate and renegotiate the conditions and the content of their work, and also when they exert actual influence on professional communities and the direction of education policies [17]. Professional agency can be enacted in various ways, such as by developing new practices, but also refusing to reform and limiting work tasks. In addition to its active forms, professional agency can also be manifested in more hidden ways, or even be bounded, for example, by attitudes or institutional systems [16].

Recent studies have shown that professional agency is notably practiced within classrooms and work communities in developing individual learning pathways and both individual and collective work practices such as educational reforms, the content of one's work, ways of working, and purposeful learning environments with students, e.g., [20–23]. For example, Eteläpelto et al. (2015) found that Finnish primary teachers were able to practice their agency by developing pedagogical practices within the classroom, but they had fewer opportunities to develop shared pedagogical and cultural practices in work communities. Here, one must bear in mind that teachers can have different ways of influencing and

developing matters within their work and work community due to individual backgrounds and social scaffoldings [20,21].

Even though this study considers the professional agency of staff members in various positions, it is important to highlight the specific definition of teacher agency that has been stressed in the recent educational reform. School staff members' work is bounded by socio-cultural constraints (including the curricula, and power relationships with colleagues and management) and the resources available (including equipment and instructional methods), but depending on their agency, it is also recognized that they enact environments that create opportunities for changes [15,24]. Moreover, the professional agency of teachers is connected to many individual backgrounds (e.g., professional commitments) and social conditions (e.g., other people, the work community, and leadership practices) [3]. In particular, the role of the school leader has been seen as crucial for teachers' work in the schools: the head teacher can be both a resource for and a constraint on teachers' professional agency, both at individual and school levels, e.g., [20,22]. According to Toom et al. (2015) [25], the head teachers' role in promoting and restricting teachers' professional agency is crucial since leaders can (re)organize teachers' work at school, allocate resources to promote teachers' initiatives concerning pedagogical innovations, and restructure everyday work in classrooms and at school.

Professional agency in teachers' work further connects with their autonomy. Indeed, the concepts of agency and autonomy partially overlap, but autonomy is more closely linked to the notion of freedom from control, while agency depends on the availability of resources for developing the capacity to act. To simplify, whereas autonomy is understood as something that staff members have (professionalism in theory), agency is more something that they do (professionalism in practice). Thus, agency can be seen as autonomy put into action [26]. Moreover, according to self-determination theory, people feel they possess increased autonomy when they endorse the values and content of the policy decisions and documents that guide their work [27]. However, it should be noted that even though autonomy is seen as supporting staff members' professional development, job satisfaction, and commitment to work, it still is not sufficiently straightforward such that a lack of regulation would lead to higher professionalism [26]. Instead of developing increasingly innovative solutions to challenges, strong autonomy can strengthen individual work cultures and lead to using even less critical reflection in everyday choices [26,28]. Hence, commonly agreed rules can also facilitate the practicing agency by staff members [26,29].

According to an overview by Ukkonen-Mikkola and Varpainen (2020) [30], professional agency is crucial for navigating the challenges in teachers' work and the tensions emerging from the conflicts between contextual demands and individual priorities. The concept of professional agency refers to not only reacting passively to the challenges but also finding purposeful solutions to them from the perspectives of both students and professionals. This study sought to shed light on school staff members' professional agency in relation to the challenges that they experienced in supporting students with migrant backgrounds.

### 3. The Research Context Constructed by Finnish Educational Conditions and Policies

Research has recognized Finnish teachers' autonomy and tradition of trusted professionalism, e.g., [31]. The strong autonomy tradition is based upon the institutional, cultural, and historical context of the education system [26]. In the Finnish context this means pedagogical autonomy, including staff members' freedom to emphasize various goals and values in their decisions regarding the materials and methods to be used in supporting students [32].

In Finland, teacher education is a profession at master's degree level, and there is no tracking system for staff members' performance at work. Despite many educational changes, teachers' job descriptions in Finland are still firmly based on a compulsory teaching time (18–24 lesson hours per week, not including preparation and post-class work). The main guiding policy document is the National Core Curriculum of the Finnish National Agency for Education, which defines the aims and requirements of education. Addition-

ally, to specify the national version of the curriculum, every Finnish school has a local curriculum to which staff members can provide input [33].

Finnish legislation guarantees education for all Finnish residents, including those of migrant status. The National Core Curriculum for basic education highlights the importance of multilingualism and aims to support each student's linguistic and cultural identity, for example, by acknowledging also the students' mother tongues [34]. A three-step support system for learning, providing general, enhanced, and special needs support, applies to all students, see also [35]. In Finland, students with foreign language backgrounds receive special needs support more often than do native students. For instance, in 2015, the percentages were 11.8% (for students with foreign language backgrounds) compared to 5.8% (for native students) in comprehensive school (grades 1–9) [36].

Finnish schools are required to have a multi-professional welfare group, which is responsible for developing general welfare practices, for processing students' issues, and for agreeing on measures to be taken, the division of work, and follow-up. At a minimum, the school welfare group meets at the transition points of the various forms of support [34]. School welfare groups typically consist of the head teacher, the school psychologist, curator, school health nurse, special education teacher, relevant teacher, and, if necessary, other experts, along with the students' guardians. Targeted support for students with migrant backgrounds includes preparation instruction, instruction in Finnish or Swedish as a second language, instruction in the migrant's native language, and an appropriation for remedial teaching of students with migrant backgrounds [34]. More than 90% of students with a foreign language background attend instruction in Finnish or Swedish as a second language, and this constitutes the support used most often in Finland. As regards other support, in 2015 less than a fifth of foreign-language students attended preparation instruction, and about half attended teaching in their own mother tongue. Municipalities are under no obligation to arrange instruction in Finnish or Swedish as a second language, nor instruction of the migrants' native languages; nevertheless, the state encourages such instruction via an extra state grant for such services [36].

In practice, the numbers of students with migrant backgrounds and the stabilization of support practices vary across schools and cities in Finland, e.g., [37]; furthermore, the exhaustion of staff members inhibits the development of the school environment, e.g., [38,39]. According to Taajamo and Puhakka (2019), staff members are obliged to develop their own teaching practices while at the same time offering opportunities for collaboration and shared learning [40].

#### 4. Materials and Methods

This study formed part of a large research project called Teaching that Matters for Migrant Students: Understanding Levers in Scotland, Finland, and Sweden (TEAMS), funded by Nordforsk, 2020–2023. The aims of the project are to understand how schools and teachers can address barriers and create opportunities for migrant integration in schools, and help teachers and school leaders to meet the needs of migrant students. The study conducted in Finland received ethical approval from the Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of Jyväskylä.

The data consisted of 15 theme interviews with Finnish school staff members. The 15 staff members who participated (4 males, 11 women), varied in age and years of work experience. They had various work positions (some staff members had two overlapping roles), including management roles (head teachers and deputy leaders,  $n = 4$ ), subject teachers ( $n = 7$ ), special education teachers ( $n = 2$ ), and other specialist roles (e.g., psychologist, curator,  $n = 5$ ). For reasons of privacy, we do not specify the background information in a manner that could identify the persons in question.

Staff members were interviewed at the end of the 2021 spring term in two lower secondary schools (grades 7–9) located in large and middle-sized cities in Finland. In both schools, more than 10% of the students had a migrant background (first or second generation); hence, staff members were used to working with them. By comparison, the



average proportion of foreign-speaking students in Finnish comprehensive schools is less than 6% [36].

First of all, all staff members received a common invitation for the interview, followed by an individual invitation. The participants were informed on the purpose of the study, and all staff members who answered the invitations affirmatively were interviewed. Thematic interviews were used to obtain an in-depth understanding, e.g., [41]. Due to their semi-structured basis, interviews were shaped differently for each participant according to the topics they raised. The themes encompassed staff members' perceptions of their own work and pedagogy, experiences with students from various backgrounds, experiences regarding institutional practices, and tools for supporting students' learning and sense of belonging. The interviews lasted from 45 min to over two hours, and two of the interviews were conducted in two parts over different days. The transcribed data amounted to 353 pages (font size 12).

The interviews were analyzed via thematic analysis [42,43]. The coding was conducted with Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis program. The analytical process was conducted in three phases. The first phase comprised in-depth reading and preliminary coding of the data. During this phase, we obtained an overview of how staff members described their work as supporters of integration in a diverse school community. In the second phase of analysis, we re-read the interviews, and identified (as sub-themes) challenges related to the staff community and education policies. From this, we structured two overarching challenges (as main themes): (1) the diversification of students makes tensions more visible in the staff community, and (2) inflexible education policies restrict support processes. Table 1 at the end of this section illustrates the analytical process for the first research question, with examples.

**Table 1.** Examples of the analytical process for the first research question.

RQ1	Data Samples	Sub-Themes	Main Themes (Challenges)
Example 1	"I sent a long message to the head teacher about it, that now there are major conflicts surrounding mention of the N-word, and that I am sad on behalf of the staff due the fact that I think this is due to ignorance or a lack of understanding.—Because there was a coffee table situation, and there were frustrated and irritable comments from many colleagues about it —that this is a terrible hassle, even though it's not used for name-calling or as an insult, and then the same students can say: "Whore, shut up!"—which is why I felt that I can't be the one who says—[frustrated laughing] so I asked for [head teacher's name] to take a stand on it and we had a fairly short conversation where everyone joined in."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Professional competence varies in sensitive encounters involving diversity.</li> <li>- Discomfort regarding intervening in colleagues' work</li> <li>- Need for a shared discussion</li> </ul>	Challenge 1:  THE DIVERSIFICATION OF STUDENTS MAKES TENSIONS MORE VISIBLE IN THE STAFF COMMUNITY
Example 2	"Neither I nor the special education teacher even knew how the situation should be solved by the book.—When nothing was ever heard [from management level]—we then decided that we would go ahead as we are doing now, that this would be advantageous for all of us. We were obliged to find a solution.—But, even though there was a lot of unclarity in the information, the outcome was that the solution that we arrived at was workable, and it then received approval from all the necessary parties, even though it took time.—But there was a bit of a tense moment thinking whether we had now done something wrong."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The staff member feels that s(he) has insufficient knowledge to meet the students' special needs.</li> <li>- Support decisions take too long and/or include obscurities at management level.</li> </ul>	Challenge 2:  INFLEXIBLE EDUCATION POLICIES RESTRICT SUPPORT PROCESSES

Having identified the challenges, we delved more deeply into how staff members practiced professional agency in relation to the challenges. We focused attention on staff members' goals and fullness of their achievements, and then identified the most frequent ways of practicing agency, different operating levels, and the individual or other factors

that facilitated or impeded the practice of agency. Throughout, we employed triangulation by discussing our interpretations.

## 5. Results

The following sections are arranged according to the two main challenge themes identified from what staff members described when the topic of supporting students with migrant backgrounds was discussed. In both sections, we first present the challenge (Research Question 1) and then how staff members practiced professional agency when facing it (Research Question 2). A summary of the findings is presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Summary of findings.

<b>RQ1: Challenges</b>	<b>RQ2: How Staff Members Practice Professional Agency</b>
<p>1. THE DIVERSIFICATION OF STUDENTS MAKES TENSIONS MORE VISIBLE IN THE STAFF COMMUNITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disproportion between old job descriptions and new responsibilities</li> <li>- Sense of unfairness regarding resource-sharing</li> <li>- Need for practices that encourage everyone to join in pedagogical discussions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Professional agency was practiced mainly by compromising, and by relying on “key persons”/like-minded colleagues. There was also evidence of agency practiced by “desisting” and “fighting”.</li> <li>- The practice of agency was focused on one’s own work level, with only rare attempts to change shared practices permanently at the whole-school level.</li> <li>- Professional agency was protected but also restricted by a strong tradition of pedagogical autonomy. The boundary between shared guidelines and staff members’ own values appeared ambiguous in practical level.</li> </ul>
<p>2. INFLEXIBLE EDUCATION POLICIES RESTRICT SUPPORT PROCESSES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inflexible/long/ambiguous support processes at higher management level</li> <li>- Inadequate resources to create new collaboration practices</li> <li>- Too one-way informing with actors outside the school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- School leaders are often contacted regarding policy concerns; while awaiting a response, staff members rely on “key person” colleagues and their own professionalism.</li> <li>- The practice of agency was focused on one’s own work/school level. To remedy the deficiencies stemming from inflexible policies, staff members offer consultation work, agree on practices for acute situations, seek support from L1 teachers variably, focus their effort on the turn of the semesters, and encourage student participation.</li> <li>- Professional agency is restricted by the higher management level. School staff members may not participate significantly in higher education policy-making.</li> </ul>

### *5.1. Tensions in the Staff Community Are Addressed by Compromising, and by Relying on “Key Persons” and Like-Minded Colleagues*

*RQ1: Challenge 1—The diversification of students makes tensions more visible in the staff community*

Under hectic conditions with insufficient resources, the diversification of students rendered tensions in the staff community more visible. Firstly, if one’s interests had consequences for the work of other, a colleague’s differing interests (involving traditional basic work, holistic well-being, or developmental work) might be seen as avoiding work or focusing on insignificant issues. Participants from all work positions viewed the teachers’ pay system is no longer appropriate as such for estimating working time and workload in the changed school environment, given that the compulsory teaching time did not take into account increased responsibilities. Subject teachers and head teachers in particular expressed a sense of inadequacy. Moreover, according to the head teachers, the system should be reorganized to enable a strength-based approach in work arrangements. The aim would be to meet students’ needs more diversely and to decrease the burden on “key

persons" (including school leaders, special education teachers, L2 teachers and/or staff members in the social work field).

Secondly, amid intensifying expectations regarding differentiation, the requirements on inclusivity affected staff unequally. The staff members experienced that extra support (involving, e.g., teaching assistants and special education teachers) was offered automatically for the teaching of mathematics, and for compulsory foreign languages. Extremely limited support resources were available for the teaching of the students' own mother tongues, apparently reflecting a lower appreciation of the subject. There were cases where students did not receive the same level of support for their mother tongue lessons as for other lessons, and the attendance was suspended on the grounds that the subject was optional. Furthermore, according to some participants, staff members' working years and even personal characteristics could play an unfair role in decision-making (regarding aspects such as who taught students with the most challenging needs).

Thirdly, staff communities would need practices that would encourage everyone to join in pedagogical discussions. Staff were wary of challenging colleagues' expressions (e.g., assimilation or derogatory ethnic expressions) or pedagogical choices (e.g., using inappropriate humor), even if the instances in question diverged from general educational values. Participants considered that staff members had become accustomed to the students' diverse backgrounds over time, but they viewed staff members' professional competences as variable in sensitive encounters involving diversity. This variability could largely remain hidden due to the general assumption of a non-discriminatory school staff and the shared principles of the National Core Curriculum. A challenging factor was that even when professional development support was on offer, it might not reach those persons most in need of it.

I still feel it important that the staff should have more sensitivity training so that they start to understand diversity. Sexual or cultural, or whatever.—After all, we all work according to our own values, and these are what lead us. Even if we represent the values of the school and the ethical values of this work, our own values come up sometimes, like a cloven hoof. No matter how much we may think "we all know that now" and "we are already accustomed to that" and "we are not racists and we don't think anything like that".

Pedagogical discussion was missed especially regarding challenging behavior from boys with migrant backgrounds. It was recognized that these boys would need longer discussions with adults, but staff members were seen to have different ways of handling the situations. Furthermore, differing pedagogical views were held on fundamental questions regarding the extent to which staff members should be flexible in seeking to meet students' needs, and the relationship hierarchy that should exist between a staff member and a student.

If you go through the case too promptly, then they [students with migrant backgrounds] think that it is not satisfactorily processed. They have not been heard and they are not trusted. So maybe there should be more patience on the part of some teachers to go through those situations. But on the other hand, when the everyday life of the teacher is so hectic—then I understand the fact that you cannot go through the case five times and give reasons and negotiate. So, is it prejudice, or is it inflexibility, or is it the reality of the work that compels this?

Cultural practices are no longer stressed about so much, but now maybe there is more consideration of language skills.—Maybe cultural differences have become more visible, since we have had these really strong boys.—But I emphasize that there is much less of a focus on problems than before.—The question is what kind of teacher and supervisor you are, and how you encounter those students.—Is it the kind of encounter where both of you give each other something?

*RQ2: Professional agency is practiced mainly by compromising, and by relying on "key persons" and like-minded colleagues*



In all work positions, the most visible tendency in practicing professional agency was that of compromise. The practice of agency focused mostly on one's own work, and there were fewer attempts to change practices at whole-school level or higher management levels. In preference to raising tense issues for shared discussion, staff members relied on the support of "key persons". Staff members did not believe that engagement followed from coercion. At school level, it seemed to be easier to accept old norms silently or after making a guarded suggestion, then to follow one's own orientation, either on one's own or with close colleagues. Staff members also engaged in deeper pedagogical discussion with those who had a similar approach in their work.

The acceptance of current tensions was justified by mutual trust that everyone was trying to do their best for the students in a challenging environment, and that the frustration of colleagues was not very visible to students. If students reported on cases perceived as unfair, staff members experienced more pressure for shared pedagogical discussion; nevertheless, they still chose their words carefully to avoid conflicts and stigmatization, or to prevent the topic of inclusive pedagogy from becoming annoying. Furthermore, there was a tendency for difficult topics to lead to postmortems "in corridors". By contrast, actual discussion was narrowed down to one-way informing, for instance, in a case involving use of the N-word (which was not used for a directly racist purpose but related to an old newspaper clipping used as lesson material). All this refers, that the tradition of pedagogical autonomy is not only strongly respected, but also that one's pedagogical choices can be understood as too bound up with one's own personality and values, even when one might be acting the role of official authority.

A lot of this kind of teenagers' ingenuity [chuckles] is released in the staff room, and sometimes pretty rude language is used.—But when the talk is about something that is related to the religion or culture of migrant youth, it more easily jumps to the ear, even if what you hear is the same phenomenon of frustration that all of us let out sometimes.—At times I feel I am stigmatized [laughing]—I think that if I'm the one who always talks about these things, then I may not always be taken seriously enough when somebody is thinking: "[the interviewee's own name] always defends those migrants."—I think that in certain cases it is important that the head teacher should be the one who conveys the message to the staff.

Regarding such challenges, leadership practices come to the fore. Head teachers were expected to set guidelines for pedagogical principles, even if contradictions could arise between the head teachers' guidelines and other staff members' versions (as when staff perceived excessive that the head teacher contacted the police, even if the staff members themselves just lacked sufficient resources to solve challenges with students and to create more unified practices at whole-school level). However, the data show that even head teachers could be reluctant to intervene in other staff members' pedagogical autonomy. The leaders were conscious of staff members' workloads, and they seemed to avoid pedagogical demands that might be seen as limiting the staff members' autonomy, and further, as threatening their motivation, coping, and developing. Instead, the leaders preferred recommendations to balance tensions. In fact, they would have liked to share leadership more with colleagues.

Finally, there was some evidence of practicing agency also by "desisting" (settling for the current situation) and by "fighting" (creating new shared practices, despite the tensions). A tendency towards "desisting" often appeared regarding developmental work on school practices and their own professionalism (which might require, e.g., attending peer support groups or supervision on the work) because, despite intrinsic motivation and experiences of the benefits, there was no time, or no payment allocated for these in an already exhausting environment. Barriers to shared discussion could also arise when the head teacher's attitude was perceived as discomfort or uninterested (as indicated, e.g., through a focus on purely economic issues, or disregarding staff members' expressions of concern via the job security software). On the other hand, when the practice was "fighting", participants

described that tense negotiations demanded an exceptionally strong professional identity, collaboration, fearlessness in conflicts, knowledge of policies and practices, confidence from years of work, argumentation skills, and even “personal chemistries”, which might mean congruent interaction styles.

It’s been fun to notice 10 years later, that now those things [language awareness] are there in the curriculum. And now that they exist, so that no one remembers it anymore, or I don’t remember, how these bridges were crossed.—Now I feel as if, now that I’ve been at work for a long time, someone listens to you, and you can get those matters heard, so your own professional identity or professional confidence is much stronger. You can assess much better what is worth presenting and trying to take forward.

### *5.2. Inflexible Education Policies Are Compensated by Relying on “Key Persons” and on One’s Own Professionalism*

#### *RQ1: Challenge 2—Inflexible education policies restrict support processes*

The participants recognized several policy barriers inhibiting support for students with migrant backgrounds. Firstly, the processing time for special needs cases was viewed as taking too long at management level, and there could be inflexibility and obscurities in the processes. For instance, obtaining the necessary diagnoses for L2 students to receive sufficient support was perceived as challenging, and so also was finding a suitable further study place for every student, despite the extension of compulsory education in Finland. The current support system was also considered problematic when a student was “forcibly” moved forward through the entirety of the lower secondary school. Some staff members expressed a need for a system where students would be allowed to be “drop to the bottom” in lower secondary school, where staff members would still have the possibility of raising them up again before it was too late from the system’s perspective.

There are those [students] that we carry along and hope that they can get through the system, and we hope that their interest in that sort of life would awake at some point.—We had these students who rely really strongly on certain people, such as special education teachers . . . and then they are no longer able to cope in the upper secondary level, and you can’t catch them.

Secondly, the administrative structures did not allocate enough time to creating new collaboration practices. The importance of knowledge exchange was highlighted by the evidence that many subject teachers perceived that they do not have enough skills to meet the students’ special learning needs or behavior. According to the staff members, bigger changes in collaboration practices would need more time to become established in everyday working life, even if there was interest in them. There were regular meetings organized (e.g., for the whole staff, theme teams, grade teams, and development teams) but, in facing challenges in dealing with students’ various backgrounds, staff members desired more shared time to discuss about “real needs” and “the things that were on their minds”, instead of informing, and strictly pre-planned agendas.

Maybe the culture of co-teaching is a little undeveloped because we can’t do it; we don’t have the resources for it, and there’s no time to plan it. So, we experienced teachers often feel that we are there [in the classroom] rather as helpers, like teaching assistants. And subject teachers do not know what our [special education teachers] role is. Overall, we are both very experienced here. We feel that we can differentiate and teach the target audience better in a small group than in a class, where we just whisper and sneak around.

By head teachers, pedagogical discussion was considered a core element of pedagogical leadership, essential in supporting staff members’ ability to cope and in developing assessments of learning in the school community. However, the head teachers indicated that too much of their working time was dedicated to various sorts of reporting. Like-

wise, workload was reported to impede exchanging support ideas with other schools even though staff members would be motivated to it.

Thirdly, in multi-professional collaboration (e.g., with family counselors, child psychiatrists, and child protection services), school staff opposed the dissemination of students' personal data without good reasons. However, holistic support was perceived as challenging in the absence of information about how processes were advancing, whether the student or family had received support, and what school staff could do better. Furthermore, staff members indicated that they were unable to receive help with the major traumas experienced by students, since such traumas were perceived as too major for the school psychologist to deal with, or else it was deemed impossible to offer support due to the language barrier.

*RQ2: Professional agency is practiced mostly by relying on "key persons" and on one's own professionalism, while still staying within the policy framework*

Staff members' agency existed mainly within the current education policy framework, and school staff members were unlikely to participate significantly in higher education policy-making. When staff members attempted to influence matters at a higher level, such attempts were focused on individual student cases or on the staff's exhausting workload. This could mean that institutional autonomy and participation at higher levels was not perceived as being such a crucial part of the staff members' job, or that staff members did not believe that they could effect changes at that level. Such perceptions were probably reinforced by staff members' experiences in situations where their attempts had not succeeded, and where policies had been inflexible in individual cases, as illustrated below.

The local school policy is so inflexible that I have written all the way to the education department, about whether it could be discretionary when the family and the student find it really stressful to change schools. In the lower secondary school, we encounter bureaucracy.—Even if you send what ever letters to wherever, the answer is "No". And then I have to say—"I'm sorry, you are being forced to change schools." And then the guardian calls tearfully saying "Doesn't our boy get to continue, after it has been so hard and with so many changes in his life, and now there is something familiar and safe?"—So, I have to justify decisions that I think are completely stupid, and I have to create an unreasonably stressful situation for the student and the family.

When help was needed concerning policies, staff members frequently contacted head teachers and other leaders, who shared their policy knowledge, defined policy guidelines at the school level, and facilitated contacts inside and outside the school (e.g., with the police and the multicultural center). Staff members argued that strictly following policies is a guarantee of fairness without relying on "personal chemistry". Still, there were also a few exceptions from the education policy guidelines, where the head teacher did not care to follow higher regulations meticulously, and more possibilities became available (e.g., staff members could use their own cars to offer school trips without sufficient insurance).

Meanwhile, while waiting for confirmation of decisions from the high management level, staff members trusted their own professionalism and that of their closest colleagues in implementing the kind of support they considered best for the students. The data also indicated that staff members try to remedy deficiencies stemming from inflexible education policies at their own work/school level. For instance, special education teachers may devote more time to consultation work, and "key persons" may agree on communication practices for acute situations related to students' challenging behavior. Even though subject teachers and special education teachers mainly act on their own, Finnish schools also invest more effort in preparation at the beginning and end of school years, and teachers, and other entities have more frequent meetings at this point. However, collaboration depended greatly on individual staff members, notably regarding their use of support from L1 teachers (e.g., to assess students' learning difficulties, provide remedial teaching,

and help in meetings with guardians), who did not seem to have an integral role in the staff communities.

Overall, listening to the students' voices seemed to be understood as essential in the school community, for instance, regarding support decisions and ideas for school development. In addition, the data showed many examples of how students participated in solving conflicts between younger students. They also played an active role in solving conflicts with staff, both on their own initiative and at the request of staff members. Students' participation is indeed one aim of the Finnish National Core Curriculum, and it seemed that the concretely noted benefits strengthened engagement with that aim.

It was amazing when that 7th grade boy was talking to those 5th grade boys.—He said: "In the fall I would have beaten you too."—"But now, I just want to teach you, and now I'm going to tell you why it hurts our hearts if you use that word." And he was talking about the history of slavery, and he was talking about racism. And I had tears in my eyes, I was just trying to be . . . Somehow, he was trying to make them understand, saying: "It's not just a word for us, that you're insulting everything that black people have experienced if you use that word". And then the 5th grade boys listened and said: "I'm sorry, we didn't realize that it feels like that" and "Now that you explained it, I don't want to use that word anymore". It was such a touching moment.

There was discussion with the students about how they, in their younger years, advise teachers now. And just by having a conversation we will learn to understand the matter. Meaning, that it is important for us to hear the message that the word really offends them a lot, and now, we have once again learned and heard that message.

## 6. Discussion

This study revealed the challenges faced by school staff members in a multicultural and multilingual school community, both at the staff community and the education policy level. The study further shed light on the ways of practicing professional agency in supporting students with migrant backgrounds, but also constituting a two-way integration process. According to the findings show, the diversification among the students made the inner tensions within the staff communities more visible. The staff members recognized several policy barriers that acted against support for students with migrant backgrounds. As noted also by Eteläpelto et al. (2015) [20], Finnish school staff members practice professional agency via a focus on their own work level, relying on like-minded and "key persons" as colleagues, and trusting their own professionalism, under strong autonomy tradition. However, outside their own work level, staff members prefer to adapt to the conditions by making compromises, and they seem not to have strong participation in higher decision-making. Hence, in line with Wermke and Höstfält (2014) [44], our study shows that staff members can possess strong autonomy in one field and weak autonomy in another. The findings further suggest that current policies and practices as such do not meet the needs of increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse students; nor do they support staff members in coping with an increased workload—A point also discussed by Golnick & Ilves (2021) [38] and Saloviita & Pakarinen (2021) [39].

This study emphasizes the need to clarify the boundaries of pedagogical autonomy in the tensions experienced by the staff community, and to strengthen staff members' institutional autonomy at a higher level. Some staff members seemed to protect themselves via the justification of pedagogical autonomy, and such an approach can take the form of non-engagement in the face of the pressures of the work culture, as addressed also by Erss (2018) [26]. Thus, even though the autonomy tradition produces benefits, it also tends to preserve an unequal workload distribution, and the absence of shared engagement means that developmental work depends on the individual. In this sense, the strong tradition of pedagogical autonomy can be seen as not purely an enabling factor, since it can act as a

barrier to developing new ways of doing things in circumstances where the diversity of school communities demands change.

At the higher levels, staff members' knowledge concerning the policies that most restrict support for diverse students is not heard. Hence, it is contradictory that even though the professions of school staff are valued, narrow possibilities of the education policy field can direct the role of school staff to implementers rather than agents. The study raises questions, for instance, whether the pay system is suitable for current responsibilities, could education policies offer better possibilities for school staff to protect stability in the lives of young people, and concerning the content of subject teacher education in terms of whether there should be offered better skills for differentiation in teaching. By strengthening participation in higher decision-making, it might be possible to respond to the challenge of excessive delay in school culture changes, and to deal also with future barriers to staff members' agency.

This study had some limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, we are aware that the examination of professional agency in relation to the highlighted challenges could tend to emphasize a certain type of viewpoint in the study, despite our use of weightings produced by the participants. Secondly, the task of qualitative research is not generalized, and two schools and 15 interviewed staff members cannot be said to represent the fully layered and diverse nature of the broader reality. On the other hand, the interviewees did represent a broad range of work tasks, and in this sense, it can be claimed that the data represented the school community in a holistic manner. Thirdly, during the analysis, we were aware that the interviewees might have had different experiences in supporting students with migration backgrounds. Especially regarding the challenging issues likely to be raised, it should be noted that participants were aware of the general goals of the study, and to that extent there was an element of self-selection according to participants' own interests. Such a procedure runs the risk of leaving essential voices unheard. Despite the limitations above, we believe that overall, our analysis can be considered trustworthy. The main responsibility for the analysis lay with the first author of the article but the coding scheme and the analysis were discussed and modified collaboratively among research team members.

In conclusion, we would argue that in order to facilitate integration processes in school communities and school staff members' professional agency in supporting students with migrant backgrounds, there is a need to embark on three fundamental changes: (1) resource time for establishing new practices, by investigating possibilities for reshaping working time and job descriptions in the changing environment; (2) strengthen head teachers' ability to promote shared leadership, while also clarifying the boundaries between pedagogical autonomy and staff members' own values at the practical level; (3) facilitate the participation of school staff in higher decision-making. Pilot schemes along these lines would offer interesting grounds for further research.

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