FACULTY OF EDUCATION
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EXPLORING FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL AGENCY IN ROMANIAN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

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Aim: This research aims to explore how seven foreign language teachers in a few urban public secondary schools in Romania understand and enact their professional agency and how contextual factors support or constrain its achievement. The purpose is to understand the ways in which the participants' teaching philosophies and experiences inform their awareness and achievement of agency, what they perceive as the available contextual resources within contextual constraints, and how that reflects in their beliefs and professional aspirations.

Theory: The thesis relies on the ecological theoretical framework (Priestley et al., 2015), which enables an analysis of how contexts mediate the interplay of values, beliefs, and practices, shaping the agency of foreign language teachers.

Method: The narrative inquiry methodology is chosen to explore the participants' personal and professional experiences, through their stories. The semi-structured, in-depth Zoom interviews captured the FL teachers' views, experiences, and relationships. The narrative analysis and interpretation highlight the particular but also the general in these individual experiences, illustrated by relevant extracts from the participants' stories.

Results: Findings show that the teachers' primary resources for enacting professional agency was their ability to seek meaningful opportunities for professional development and build productive relationships in the classroom, school, and community. The teachers enacted proactive agency through resilience, responsibility, and commitment, materialised as compensatory actions to mitigate school shortages, support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and ensure students' academic development and language certification. Macro factors such as the underfunded centralised education system, national policies, and appraisal criteria combined with the demand for international language certification, mediate language teachers' professional agency, causing asymmetrical relationships, administrative chores, high accountability, competition between students, teachers, and schools, and social inequity. The teachers manifested reactive agency by complying with institutional requirements. The participants' critical evaluations and conflicted projections illustrate that their professional agency is intertwined with their identity and mediated by their need to act according to their values and professional convictions. The narratives revealed that their agency was also moderated by their need to preserve a dignified status as FL professionals and be validated by the school community.

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Abbreviations

LTA (language teacher agency)

FL (foreign language)

CLT (Communicative Language Teaching)

ELT (English Language Teaching)

CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)

YLE (Young Learners English)

KET (Key English Test)

PET (Cambridge Preliminary English Test)

FCE (First Certificate in English)

CAE (Cambridge Advanced Certificate in English)

DELF (Diplôme d'Etudes en Langue Française)

DALF (Diplôme Approfondi de Langue Française)

CPD (continuous professional development)

LEN (Law of National Education)

MENCS (Ministry of National Education)

MoE (Ministry of Education)

O.M.E.C.T.S (Order of the National Ministry)

O.M.E.N (Order of the National Ministry)

TALIS (The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey)

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)

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Diagram 1: The ecological theoretical framework (Priestley et al., 2015)

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Teacher agency has become a growing concern for educational theorists and researchers who have been trying to understand how teachers exert judgement and control over their work (Biesta et al., 2015). Efforts have been made to conceptualise the elusive construct of teacher agency building on theorisations from social sciences (Giddens, 1984; Archer, 2000; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998); social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), linguistic anthropology (Ahearn, 2001), sociocultural theories (Vygotsky, 1978), dialogic theory (Bakhtin, 1981), or poststructural theories (Davies, 2000; Zembylas, 2003).

Important for the present paper is Priestley, Biesta & Robinson's (2015) ecological approach, which advances toward the operationalisation of the construct of agency, viewing teacher agency as conscious, intentional mobilisation of values, beliefs, experience, expertise, and capacity for situated judgements, mediated by unique sociocultural contexts. As such, teacher agency is temporal, fluctuating, and context-dependent, as well as something to be achieved in interaction rather than an inherent capacity (Priestley et al., 2015).

The concept of teacher agency has become relevant due to the acknowledgement that teacher professionalism has been gradually confined to the narrow understanding of a technician's effectiveness demonstrated through measurable educational outcomes and concrete student achievements (Priestley et al., 2015). This has eventually limited teachers' space to exercise their professional judgement. By switching focus from teaching quality, entailing a risk-taking, innovative pedagogical approach, to teacher quality, national educational policies have hindered teachers' identity and autonomy, by holding teachers accountable for their students' failures (Mockler, 2013).

In consequence, conceptualisations of teacher agency have scrutinised its interconnections with teacher professionalism (Edwards, 2017), professional learning and competencies (Vähäsantanen et al., 2017; Kauppinen et al., 2020; Toom et al., 2021), identity (Buchanan, 2015, Ruohotye-Lyhty & Moate, 2015; 2016), emotions (Lasky, 2005; Miller & Gkonou, 2018), teacher autonomy (Erss, 2018; Lennert da Silva & Mølstad, 2020) or beliefs about educational purposes within curricular reforms (Biesta et.al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). Recent Finnish research (Varpanen et al., 2022) has connected teacher agency with *futures- thinking*, exploring teachers' long-term vision of education and their positioning within challenging social contexts increasingly more devoid of moral accountability, caring, and responsibility.

It was contended that teachers working within institutional regulations and constraints often lose their critical voice and eventually give in to their school's habitual practices and performativity culture, despite their professional experience, knowledge, and capacity (Priestley, Robinson, & Biesta, 2012; Ball & Olmedo, 2013). In this regard, Priestley et al., (2015) and Biesta et al., (2015) have critically articulated that policy designers and teacher education must scrutinise what educational contexts and purposes look like today, and whom or what they serve, to address the educational problems and realities of tomorrow. They emphasise that teachers' educational beliefs, expertise, reflexivity, and resistance are crucial ingredients of meaningful education.

Edwards (2015, 2017) elaborates on the concept of teachers' relational agency and expertise, emphasising the role of purposeful collaboration between teachers as well as teachers and students based on active reciprocal learning and constant and creative evaluation and transformation of practices. Reflecting on the differences between occupational and organisational professionalism,

Edwards ponders questions about how teacher education can support teachers' learning and agency as occupational professionalism, through collective professional standards. She argues that socio-cultural and historical theories can facilitate discussions about teachers' transformative agency that can be achieved when teachers remain attentive, embrace change, and transform their teaching environments responsibly, based on professional standards and close connection to their school communities (Edwards, 2017).

Teacher agency considers the moral and emancipatory dimension of teachers' work which has made researchers advocate for the need to develop teachers' capacity for collective action to promote social justice and inclusion of marginalised communities (Pantić, 2015). Pantić's model of teacher agency comprises four aspects, "sense of purpose, (the belief that a certain practice is worthwhile for achieving a certain outcome), competence (knowing how to influence a desired outcome in practice), the scope of autonomy (power to make a difference within given structural environments) and reflexivity (a capacity to monitor and evaluate one's actions)" (Pantić, 2017, p. 220). The assumptions lying at the core of her model are that teachers believe that agency for social justice is part of their role, have different understandings of social justice, and will act differently in different contexts at different times (Pantić, 2015).

Similarly, Flessner and Payne (2017) examine the impact of social theories in education (Dewey, Freire, 1970) and the latest research, emphasising teachers' and communitarian efforts to re-humanise societies and education, advancing the concept of collective agency and social action, with implications for teacher education programmes. As such, teachers must be enabled to recognise privileged narratives that maintain the status quo in education. Further, teachers must acknowledge their role as activists for social justice, collaborate closely with the marginalised communities and integrate their knowledge, in an attempt to change dominant discourses and practices (Flessner and Payne, 2017).

In their studies, Eteläpelto et al., (2013) contend that professional agency should be conceptualised from a subject-centred socio-cultural and creative life-long learning perspective, where agentic actions are goal-oriented processes and identity negotiations in changing work contexts or reforms, constrained or supported by institutional, organisational, and cultural conditions, power relations, and available material resources within workplaces. Professional agency is conceived as identity in action, underscoring behavioural capacity, where past personal and professional experiences, subjectivities, motivations, ideals, interests, values, professional knowledge, and competence are purposefully employed to exert influence, take stances, and make conscientious choices that affect practices and working conditions (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

Drawing on psychological perspectives, Maclellan (2017) discusses teacher agency in relation to learner achievement, such as agency as enacted behaviour, implicit theorising, self-efficacy, autonomy, epistemic agency, and autonomy. She argues that teacher agency as enacted behaviour entails more than teachers' ability to enact prescribed procedures and includes teachers' conscious understanding of the reasons why certain actions favoured their learners' attainment. Agency as implicit theorising refers to teachers' expertise enabling them to interpret prescribed curricular and pedagogical changes and choose those actions they feel appropriate in their contexts. Reflection, engagement with research, and epistemological sophistication are thus prerequisites to reconfiguring one's teaching practice. Teachers' agency as self-efficacy derives from teachers' beliefs that they have the required knowledge to engage in innovative practices that promote their learners' cognitive activation and critical reflection. Also, epistemic agency refers to teachers' intentional engagement in critical thinking, reasoning and arguing for ideas, challenging assumptions and sources of evidence, taking responsibility for pedagogical practices and learning, and advancing learners' knowledge. Teacher autonomy is deeply contextual and entails reconciling individual freedom with professional

responsibilities and institutional demands. Teachers have autonomy within external demands only when they can claim authorship of reasoning-to-act, as in acting upon beliefs after critical reflection (Maclellan, 2017).

Concluding, the above conceptualisations reflect the efforts to build an integrative and nuanced picture of teachers' professional agency. All make references to the importance of contextual factors (relationships, school conditions, policies, discourses) and internal factors (teachers' expertise, professional learning, moral, and critical stance) as mutually constitutive and decisive for the development of teachers' professional agency. Notwithstanding, teacher agency requires teachers' conscientisation and making sense of their knowledge, learning needs, professional values, and allegiances, as well as opportunities to develop on a personal and professional level and exercise their power of decision in schools. Thus, the nature of teachers' professional decisions and goals, in terms of alignment with, resistance to institutional practices and culture, or reluctance to act due to perceived risks and lack of support, has practical, moral, and political implications that render the development of teachers' professional agency important (Priestley et al., 2015).

Problem statement, relevance, and significance of the study

The rationale behind the recent interest in teacher agency in second/foreign language education research connects to the effects of prescriptive curricula, language policies and ideologies, political and social discourses, or the globalisation, internationalisation, and marketisation of language education, on language learners' motivations and language teachers' professionalism (Miller et al., 2018). Language learning has gradually shifted emphasis from communication competence to commodification, actualised in learning outcomes in high-stakes examinations (Thornbury, 2016).

It was contended that by having to respond to performance imperatives within global language policies, national policies, and school constraints, language teachers rarely afforded the time for reflection and self-awareness that could lead them to adopt a more transformative stance and develop an agentic identity (Morgan, 2015). Instead, the dynamic landscape of second language education research has constantly equipped language teachers with the methodological tools by which they could continuously improve their teaching skills and strategies for rather instrumental purposes, to help learners reach their language levels and skills and subsequent language diplomas.

Researchers in applied linguistics assert that language education distinguishes itself from other subjects by features such as non-native language teachers' anxiety and self-doubt about their language proficiency, affecting their self-efficacy and legitimacy (Borg, 2006; Hiver, 2016), enhanced emotional labour (Benesch, 2018; Gkonou & Miller, 2019); King & Ng, 2018) or challenges to the sense of self and identity due to the power dimension of languages reflecting values of the target cultures (Borg, 2006). Also, language teachers keep pace with intense teaching methodologies and pedagogical innovations having to negotiate their pedagogical choices to teach for various instrumental purposes in competitive environments (Kubanyova & Crookes, 2016).

Relying on a strong research foundation in teacher cognition (Borg 2006; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Golombek, 2015), and identity (Duff, 2012; Varghese et al., 2005; Barkhuizen, 2017) that examined language teachers' decision-making, ability, beliefs, pedagogic and subject knowledge, or practical knowledge of their environment, researchers in applied linguistics began to raise awareness of how language teachers exercise their capacity to accomplish things in their contexts and how they use their moral and critical voice (Miller et al., 2018). This gave rise to various studies among which Ng and Boucher-Yip (2017), Tao & Gao (2021), Miller et al., (2018), Hayi-Kaydar et al., (2019), and White (2018), which include theorisations of the construct, and analysis of various empirical studies,

focusing on diverse language teaching/learning contexts in the U.S.A, the U.K., New Zealand, Japan, India, Vietnam, or China, among others. All of the above have called for research on LTA to draw on various theoretical approaches and scrutinise language teachers' professional lives in different educational contexts.

Language education research has adopted diverse constructs to help conceptualise and examine LTA, such as race, negotiating identities, and positioning, as affected by power relations in social contexts (Kayi-Aydar, 2015a; 2015b; 2017) or emotional labour and resistance to policy as triggers for reform and teacher activism in higher education (Miller & Gkonou, 2017; Benesch, 2018; 2020) in the U.S. and U.K. Agency enactments through professional development within curricular reforms are scrutinised by Tao and Gao's (2017) study of L2 teachers in China. Also, language teachers' agency in response to language policy implementation within curricular reforms in EFL contexts, in Vietnam, is explored by Nguyen & Buy (2016) or Van Huy, Hamid, & Renshaw (2016). In the European context, research within Finnish education focuses on pre-service teachers' construction of professional knowledge, identity, and agency in teacher education programmes (Moate & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2014; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016) and language teachers' professional agency in a CLIL context (Pappa et al., 2019). A few studies place their examination of agency in a public secondary school context such as Hiver & Whitehead (2018), who explore the Korean ESL teachers' pedagogical agency within the reconstruction of critical events in public secondary school classrooms. Also, Namgung et al. (2020) investigate secondary ESL teachers' agency and legitimacy in South Korea in the context of high-stakes examinations and external evaluations from parents. Further, Huang (2020) and Huang &Yip (2021) scrutinise aspects of early career ESL teachers' agency and teacher attrition, in secondary schools in Hong Kong.

In Romania, historical factors, educational policies, reforms, and school traditions and cultures have reshaped the landscape of teacher professionalism and how various educational stakeholders and groups of teachers define professional and educational success. Teachers experience vulnerability in their professional lives having to respond to various expectations from demanding educational stakeholders in increasingly more stressful school environments affected by a lack of resources. Research on the dynamic phenomenon of teachers' professional agency becomes all the more relevant in this context to unveil the Romanian teachers' capacity to exert judgment and control of their work, as a form of resistance and reclaiming professionalism, or on the contrary, as maintaining the status quo and replicating practices.

Two events have brought me to the choice of the topic of agency, my own experience as a foreign language teacher and the IMER programme. The master's provided knowledge, helped me redefine personal meanings and purposes, and enabled me to reflect on my own experiences within the national education system. My choice to research the professional agency of language teachers within secondary school practices and cultures in Romania is thus very personal.

It was timely to research teacher agency in a national context because, generally, Romanian secondary school teachers' professional lives can benefit from more attention and empirical research. While researching the topic of teacher agency, I have not found any studies on the topic from general education in a national context. Also, whereas there is a richness and breadth of research in foreign language teaching methodology, English and American cultural, literary, translation studies, and more generally, linguistic studies in the national context, I have not found any literature on the topic of teacher agency in language education. As I cannot be certain that it does not exist, I can only admit limited access to any empirical research on the topic in the Romanian context.

I contend that there is a unique interplay of professional, institutional, historical, and cultural aspects mediating teachers' professional and personal agency within the Romanian centralised education

system. Language education has its defining features, influences, expectations, and demands, which renders it meaningful to explore in context. It feels relevant and timely to explore how foreign language teachers in my country make sense of their knowledge, professional beliefs and values, intentions, and allegiances, as well as what hinders and supports them to develop professionally and exercise their power of decision in the classroom and school. The teachers' stories can reveal aspects and limitations of agency, highlighting the complexity of situations, relationships, classrooms, and schools within the national education system, as well as issues of attractiveness and sustainability of the teaching profession. Teacher agency depends on sociocultural and economic factors and thus differs across contexts, bringing new and unique meanings and facets of the construct. The research is a starting point offering opportunities for further reflection on the problem of teacher agency in language education in a national context, and not only. This could hopefully inspire other practitioners and researchers to tackle this topic in the context of Eastern European countries and beyond.

Aim of the study

The study aims to explore how seven Romanian foreign language teachers in urban public secondary schools understand and enact their professional agency, and how contextual factors mediate, support, or constrain its achievement, through the participants' stories. The purpose is to enable an understanding of how the participants' teaching philosophies and experiences inform their awareness and achievement of agency, how they enact their professional agency utilising available contextual resources within contextual constraints, and how that reflects in their beliefs and professional aspirations. This research aims to provide further knowledge and insights into FL teachers' agency potential, within the public secondary schools' practices and culture, in the Romanian centralised education system. The project expands the exploration and discussion of teacher agency to the educational context of an Eastern European, developing country in the EU.

Research question and subquestions

RQ: How do the foreign language teachers in Romanian public secondary schools understand and enact agency by way of their relationship with their environment?

SQ1: In what ways do the language teachers consider themselves agentic, based on their personal and professional philosophies and experiences?

SQ2: What do the language teachers perceive as the available contextual resources enabling them to address challenges and act on their professional goals?

SQ3: How do contextual factors moderate (or inhibit) the language teachers' professional agency, in terms of actions, beliefs, and aspirations?

Teacher agency emphasises individual attributes such as consciousness, reflexivity, intentionality and relationality, as well as interaction with and mediation by social contexts (Priestley et al., 2015). The thesis relies on Priestley et al.,'s (2015) ecological theoretical framework of teacher agency, comprising three dimensions: *iterative*, as teacher agency builds on previous teaching experiences, patterns of thoughts and actions, *practical-evaluative*, referring to teachers' ability to make situated practical judgements using available resources, and *projective*, as in teachers' motivations and aspirations prompting them to intentionally act on their future.

Regarding the methodology of the study, I consider that a qualitative approach through narrative inquiry is suitable for researching teacher agency because it allows the reconstruction of a teacher's

experience in relation to others in a specific social and cultural context, enabling understanding of how contexts shape teachers' actions and beliefs (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The concept of agency is profoundly contextualised, unique, temporal, fluctuating, and shaped by personal histories as well as social, cultural, and institutional narratives, resources and relationships, which can be ultimately revealed through teachers' stories. The purpose of narrative inquiry in this case is to describe how FL teachers make sense of their experiences within specific public secondary school contexts in Romania.

Thesis structure

The paper is divided into five chapters, with subsections for each of them. In the first chapter, the introduction, some of the rationales and research efforts conceptualising the construct of agency in teacher education have been examined. After that, the problem statement, relevance, aim, research questions, ecological theoretical framework and methodology supporting the research have been discussed. This chapter includes a brief overview of the national education system and the context of teaching foreign languages, aiming to provide background and a representation of the most important factors affecting FL teachers' professional lives, with references to national laws, methodologies, or significant literature. The second chapter presents the theoretical framework and the literature review, and discusses empirical findings relevant to the scope of the study from both general teacher education and language education. The third chapter covers the research approach and methodology, data collection, analysis, sample, reflexive summary, ethical considerations, and the sustainability statement. In the fourth chapter, the narrative data is analysed thematically, with relevant illustrations supporting the findings. The fifth chapter discusses the results and presents conclusions, implications, and recommendations for future research.

Foreign language teachers in the Romanian education system

A presentation of the national education system

After the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1989, the Romanian public education system struggled to progress despite the difficult economic conditions and changes in social and economic life, during the transition to a market economy and democracy. After 1998, the reform of national education started, as a result of the gradual democratisation and infusion of European and World Bank funds (Cîrstocea, 2014, as cited in Deca, 2015). Romania became a member of the Bologna Process in 1999, by signing the Bologna Declaration, and committed to a process of reform in higher education, marked by changes in legislation and reconsideration of the basic principles of the educational process for a society based on knowledge. Nonetheless, the changes implemented by higher education institutions within the Bologna process were described as superficial, modest, cosmetic, mechanic, without meaningful focus on innovation and curricular content, goals, and competencies (Miclea, 2003).

The national laws of education affirm that the state provides Romanian citizens with equal rights of access to all levels and forms of pre-university and higher education, as well as lifetime education without any form of discrimination. The educational ideal assumes a system of values necessary for personal development, advancement of the entrepreneurship spirit, active citizenship, social integration, and employment, following Romania's EU membership and its existence within a globalised world (LEN 1/2011, art. 2, actualised in August 2018).

The Romanian education system is centralised and the government provides basic funding for public secondary schools, within the limits of the standard cost per pupil. Schools receive their resources from local council administrations and, when possible, autonomous funds (Eurydice, 2023). Although the principles in the national educational policies assert that education is a national top priority

ensuring equal access to education, the governmental spending per student in primary and lower secondary schools is less than one-third of the EU average (Kitchen et al., 2017). According to Kitchen et al., (2017), one in four Romanians – and one in two Romanian children has an income below the national threshold, which renders them unable to have a decent standard of living. The income gap between the richest and poorest citizens is also the highest in the EU (Kitchen et al., 2017).

Institutions belonging to state pre-tertiary education are subordinated to the Ministry of National Education through county school inspectorates. School inspectorates implement at the county level the education policies established at the central level, and monitor and evaluate the quality of the management of educational institutions. Together with local public administration authorities, they ensure the schooling of students and monitor their participation in courses during compulsory education. They also coordinate admission to high schools, national assessments, and school competitions (LEN 1/2011, art. 95). Also, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in School Education (ARACIP) is in charge of the schools' external quality evaluation and ensures schools accreditation at MENCS's proposal (Eurydice, 2023).

The context of foreign language teaching in Romania

Learning and teaching foreign languages in Romania have been influenced by the social and political changes in the Eastern Europe region after the fall of communist regimes. The country's struggle to become a democracy and the social and economic transitions after the revolution in 1989, the PHARE funds infusion from the EU, the accession to the Bologna process in 1999, and, since 2007, its membership in the European Union have impacted the study of foreign languages (Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018 in Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018). Romanian universities benefitted from funds to develop master's and Ph.D. programmes for foreign languages and FL teachers had to be prepared to respond to students' complex rationales to learn foreign languages, such as personal development or a future profession (Eurydice, 2015; Chefneux, 2018 in Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018).

Before the 1989 revolution, the study of foreign languages in Romania was influenced by the communist propaganda against the West. Expectedly, language education was affected by the country's political orientation, with Russian as a compulsory subject in the school curricula. French and English primarily, and more rarely Spanish, Italian, or German (mainly taught in urban high schools) survived together with the Russian. It was also suggested that, generally, there was little space for the development of foreign language professionals (Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018 in Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018). After the fall of communism in 1989, foreign language education reflected the country's political reorientation to the West (Kozma, 1990, as cited in Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018). Consequently, the Russian language gradually disappeared from the pre-university curricula in Romania. It was contended that particularities such as Romania's geographical location among Slavic countries and Hungary, its Romance language (belonging to the group of Latin languages), combined with the Romanian people's idealised conception of the non-communist world after the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1989, accelerated the adaptation to new European linguistic models in language education (Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018 in Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018). It could be inferred that language education in the national context has progressed more rapidly in comparison to other school subjects, benefitting from methodological innovations and, generally, a vast second language education research. Despite that, however, the national education system was reluctant to reform and progressed slowly.

The Romanian education system transitioned from an education emphasising knowledge transfer and traditional methods based on memorisation and content knowledge to an education based on knowledge construction, and the development of skills and competencies. In line with the new

curricular reforms, learners had to be enabled to adapt to a rapidly changing world, due to economic, social, and cultural changes. The socio-economic transitions and policy reforms reconfigured teacher education and teacher roles that had to subscribe to global understandings of quality, professionalism, development, and certification (Tatto & Mincu, 2009).

During the 90s, foreign languages (particularly English) became optional subjects starting with the 1st and 2nd grades. In 1997–2005, the educational system underwent a new curricular reform, allowing the replacement of old textbooks with alternative ones. Teachers could decide on the instructional process and material selection, based on their teaching contexts and students' needs (Badea et al., 2018 in Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018). From 2005 to 2015, the educational system gradually adapted to European educational policies and quality standards concerning curriculum and textbook design. Between 2005 and 2013, the national curriculum stipulated the study of English (and more rarely French) in the 3rd and 4th grades for children aged 8–10. Since 2014, English language teaching has been studied from the preparatory year 0, preceding the 1st-grade needs (Badea et al., 2018 in Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018). Nonetheless, English language study often begins in kindergarten. Romanian students usually learn two foreign languages and can study a third, as an optional subject. So far, the Romanian students have been evaluated only for the first foreign language studied in school within the national baccalaureate foreign language competence exam.

Concerning school teaching traditions and practices, foreign language education in the national context employed direct, deductive methods, such as the Grammar-Translation Method combined with the Audio-Lingual Method, before 1989 and long after that. These have been gradually replaced with Communicative Language Teaching since the beginning of the reforms in 1995. Nonetheless, at the beginning of this transition, and not only, Romanian FL teachers subconsciously used a combination of different approaches that could work in their classroom contexts, based on available textbooks and teaching materials (Wetzl, 2006). The socio-economic and cultural characteristics of their classrooms and schools, teaching and learning background, lack of opportunities for professional training, inadequate textbooks, lack of curricular guidelines for alternative textbooks, and insufficient support and resources made Romanian FL teachers fear or distrust innovation (Wetzl, 2006). Consequently, they only marginally adopted some CLT strategies in their classes (Wetzl, 2006). Nonetheless, FL teachers had to eventually adapt CLT to their contexts and update their teaching practices, to facilitate the transition from linguistic competence to communicative competence, from accuracy to fluency, focus on language functions, and teaching the four skills, reading, listening, speaking, and writing (Wetzl, 2006).

The role of foreign language teachers eventually changed from authoritative figures in front of the classroom in charge of controlled practice and oral drills, to facilitators of interactive group work. The typical classroom arrangement, however, did not favour the implementation of CLT procedures and collaborative learning (Wetzl, 2006). Over time, particularly concerning the English language, the British Council and the main publishing houses, such as Longman, Oxford, and Cambridge University Press began offering courses and textbooks to support Romanian teachers to implement CLT in their classes.

Concerning the national language policies, the EU language policies and the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) regulate the modern language curriculum in Romania. The CEFR contains the assessment criteria and descriptors for languages, providing the primary basis for the elaboration of the national language syllabuses, curriculum development, examinations, teaching training, and textbooks (CEFR, 2020). Foreign language education in Romania has aimed the quality assurance advanced by linguistic policies and CEFR guidelines, concerning common frameworks, cultural identity, social integration, mobility, internationalisation, lifelong learning, as well as employability. With language learning rendered as a fundamental competence,

foreign languages were introduced in the national curricula from an early age and qualified teachers had to rise to the task (Badea et al., 2018 in Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018).

Romanian FL teachers organise their yearly planning around the national curricular documents for foreign languages and follow their methodological recommendations. The ministry evaluates and approves the school textbooks, through a commission of educational experts, then purchases the textbooks and ensures that schools are provided accordingly, according to a methodology (Anexa 1 O.M.E.N 3103/28.01.2019). The law stipulates that students and teachers in state education benefit from free school textbooks. FL teachers have to select from the textbook alternatives approved by the ministry. It was contended that because of this requirement, FL teachers were encouraged to rely too much on textbooks, which made them less engaged in teaching creatively using authentic materials (Sonea, 2018, in Grosu- Rădulescu, 2018). Combined with other practical problems arising in schools, this has hindered FL teachers' possibilities of addressing students' real levels of language in the classroom as well as an authentic teaching and learning process according to CEFR criteria (Sonea, 2018, in Grosu- Rădulescu, 2018).

Initial teacher training and teacher qualification in a national context

The legislation establishes the initial training requirements that prospective teachers need to fulfill to become qualified and subsequently appointed to teaching positions. Selection, recruitment, and appointment of teachers in public pre-university education are based on national examinations. According to OECD (2020), "Romania is one of the few countries in the EU lacking national teacher competency standards to allow initial teacher education and professional development programmes to focus on pedagogical practices". Romanian teachers need training to use new teaching practices, in line with the ongoing curriculum reform, to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

The initial teacher training in Romania has followed a simultaneous model, combining education in the specialisation of studies with education and training for the teaching career during university. The simultaneous model organised within the departments for the training of teaching staff was the only variant of initial teacher training in Romania, in the period 1996-2020. Student teachers' prospects for a coherent, organised, and meaningful initial training education were hindered by the lack of collaboration between the faculty of education and faculties preparing subject teachers due to the established faculty autonomy within Romanian universities (Miclea, 2003). Also, despite numerous initiatives, both from the ministry and the professional community, the didactic master's was not implemented until the academic year 2020-2021 (OMEN 4524/2020). Already implemented in many modern education systems, the didactic master's degree currently represents an alternative to the initial training of teachers provided by the departments for the preparation of teaching staff in Romanian universities. At present, the most important universities in Romania have piloted, for the first time in the country, two-year master's degree programmes in education.

The pedagogical practice in study subjects is carried out in the network of application schools, and includes observation of didactic activities, teaching assisted by a mentor teacher, teaching in the classroom, didactic discussions in the application school, or projects and presentations based on course topics at the university. Romanian student-teachers receive significantly fewer teaching practice hours than in other European and OECD countries. Pre-service primary and lower secondary teachers in Romania receive less teaching practice (78 hours), than all but one other European country, while upper secondary teachers in Romania receive 120 hours compared with up to 1065 hours in other European countries (OECD, 2020). The initial teaching training is completed with an induction year, a practical internship carried out in a school unit, under the coordination of a mentor, lasting at least 1 year.

The first step for candidates to obtain tenure in the pre-university education system consists of national competitions (tenure exams) to access vacant teaching positions in pre-university education (LEN 1/2011, art. 240). The second step consists of passing a final exam (definitive exam/ definitivat), by which teachers acquire the right to teach, in the capacity of tenured teachers, and are employed for an indefinite period (LEN 1/2011, art. 241). Since 2016/2017, the examination for tenure in education has included a practical internship, two specialised inspections, a teacher portofolio evaluation, and a written test (OMENCS 5087 / 31.08.2016). The legislation for obtaining tenure has undergone many changes over the years. School principals and administrative councils were allowed to award tenure to teachers in school (LEN 1/2011, art. 253 (abrogated); (current art. 931) if there was the possibility of a viable teaching norm in that school. The articles were debated and reconfigured a number of times.

FL teachers' professional development in a national context

FL teachers in Romania are preoccupied with lifelong learning and CPD and participate in various nationally and internationally organised training courses and webinars. The dynamic, competitive environment of language teaching requires solid skills to prepare and assess students for various examinations, such as international language testing exams, entrance language exams in intensive classes, bilingual classes in the 9th grade, or written and oral language examinations within the national baccalaureate. All these diplomas can be used by students to apply to national and international colleges or scholarships.

FL teachers continue their education and training after university, through specific evaluations that lead to certification of a higher professional degree, such as the first and second didactic degrees. These professional degrees entitle teachers to slightly higher salaries and the possibility to compete for management, guiding, and control positions. The procedure for organising and conducting the examinations for obtaining the didactic degrees is regulated by a methodology developed by the ministry (O.M.E.C.T.S. 5561/07.10.2011). Teachers thus prove their teaching abilities in a series of classroom inspections where they must comply with performance descriptors in teaching. They also have to demonstrate their continuous professional training and engage in various administrative responsibilities at the school level. Further, they conclude by taking national examinations and preparing dissertations supervised by professors in higher education.

Teachers' salary incentives are established according to the position held and added to the salary corresponding to the level of the initial training, the professional degree, and seniority. Nonetheless, it was contended that the current appraisal process cannot recognise, reward, or advance new roles and responsibilities for teachers according to their competence. This process needs reconfiguration from a model based on passing national examinations to a model based on authentic evidence of teaching. Further, it should provide opportunities for career growth based on merit, to be able to retain talented teachers (OECD, 2020).

In pre-university education, the teaching staff has the right and obligation to participate periodically in continuing education programs, and accumulate a minimum of 90 transferable professional credits, every 5 years (LEN 1/2011, art. 145). According to TALIS (2018), in-service training through courses and seminars is common among teachers in Romania, with "89% of teachers (OECD average 94%) attending at least one professional development activity", one year before the survey''. There is however strong concern regarding the quality of these professional development programs that are not necessarily connected to teachers' learning needs and classroom contexts (Educated Romania, 2018). Also, adequate funding must be provided to create sustainable CPD programmes that could support Romanian teachers and allow them sufficient time to learn, experiment, and reflect on new strategies to facilitate changes in their practice (OECD, 2020). According to TALIS (2018), Romanian teachers mostly value collaborative practices, and peer coaching, and acknowledge a high need for training in

areas such as teaching students with special educational needs, 35% in Romania (compared to 22% across the OECD), teaching in multicultural/multilingual settings, and developing ICT skills (TALIS, 2018).

The evaluation of CPD is carried out by an accumulation of transferable professional credits, validation of the competencies obtained in the didactic activity, inspection reports, portfolio scoring, self-assessment as well as departmental and administrative assessments based on student results (OECD, 2020). When it comes to language teachers, this translates into participation in open classes, observed and set by language county inspectors and methodologists, foreign language olympiads, national and international projects, various high-stakes language examinations such as international language examinations, language competence exams within the national baccalaureate or granting access to bilingual or intensive language classes. Students who pass international exams for the certification of linguistic skills in foreign languages have the right to the recognition and equivalence of these results upon request, according to a methodology approved by the ministry.

Concerning student population, Romanian classrooms are overall composed of Romanians, and "0% of teachers work in schools where at least 10% of the students have a migrant background compared with the OECD average of 17%" (TALIS, 2018). At the same time, "95% of school leaders report that their teachers believe that children and young people should learn that people of different cultures have a lot in common (OECD average 95%)" (TALIS, 2018).

Generally, FL teachers in Romanian public schools have had few resources and possibilities for travelling and access to genuine experiences within the cultures and civilisations of the languages taught, thus fewer opportunities to develop intercultural knowledge more meaningfully. This affects the teachers' self-efficacy and legitimacy, as lived experiences within the target language and cultural contexts render teachers more knowledgeable and credible as professionals. In the context of a globalised world, FL teachers need to be able to address sensitive cultural and social justice issues and facilitate their students' intercultural communication and development of social awareness and democratic citizenship (Marinescu, 2018 in Grosu-Rădulescu, 2018).

Chapter 2

The theoretical framework

Priestley et al.,'s (2015) theoretical and analytical framework was deemed as the sensible choice for the purpose of this project, which is to explore FL teachers' professional agency within Romanian public school cultures. Teacher agency focuses on teachers' daily work in classrooms and schools, teachers' beliefs, values, and traits within their local school settings and characteristics of national education that have shaped their actions and philosophies (Priestley et al., 2015). As such, teacher agency is deeply individualised, implying that some of the findings will be unique and context-specific.

Priestley et al.,'s (2015) ecological theoretical framework on teacher agency takes the challenging task to operationalise the concept. The authors argue against conceptualising teacher agency as a variable, either cause or effect or as personal capacity or competence as in structure vs. agency debates, defining agency as a complex phenomenon emerging in the ecology of teachers' professional contexts, within the actor-situation transaction. They also warn against associating the concept of teacher

agency with teacher leadership or any other special capacity, and advocate that all teachers, regardless of their particular capacities, must be supported to express and apply their professional judgement, thus exercise agency in their work. The authors further distinguish between teacher agency and the concept of teacher autonomy, which, in current educational policies and discourses of accountability, is conceived as the teacher bearing the main responsibility for all educational matters (p. 4).

Their framework builds on sociological theories such as Bourdieu's (1977) notion of 'habitus', Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration, or Archer's (1995) realist social theory, nonetheless, acknowledges its reliance on pragmatist approaches (Dewey, Emirbayer& Mische) and action-network theory at its core. Drawing on a combination of these theoretical approaches resulted in teachers' professional agency conceived as a unique, dynamic, temporal, situational phenomenon fluctuating over time, both shaping and being shaped by teachers' historical, social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Teacher agency can transform or reproduce habitual practices, developing in relation to different types of learning during life (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta and Tedder, 2007).

The ecological model advances the understanding of how contextual conditions mediate the interplay of values, beliefs, and actions shaping teacher agency. The authors developed Emirbayer & Mische's (1998) pragmatic conceptualisation of agency as embedded in a three-dimensional framework, iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective. As such, agency is not an attribute that individuals inherently possess but an emerging phenomenon, something achieved by individuals in their practice, through conscious, intentional, and active engagement with their ecological circumstances (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 30). We understand teacher agency as marked by temporality and fluctuation due to various school environments, educational reforms, or lifelong learning. Teacher agency can be also constrained by the dissonance between personal and institutional values or by the absence of a collectively articulated educational vision (Biesta et al., 2015).

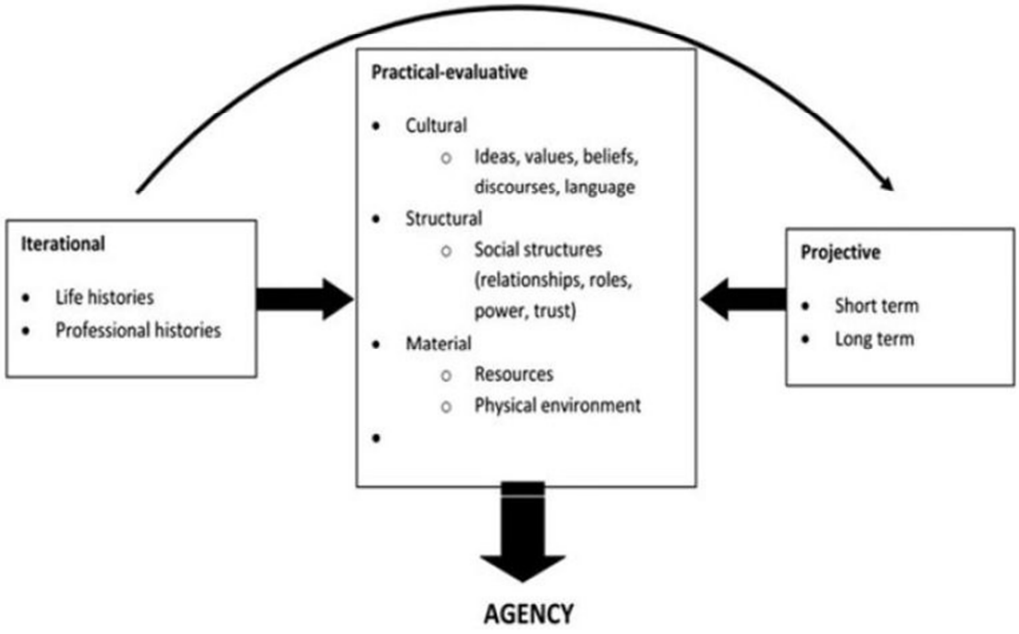

Figure 1. The ecological model of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015)

In this study, the achievement of agency is understood as related to teachers' professional histories and identities, education, and their ability to capitalise on past knowledge, skills, and experiences, (the iterative dimension). The project examines the FL language teachers' views on some of their relevant learning and teaching experiences that have potentially constructed a sense of agency. These beliefs and values are inadvertently impacted by institutional demands of accountability, cultures of performativity (meso factors), as well as educational policies and the larger cultural discourses around education (macro factors). In their study, Priestley et al., (2015) ponder whether teachers can enact agency after a long period of being rigidly controlled by accountability mechanisms and following prescriptive curricula.

Performativity is defined by Stephen J. Ball (2003, p. 216)) as "a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change, based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)". As such, individual (in this case, teacher or headmaster) and organisational (school) performances are conceived as displays of productivity and quality, within promotion or inspection circumstances, which ultimately decide the value of teachers, principals, and schools (Ball, 2003).

Teachers' past routines or patterns of thought and action, which can be also internalised aspects of performativity cultures, influence their evaluations of and concrete engagement with the present contexts (the practical-evaluative dimension), based on cultural resources (values, beliefs), structural resources (social, relational), and material aspects (Priestley et al., 2015). These internal and external resources might enable or constrain their capacity for decision. Teachers assess the feasibility of their actions in unique situations, deciding how to act by evaluating the risks and considering available material and relational resources.

The iterative constituent of teacher agency impacts not only how teachers approach their daily work (the practical-evaluative), but also the projective, aspirational dimension of their profession (Priestley et al., 2015). How teachers understand to act on their contexts, by aligning with, adjusting, or creatively transforming teaching practices, influences their orientations toward the future, concerning their aspirations and goals (the projective dimension). Teacher agency thus depends on the nature of teachers' values and beliefs, perceived roles, and how they view students and educational purposes, which might either contrast or conform to the contextual demands of accountability (Priestley et al., 2015).

Consequently, agency entails engagement, commitment, responsibility, and reflexivity, and can be achieved by teachers in their work, through their critical, contextualised judgements, choices, and decision-making, which the present project tries to examine. Teacher agency underscores teacher professionalism which can be reclaimed through collective professional values and competencies (Edwards, 2017), surpassing those on various educational stakeholders' agendas, entailing uniformity and lacking empirical foundation (Priestley et al., 2015; Toom et al., 2021). Further, the development of teacher agency is dependent on the quality of teachers' collegial relationships, and their opportunities for collaboration in their school community, framed by the larger educational and cultural discourses (Priestley et al., 2015). The study scrutinises relational and collegial aspects affecting the FL teachers' agency within the organisational cultures of a few Romanian public secondary schools, and thus any possibilities of acting collectively for the improvement of work conditions.

Literature review

The literature review adopts the approach of a traditional review and a confirmatory viewpoint based on a personal selection of materials allowing it to be reflective (Jesson et al., 2011) and relevant to the context and aim of this project, which is to explore in-service FL teachers' agency in Romanian public secondary school contexts. The literature review does not claim to achieve the comprehensiveness of the theme. It was undertaken through Supersearch and by searching databases such as Google Scholar and Scopus, through the Gothenburg University Library. Only scholarly literature such as peer-reviewed academic journal articles, literature reviews, and academic books, written in English were included in this project. The review discusses empirical studies on teacher agency from both general education and applied linguistics. Empirical studies from language teacher education illustrate FL teachers' agency within their situated experiences and professional trajectories. The studies were chosen to accommodate the ecological framework governing the project, the exploratory features of the research, the participants, Romanian FL teachers, and the context of public secondary schools in Romania. I considered it important to investigate some of the theoretical and methodological approaches that were adopted to explore the construct and identify some of the research contexts and findings concerning internal or ecological factors impacting FL teachers' agency, which are relevant to the scope of the project.

Findings from empirical studies in general teacher education

In their research about student teachers' learning and development of professional agency in Finnish teacher education programmes and classrooms, Soini et al., (2015); Heikonen et al., (2017; 2020); Toom et al., (2017) characterise teachers' professional agency as a motivational-affective, intellectual and behavioural capacity that presupposes intentional and reciprocal learning, active reflection, commitment to students' learning and participation, and building a collaborative learning environment in the classroom. The studies showed that observing and modelling peers, mentors, and expert teachers required student teachers' transformative adaptation and contributed to student teachers' self-efficacy, learning, competence, and the development of a contextualised repertoire of functional teaching methods (Heikonen et al., 2020). These studies found that to develop their agency, student teachers need continuous reflection and experimentation with instructional practices based on an active observation of students, their learning needs and processes, understanding of classroom situations, and active engagement with professional development.

Buchanan's (2015) study explored the relationship between teacher agency and identity within reforms in the U.S., finding that teacher agency was closely intertwined with their identity and influenced by accountability discourses. The teachers demonstrated that they adapted to situations creatively, trying to stay true to their self-conceptions. Findings from in-depth interviews showed that elementary school teachers navigated accountability demands in deeply individualised ways and challenged new policy discourses around good teaching and teachers. In doing that they relied on their career histories, prior practical work experiences, and shared understandings of quality teaching. The teachers' agency was determined by the teachers' fit with school cultures and dependent on their identities. It was categorised as *stepping up* when teachers concentrated on actions that exceeded their perceived roles and expectations, such as mentoring other teachers. When *pushing back*, teachers responded to accountability pressures, such as implementing prescribed curricula, challenging the school administration, or asserting their professional identity, expertise, and commitment. The study raised awareness of how accountability discourses shaped teachers' actions and views of educational success, and the danger that teachers grown and taught in this climate might lose their criticality entirely, by not having different prior experiences to rely on.

Scrutinising Dutch primary school teachers' self-attributed personal characteristics as change agents, van der Heijden et al., (2015) showed that the teachers' mastery in the classroom was highly individualised in the expression of enthusiasm and commitment. Teacher agency appeared to be dependent on the level of self-awareness, expertise, comprehensive knowledge, and skills to access collegial support in the school environment as well as impact students' learning. The teachers demonstrated agency when they collaborated and learned from their colleagues, and teaching experiences, and when they directed their professional development to enhance their skills for the benefit of learners. However, as change agents, the teachers adopted an entrepreneurial approach when taking creative initiatives by calculating risk, which showed a reluctance to be innovative risk-takers, implying that the school environment was decisive concerning this perception, thus worth examining.

Comparative studies (Erss, 2018; Lennert da Silva & Mølstad, 2020) explored the relationship between teacher agency and teacher autonomy, within accountability systems and state control. Erss's (2018) comparative qualitative study examined upper secondary school teachers' perceptions and approaches to teacher autonomy within their experience of being controlled by the state in Estonia, Finland, and Germany. The article is interesting because it provides a nuanced discussion of different conceptualisations of autonomy and agency, concluding that these two concepts are only partly overlapping. Erss eventually asserts that autonomy is something that teachers might possess, while agency refers to something they do. As such, autonomy appears to be related to self-directedness, and the capacity for autonomous action as being in control of one's work environment, thus having freedom from control. Agency, on the other hand, refers to the actualisation of autonomy within unavoidable professional limitations and environmental constraints, which underscores reflective thinking and responsibility concerning students' learning and decision-making in schools. It can be inferred, nevertheless, that educational policies can increase control over teachers' work, disguised as discourses claiming that individual teachers need to develop autonomy and those qualities deemed important for governmental systems, where professional development programmes play a decisive role (Lawson, 2004, cited in Erss, 2018). As Priestley et al., (2015), Erss posits that both autonomy and agency can be manipulated to justify teachers' overload and enhanced responsibility.

Analysis of data from semi-structured interviews showed that teachers' expectations concerning their desired autonomy varied, partly due to historical factors and different educational traditions and views of teaching. The Finnish teachers perceived that the state's control over teachers' work was unnecessary, due to their high professionalism, while the Estonian and German teachers perceived that a certain amount of control and clear regulations were beneficial to their work, offering at the same time legitimacy and security. It was also inferred that the absence of control did not necessarily lead to teacher professionalism or agency. Estonian teachers perceived that they had more autonomy than German teachers but a reduced agency due to personal accountability for student achievement. The study acknowledges limitations due to the inherently individualised constructions of autonomy which depend on context and advocates that autonomy and agency should be examined concurrently.

Similarly, Lennert da Silva & Mølstad's (2020) qualitative comparative study examined Brazilian and Norwegian lower secondary teachers' autonomy and agency responses within accountability systems and centralised outcomes-based curriculum and testing. In the study, accountability is defined as a complex and dynamic system consisting of assessments of teachers' work by utilising data from large-scale studies combined with various forms of appraisal, report writing, and assistance of teaching in the classroom (Ball, 2003, cited in Lennert da Silva & Mølstad, 2020). Teacher autonomy is conceived as the teachers' scope of action allowing them to decide the content and work conditions, justify choices, and develop practices within the state's resources and regulations that are enabling or hindering teachers' work. The study also draws on ecological perspectives (Priestley et al., 2015) conceiving teacher agency as teachers' intentional, critical, and reflective action within the challenges, perceived affordances, and resources of their daily work.

Analysis of data from semi-structured interviews showed that the teachers navigated policies in individualised ways to accommodate their needs and beliefs and those of their students. It was found that the Brazilian teachers were monitored through both internal and external evaluations such as strategic planning and report writing to improve students' outcomes. In contrast, Norwegian teachers benefitted from trust and school cultures characterised by group meetings, shared teaching, and collegial classroom observations, offering some opportunities for collective improvement of practices, legitimacy, security, and agency. Nonetheless, the Norwegian teachers experienced strong external control from the state, concerning the curriculum and testing. It was revealed that although teachers had to use test results to identify competencies that needed improvement and plan teaching accordingly, some refused to do so, preferring to use their contextualised judgements based on their daily relationships with their students. The authors interpreted this as an expression of agency according to ecological understandings. It was concluded that although the Brazilian and Norwegian teachers had similar perceptions of autonomy within similar accountability systems, such as freedom to decide the content and methods of instruction, their responses to policies were shaped by distinct cultural, organisational, and material conditions. These contextual conditions further affected the teachers' achievement of agency.

Recent findings from Liyuan et al.,'s (2022) quantitative longitudinal study in the Finnish educational context show that teachers do not necessarily develop a sense of professional agency in the process of acquiring experience, but rather that different teachers have variations of their sense of agency from low to moderate and high, concerning aspects such as collaborative environment and transformative practice or reflection in the classroom. It is implied that teachers need individualised support that can facilitate self-understanding, self-evaluation, and identification of developmental needs.

It can be concluded that teacher agency is continuously shifting, depending on the sociocultural and economic environment, professional discourses around education, school resources, teachers' appropriation and adaptation of pedagogical practices, individual evaluations of their conditions, and their preparedness and intention for current and future action in their professional contexts (Buchanan, 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2015; Pantić, 2015). Although teachers may be self-directed and have autonomy in their work, expressed as the selection of didactic material and methods, curriculum development, participation in decision-making, and having freedom from control, they may not necessarily achieve agency expressed as enhanced professionalism by creatively addressing professional goals (Erss, 2018). In fact, having autonomy can be experienced as having the freedom to bear an increased workload and responsibility for student achievement, which translates into a reduced agency. Further, both concepts can be manipulated to justify economic and governmental agendas and disempower and de-professionalise teachers, which begs the question of autonomy and agency for whom or what (Priestley et al., 2015; Erss, 2018). It is revealed that in achieving agency, contextual conditions play a significant part, where material resources, professional values, authentic support in the school community, and collectively sharing good practices can have a beneficial role (Lennert da Silva & Mølstad, 2020). Also, some teachers may prefer clear guidelines and regulations from the state, which leads to a shared responsibility for student performance and enhanced teacher legitimacy (Erss, 2018).

Nonetheless, professional agency encompasses a strong locus of control, and teachers' capacity to provide contextualised reasoning for their actions based on reflection, pedagogical judgements, and goals (Toom et al., 2015; Pantić, 2015; Soini et al., 2015; Buchanan, 2015). Teachers enact agency when they creatively draw on their convictions and professional knowledge, mostly in constrained school environments by taking responsibility for alternative teaching practices that benefit their students, which sometimes resist the prerequisites imposed by top-down policies (Priestley et al., 2015; Dovemark, 2010; Buchanan, 2015). Teachers need to maintain good relationships with students' parents, interpret policies, meet institutional requirements, reconcile private convictions with shared

understandings, and collaborate with colleagues and school management (Toom et al., 2015). Priestley et al., (2015), and Soini et al. (2015) observed that a supportive work environment, equality, recognition, collegiality, sharing knowledge, seeking advice, and building strong relationships through informal professional networks, positively impact the achievement of agency, through their potential to ensure trust and emotional safety as well as improve teaching practices.

Findings from empirical studies on LTA

Aspects of agency and identity development within language teacher education programmes

In a European context, research from the Finnish educational context has focused on pre-service language teachers' agency, discourses, and their construction of professional knowledge and identity within teacher education programmes. Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate's (2015) action research project argued for a practice-oriented view of the phenomenon of agency, drawing on the dialogic theory and ecological perspectives on agency. The project aimed to develop dialogic pedagogical practices within a language teacher education programme, scrutinising which language learning experiences were significant for the student teachers participating in the research. Twelve student teachers were invited to critically reflect on their learner biographies as English language learners. Findings revealed contradictory and varied aspects of the students' life-course agency, based on their previous experiences, perceived strengths and weaknesses, hopes and frustrations, shaped by their circumstances and relations to others. Two dimensions of agency were illustrated: *reactivity*, as in meeting others'expectations, retiring and expecting others to deliver, or *proactivity* as in delivering, connecting, finding personal goals, entering a new space, and taking a stance. The study offered a conceptualisation of the life-course agency which facilitated an understanding of the relationship between reactive and proactive dimensions of agency, and self-reflection.

Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate's study (2016) focused on autobiographical narrative data obtained from written accounts in which pre-service teachers depicted their thoughts, experiences, and self-projections within an English language teaching program. Following a dialogical analysis, the study identified three categories of identity -agency, characterised by temporality. The *expansive* identity agency was motivated by interests, confidence, and responsibility, while the *reductive* identity agency was determined by rejections, boundaries, daunting expectations, and withdrawal, which led to self-understanding. The *attentive* identity agency was based on pre-service teachers' anticipation and monitoring of their environment. The findings revealed the importance of concrete teaching experiences, relational group work, and the implementation of educational theories in practice within teacher education programmes so that pre-service teachers could manifest agency and develop a professional identity.

These studies offered scope and implications for teacher education programmes, reinforcing the need to critically reflect on how to facilitate student teachers' intelligent, critical thought, based on engagement with educational theory and participation within the school community.

Internal and contextual factors mediating LTA

Drawing on ecological perspectives on agency, Ruohotyie- Lyhty's longitudinal study (2015) scrutinised newly-qualified modern language teachers' beliefs, during their first four years of teaching in Finnish schools. The study explored their beliefs about foreign language teaching and their agency emerging from their individualised constructions of their environment. The study proposes that teachers' perceptions of their environment lead to an assessment of affordances and constraints that enable or hinder their possibilities for acting. Analysis of reflective essays and yearly interviews

revealed that the teachers adopted two contrasting subject positions, the first as dependent on their dominant environment guided by norms and authorities, and the second as autonomous teachers finding opportunities in their environment. Also, the students were perceived as undermining the teachers' independence to teach according to their pedagogical judgements. Findings showed that the teachers constructed their environment as restrictive, as their initial beliefs about good teaching developed at university were contradicted by the traditional school practices valuing discipline and exam preparation. The study suggested that the teachers' positioning and self-beliefs concerning other people and the school environment impacted their professional development, practices, and sense of agency. Concluding, agency appears to be moderated by the environment and teachers' personalised construction of their context according to their identity, beliefs, and values.

Following the complexity/dynamic systems theory framework, Hiver & Whitehead (2018) explored how Korean ESL teachers constructed their pedagogical agency and identity within the reconstruction of critical incidents in classroom practice in the public secondary school sector. In their study, agency was situated as a complex and interrelated system of components, reflecting individual capacities, pedagogical convictions, and willful actions, within the resources, constraints, and affordances of their context. Observational data through video recordings, reflective journal entries, and semi-structured interviews focused on dynamic phenomenological manifestations of agency as intentionality to make a difference in students' learning, within the language classroom ecology. The findings revealed that the language teachers drew on autobiographical reasoning to legitimise their actions in response to classroom critical incidents, such as the vice principal's interruptions or a ''star'' student's reaction, thus constructing their pedagogical agency and professional identity.

Colegrove & Zúñiga's study (2018) examined an ESL teacher's beliefs about teaching and learning as she explored her own and her students' agency in implementing project-based instruction in her economically, culturally, and linguistically diverse classroom, in the U.S. educational context. Drawing on teacher agency within the pedagogy of hope approach (Freire) and positioning theory, the study advocated for formative assessment and child-centred environments that incorporate language minority students' experiences and cultural understandings. The study unveiled the dehumanising, deficit-based teaching practices through high-stakes assessments, as diminishing students' bilingual development as well as language teachers' professional agency. The authors utilised video-cued ethnography, field notes, films, photos, and follow-up interviews with the participants. Analysis of observational data showed a dissonance between the teacher's initial self-perception as a controlling teacher, and her actual teaching practices during PBI implementation, proving her risk-taking approach when teaching. It was suggested that watching herself on video enhanced the teacher's self-awareness and reflection on her identity and teaching practices during the research. The findings showed that as a facilitator within PBI, the teacher became a transformative agent toward advocacy, extending agency to her students by positioning them in a central role, having them learn dialogically through collaboration, and giving them space for autonomous learning. The study brought to attention the plight of the most vulnerable and marginalised within accountability systems based on test scores, the teachers in low-performing schools who experience the most difficulties in adopting creative, context-sensitive pedagogical practices that could help their vulnerable students evolve. Also, it emphasised the importance of collaboration between researchers and teachers, which can enable teachers to explore innovative, situated instructional alternatives and thus enact their desired pedagogical identity and agency.

Following an ecological approach, Namgung et al., (2020) investigated how secondary ESL teachers in a Korean province understood their agency and the contextual factors that mediated it. The data from 15 semi-structured interviews investigated teachers' experiences, or aspects of their professional knowledge and opinions. The thematic analysis revealed aspects such as teachers' *espoused agency*, as in what teachers would like to exercise provided they had opportunities, and their *realisable agency*,

as in what teachers were able to achieve in their environment, that was mediated by individual, collegial, and sociocultural legitimation. The study underscores the notion of socio-cultural legitimation embodied by power and authority imbalances, national curricula, standardised tests creating competitive educational environments, and parents' evaluations of teachers' work. Findings showed that the teachers' self-doubt regarding their language and teaching competence led to feelings of inadequacy, compelling them to give in to parents' complaints and design assessments according to parents' wishes. Also, the required collegial consensus regarding assessment design was a structural impediment that inhibited individual teachers from acting according to their pedagogical convictions, and thus enacting their espoused agency. One of the conclusions, in Foucaldian understanding, was that teachers' realisable agency was restricted to those pedagogical practices rendered legitimate by socio-cultural factors as caught within a mechanism of objectification. Although limited to a specific South Korean province, the study reveals that Korean ESL teachers were under severe scrutiny, and their pedagogical agency was inhibited by both schools' internal oppressive mechanisms and external factors, such as high-stakes examination policies.

Aiming to scrutinise teacher attrition issues and the sustainability of the teaching profession, recent longitudinal studies on early career ESL teachers' agency and identities such as Huang & Yip (2021), and Huang (2021) examined the internal and contextual factors impacting teacher agency, concerning their intentions and actions, in Hong Kong's educational context. Huang & Yip's (2021) longitudinal qualitative multiple-case study drew on Bandura's social cognitive theory, to examine how three Hong Kong secondary ESL teachers manifested agency to gain control over their teaching practice and professional development within the challenges and affordances of their workplace contexts. The theoretical model was chosen to reveal the interactions of personal factors, such as personality, beliefs, cognitions, affect, and adapted actions, with practices within dynamic environmental affordances and constraints. Findings from in-depth interviews, WhatsApp communications, and school documents revealed that their motivations for leaving their schools were connected to contextual challenges in their work environment that intermingled with their pursuit of further education. Mini-stories representing the themes found showed that each participant manifested different degrees of proactive, reactive, and passive agency within their school contexts over the years. The teachers enacted their proactive agency such as innovating classroom teaching and assessments or seeking further professional development, when they benefited from collegial support, mentoring, sharing resources, and had the freedom to interpret the curriculum. When the participants perceived misalignment with school cultures, due to inappreciation from authoritarian leadership, colleagues, or students, they manifested reactive agency, by mere compliance with school requirements. Teachers manifested passive agency when they stagnated in their professional development as their initiative in innovating materials and practices diminished due to school routines. The four properties of human agency (Bandura, 2001) such as intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness, influenced the teachers' proactive, reactive, and passive agency when they responded to the interplay of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. The participants' agency fluctuated regarding intentionality and forethought, due to positioning of self, others, and school contexts. It was concluded that the teachers' agency concerning their teaching and professional development was inhibited by institutional cultures, administrative style, workplace relationships, policies, and power imbalances. All these undermined the participating teachers' authority and confused their identity and status, resulting in teachers' stress and declining health, and consequently, teacher attrition.

Similarly, Huang (2021) presented a longitudinal case study of a Hong Kong early-career ESL teacher, transitioning through various stages of professional development and job positions. Narrative data collected over eight years, through interviews, informal communications, and autobiography explored the teacher's exercise of agency and her identity construction, through her perceptions and experiences within contextual constraints and opportunities, in Hong Kong's secondary school contexts. The

author proposed a framework for agency and identity to support analysis of early career teachers' decisions to join, stay in or leave the teaching profession, drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus, contending that social norms and structures shape behaviours and thinking. Identity is thus presented as emergent from structural resources and individual agency in response to structures. The data analysis seeking motivations for leaving or remaining in the profession showed that the participant's identity was built on previous learning experiences, beliefs, and aspirations to become an innovative teacher. The contextual challenges influencing her agency by her commitment to leave or stay were represented by the schools' organisational cultures, the level of collaboration between teachers, workload, and classroom management problems. Particularly striking in the study was the depiction of the school management's quality control measures, materialised in repeated lesson observations, and rechecking of students' assignments, resulting in the participant's humiliation and trauma, followed by resignation. Analysis revealed that fluctuating macro-systemic, political, and socio-cultural influences combined with temporally bound internal factors such as beliefs, emotions, and memories associated with her experiences, impacted the participant's agency and identity development, and led to the abandonment of the profession.

These longitudinal studies shed light on early career ESL teachers' professional trajectories and unveiled Hong Kong's school cultures, providing implications for all educational stakeholders. The studies emphasise that beginning teachers need self-reflection and mental preparation when embracing the profession. They also offer implications for all school stakeholders' who must ensure reasonable working conditions and development opportunities for teachers, to prevent teacher turnover.

Drawing on critical realist perspectives on agency and social structure developed by Bhaskar (1998), Khalil & Lewis's (2019) mixed methods study explored EFL teachers' autonomy in lower secondary schools within Turkey's centralised teaching system. Teacher autonomy is described as a workplace construct referring to teachers' reflective practice, collaboration, initiation of responsible action and decision-making regarding teaching and assessment, school management, professional development, and curriculum development. The study considers teachers as active agents who can critically evaluate their circumstances, consciously transform or perpetuate social structures, exercise their power, and create opportunities for autonomy. Analysis of documents revealed that teacher autonomy was discerned as teachers' identification of professional developmental needs, initiatives to meet students' needs, collegial collaboration, and decision-making by evaluating the head teacher's performance. Analysis of survey data, observations, and interviews showed that teachers had autonomy in teaching and assessment, based on students' needs. They expressed mixed opinions concerning the free choice of assessment techniques independent of those suggested by the ministry. Findings showed that the teachers were pressured by parents and school management which led to the falsification of exam results to enhance students' centralised exam results.

Teachers' autonomy was restricted to the negotiation of weekly schedules, choice of year groups, participation in school committees, textbook selection from a predetermined list, and teacher guard duty. Findings revealed that individual capacity and the existence of these opportunities did not necessarily materialise in teacher autonomy, which depended largely on specific school contexts and workplace relationships. Although teachers identified their developmental needs and complained about the low quality of professional development programmes organised by the ministry, they passively accepted the situation, knowing that nothing would be changed. Teachers' lack of awareness of opportunities led to their lack of autonomy and feelings of inefficacy concerning their professional development. Concerning curriculum development, findings showed that this was carried out through teacher focus group meetings and reports submitted to district directorates. The interviews revealed that teachers were convinced that their views were not accounted for since they received no feedback and that the strategies employed by directorates were not transparent regarding teachers' concerns.

The ESL teachers' English language competence was criticised and they distrusted that the ministry valued their concerns or students' needs. Teachers' lack of trust and feeling unappreciated affected their agency and autonomy, along with their commitment to the profession, job motivation, and self-esteem. Passive forms of agency reproduced flawed habitual practices maintaining the status quo. Although focused on the concept of autonomy, the study provides an understanding of teacher autonomy and agency from various stakeholders' perspectives. Despite being limited to a single province, it unveils systemic dysfunctionalities of relations and practices within schools in the Turkish centralised educational system. The study raises awareness of the integrity of the profession and teacher professionalism when teachers are subjected to hierarchical pressures.

Following a dialogical approach to agency and emotions, Priestley et al.'s (2015) ecological approach to teacher agency and Zembylas' s (2003) poststructural approach to emotions, Miller & Gkonou (2018) investigate how emotions are related to teacher agency, in the context of tertiary education in the U.K. and the U.S.. The study revealed that teachers' emotional labour, as in teachers' effort to control their emotions, was connected to teachers' ethical self-formation (Foucault, 1983). Ethical self-formation represents the process teachers undertake to critically reflect on their selves and improve themselves morally as inherent to their profession and identity while negotiating their teaching environment and recognising its dominant ideologies. Findings from an online questionnaire with thirty language teachers in the U.K. and the U.S., and follow-up semi-structured interviews, inquiring about their emotions, revealed that the teachers invested mainly positive emotions in teaching and supporting students, thus taking emotional rewards from their teaching. Nonetheless, their emotional labour was socially and politically promoted within the discourses of teaching-as-caring, as values that have been traditionally associated with good teaching and expected of teachers, as their students' nurturers. The authors show that discourses on teaching shape institutional politics and legitimise certain ways of being and feeling. The study concludes that investigating teachers' emotions provides insight into how these discourses shape teachers' understanding of emotions as either positive or negative, and thus their own choices to exercise agency by acting and feeling differently.

Drawing on motivation theories and conceptual frameworks related to teacher autonomy and agency, Glas's (2016) research aimed to examine the Chilean teachers' beliefs about their own competences, and thoughts on the contextual affordances and constraints, conducive to successful or less successful use of motivational strategies in the classroom. Findings showed that external factors such as family background, an 'island mentality' in disadvantaged parts of Chilean society, rejecting foreign language study, and globalisation impacted students' motivation as well as the teachers' development of a sense of agency. The teachers pinpointed a series of classroom factors that helped students' motivation and autonomy, such as context-appropriate, cultural contents, material selected upon students' request, students' involvement in creating learning activities, teaching techniques, or teacher's personality and approachability. Further psychological factors such as 'feelings of incompetence' impacted students' motivation to learn and were identified as resulting from previous learning experiences, low grades, the heterogeneity of students' levels in secondary school classrooms, and generally, an internalised role assigned to them in the education system. Contextual constraints such as low expectations, lack of support, and difficult access to mediational means such as relevant textbooks and technological tools, indicated institutional rejection of innovation and governmental neglect. These hindered teachers' efforts to motivate their students to learn. Internal constraints such as teachers' feelings of inefficacy, distrust in personal capabilities to innovate, and deficit projections on students led to teachers' feelings of discouragement and abandonment of their students. The study offered scope and implications for research, teacher education programmes, and policy-makers that could support teachers to reflect on their practices, explore practical approaches to autonomy and motivational strategies, and develop

their creativity. Thus they could open spaces for agentic action, which could benefit their students' motivation, autonomy, and language learning.

Conclusion

Findings show that workload, authoritarian leadership, power relations, institutional discourses, school regulations, norms, dysfunctional teacher-student-parent relationships, and students' lack of motivation impact language teachers' self-efficacy and identity construction and hinder their desired or proactive agency at a micro and meso- level (Huang & Yip, 2021; Namgung et al., 2020). Macro factors such as language policies and ideologies, political and social discourses, societal norms and values, globalisation, and the internationalisation of language education through external demands and regulations impact educational systems and school teachers differently, depending on cultural and socio-economic contexts. Passive and reactive forms of agency, such as compliance and giving in to school habitual practices maintain the status quo or lead to teachers' turnover (Huang & Yip, 2021). Abnormal types of teacher autonomy and agency are expressed as answers to pressures and control in centralised educational systems, revealing a lack of agency, professional stagnation, distrust, and demotivation (Khalil & Lewis, 2019).

Internal factors such as teachers' values and beliefs about education and students, personality, emotions, and experience, affect their levels of alignment with schools' practices, and thus their agency enactments at micro and meso levels. Teachers' language proficiency, self-efficacy, professional development, and experience can arguably contribute to teachers' agentic potential and enactment. The findings in the empirical studies under discussion illustrate that teacher agency is highly individualised and fluctuating, based on teachers' personalised constructions of their environment, opportunities in teacher education programmes, and professional learning (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2015; 2016; Soini et al., 2015; Heikonen et. al., 2020; Toom et al., 2017), resulting in different expressions of agency at different times of their careers (Liyuan et al., 2022). Teachers can assess their classroom situations and sometimes resist educational policies, counteracting them by adapting and tailoring pedagogical practices to accommodate their students' individual needs in their school contexts (Buchanan, 2015; Glas, 2016). Particularly relevant were arguments and evidence that teacher agency can support learner agency through affection, problem-based pedagogical choices and materials, by opening democratic pedagogical spaces for underprivileged learners (Colegrove & Zúñiga, 2018).

Concerning some of the theoretical frameworks adopted to explore the phenomenon of teacher agency, the researchers employed the social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001), ecological perspectives (van Lier, 2004; Priestley et al. 2015), Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic theory, the complex dynamic systems theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2017), or poststructural views and positioning theory (Davies, 2000; Zembylas, 2003).

Qualitative case studies and narrative inquiry, through semi-structured interviews, reflective essays, journal entries, video recordings, classroom observations, and artifacts, are the main methodological approaches and strategies exploring the construct of agency in language education. Narrative inquiry investigating the narrative formation of identity and agency is established in language teacher education as a method able to capture the complex nature of beliefs, actions, intentionality, and contextual dynamics that compose the ecological construct of teacher agency.

Despite being bound preponderantly to newly-qualified ESL teachers' professional lives, LTA research is valuable and re-positions language teachers beyond the narrow focus of the language

technician abiding language policies or developing students' necessary skills for language testing, providing a rich resource for the present project.

Chapter 3

Research Approach and Methodology

This project relies on the ontological, axiological, and epistemological assumptions of a qualitative inquiry within the social constructivist paradigm. Qualitative research is characterised by open-ended research questions, a naturalist methodology facilitating understanding, the researcher as a participant in the meaning-making and his/her distinct positioning and reflexivity, a focus on participants' views, and a holistic account that develops a complex picture of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013). The ontological assumption of the social-constructivist paradigm advances the existence of a multiplicity of truths and realities constructed actively by the researcher, participants, and potential readers, who are involved in the meaning-making concerning the research. The epistemological assumption divulges the subjective nature of knowledge derived from individual interpretations, negotiated socially and culturally through the researcher and participants' relationship and interaction. The axiological assumption requires that the researcher positions explicitly by disclosing his or her worldview, values, and biases, and by acknowledging the value-laden nature of the interpretations (Creswell, 2013). To this end, I created a special space for a reflexive summary in the chapter.

Educational research has long acknowledged the potential of narrative inquiry to address the complexity of teacher stories sensitively and holistically, by illuminating individual experiences and identities in context (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013). Considering the findings of the literature review, the narrative inquiry methodology was deemed adequate to address the research questions and scope, which is to explore and understand how FL teachers make sense of their personal and professional experiences. As such, the narrative inquiry gives access to teachers' evaluations of their school environments, relationships, and contextual resources enabling the enactment of professional agency, through their stories, in a specific cultural, social, and professional context. The theoretical and empirical literature and the ecological framework inform the narrative inquiry methodology, enabling understanding of the participants' experiences. Narrative inquiry values the participants' experiences allowing exploration of the personal (feelings, emotions, philosophies) social (relationships), cultural, and institutional narratives which shape these individual experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

According to Elbaz (1990), facilitating teachers' stories enables voicing criticism in socially accepted ways, involves reflection and moral lessons to be learnt by researchers, participants, and readers, and builds a dialogue between storytellers and potential audiences, all of which this project attempts to achieve.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) posit, narrative inquiry places in the centre the multiplicity of voices, people, and actions, in their contexts defined by temporality. It rejects certainty allowing different interpretations, aiming to identify common themes and achieve verisimilitude and trustworthiness of findings (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative inquirers must find balance and reconcile fidelity to the story and how the participants are making sense of that story, with their own reconstructions and intentions concerning the text, which involves also creating relationships with communities of scholars and readers (Blumenfeld-Jones, 2006).

Clandinin and Connelly (1990) advise that criticality is essential in narrative analysis implying that subjectivity must be tempered to prevent the 'smoothing" of findings and maintain the integrity of the research. As such, the narrative inquiry comes also with limitations and criticism, concerning its inherent subjectivity, tentativeness, self-indulgence, and the possibility of distortion, which was called the "Hollywood effect" by Clandinin and Connelly (1990). Despite all this, a narrative approach addresses the complexity of human experience in context, and in this case, contributes to the understanding of a multifaceted construct such as teacher agency.

In narrative research, the researcher and the participants actively collaborate and co-construct meaning, through their interaction. Narrative reality is not a representation of facts and historical truth, but a particular account of experience, a reflection of reality, in a particular social, temporal, and relational setting (Mishler, 2004). This represents the main assumption of narrative inquiry, as altering the phenomena under study. Both the researcher and the participants have rationales and specific audiences in mind, within a specific context, which shape stories and understandings (Creswell, 2013). The meanings that the participants ascribe to their stories are essential in narrative research, which values the unique, particular, insider perspectives (Atkinson, 2007).

In this study, the narrative inquiry approach empowered the participants to tell their stories and talk about their views on education from the position of knowledgeable actors inside the education system. The teachers' stories provided the opportunity to explore their past and present experiences, unveiling the environments in which they were learning or teaching, their relationships in class and school, as well as the larger contexts and discourses around education that shaped their beliefs, sense, and achievement of agency. A characteristic but also a challenge of narrative inquiry is that it focuses on the narrative meaning, which is fluid, shifting, and completely dependent on the participants' dispositions, contexts, and ability to reflect and remember (Polkinghorne, 1988). This constitutes one of the limitations of this research, which acknowledges that a comprehensive truth about the topic of language teachers' agency cannot be captured, and that research must be expanded to other participants, methods, other forms of narrative data, and a longer time in the field.

As Gubrium & Holstein (2009) contend, storytellers assemble and construct their stories actively, by choosing strategically from their experience to create a persuasive account, connected to what is most significant to them. As such, it was important to remain aware that the narratives were shaped by the situated demands of interaction and subscribed to local understandings and perceived roles and expectations (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

Further, narratives are the result of a collaborative process of meaning-making where as a researcher I have to acknowledge my contribution to this interaction, by inactions or actions that have shaped the narrative (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009) dependent also on researching skills. I was aware that our collaboration and complicity would eventually influence the direction of the story. Ultimately, I became the co-narrator of the participants' stories, involved in the re-storying and interpretation of data. I aimed though to follow closely the participants' views and keep the interpretation of results balanced (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

Data Collection

The main source of data for this research consists of interview transcripts and the researcher's reflections during the research process and after each interview. I also examined sources of literature consisting of national and European language education policies, methodologies, and procedures because the narratives contained references to some of these and it was necessary to explain and bring context to the participants' stories.

Although the participants were busy, sometimes discouraged, tired, and somewhat guarded, I sensed that they wanted to be asked about their lives as professionals, and what they had experienced in their school environments daily. Some of the participants were not sure to participate in the beginning, so there was a need for negotiation and phone calls, reassurance, explanation and also sharing some of the methodological details of the research. After two weeks, I was able to establish the date of the interviews, minding the participants' busy professional and personal lives. Data collection from interviews started on the 13th of February and ended on the 26th of February, 2022.

The semi-structured, in depth-interviews on Zoom constituted the main form of data collection in the study. They were two hours to two hours and a half long. The interview contained open-ended questions derived from the research questions, aiming to allow the participants the space to share their personal background information, their views, and teaching experiences.

In-depth interviews or responsive interviewing (Rubin and Rubin, 2012) are among the main sources of evidence in qualitative studies. As such, I regarded the semi-structured Zoom one-on-one interview based on open-ended questions, as an efficient method to collect rich data concerning FL teachers' opinions, perceptions, and experiences, which facilitated understanding of the multidimensional but less known phenomenon of teacher agency in the Romanian public secondary school context. As Guest et al., (2013) posit, semi-structured interviews enable discussing emerging issues without straying off topic, allowing the researcher to build rapport, ensure confidentiality, and extend empathy.

Thus, the participants were invited to speak about their beginnings and motivations to embrace the profession, their values, beliefs about teaching, roles, responsibilities, educational purposes, relationships in their school environment, professional development, initiatives, or challenges and aspirations. The participants were also encouraged to share further aspects that they found relevant for the discussion and expand on these issues at their will. The concept of agency was explained at the beginning of the research and the interview questions were founded on the ecological framework with the iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions, meant to elicit stories.

I minded what Goodson & Gill (2011) asserted about interviews in narrative research, as being composed of a narrative phase, where the participants are invited to tell their stories, and a conversation phase, based on a dialogic interchange between the researcher and participants. Following their guidelines, I first tried to restrict my role to that of an attentive and empathic listener. I was also attentive to the opportune turns at talk to ensure conversational flow (Patton, 2002). In the conversation stage, I introduced topics that were related more to my theoretical interests and invited them to elaborate and clarify their views on the issues (Goodson & Gill, 2011). As a researcher, my main concerns were to develop trust, examine personal assumptions and make sure not to communicate preferences and judgements, encourage discussions about difficult issues within reasonable limits, emphasise the learning that occurs in conversation, and pay attention to issues of power in our interaction, to allow the participants unveil and own their stories (Gubrium et al., 2012).

The interview questions were open and the follow-up questions were individualised, based on what each participant had to say, followed by asking for further detail (Patton, 2002). I checked for meaning, understanding, and confirmation during the interview and reformulated questions when needed. I had follow-up questions prepared for each interview but mostly tried to elicit stories, allowing emergent knowledge. The interviews were conducted in Romanian, transcribed by hand, and stored safely on my computer. The recordings were deleted after transcription and relevant extracts were translated into English. Quotations from the interviews were used to illustrate the themes found in the analysis part. The participants had the possibility to send any additional thoughts via email or WhatsApp if they wanted. They chose not to, as they had busy school schedules and personal lives.

Sampling Procedure

The study employed a non-probability snowball sampling combined with a purposive sampling procedure or "judgment" sampling, aiming to gather participants who could provide meaningful, rich information about the topic (Patton, 2002; Guest et al., 2013). The teachers had to be fully qualified to teach their subject, with a minimum of 3 years of teaching experience, and work in lower public secondary schools or high schools in Romania. I have selected the participants by involving my networks. With my colleagues' help, based on their recommendations, I connected with 3 French language teachers and 4 English language in-service teachers with various degrees of professional experience and qualifications. I could not find a German, Spanish, or Italian language teacher in due time, therefore I could not ensure a diversity of language subjects and perspectives, which constitutes another limitation of this study. I state that in most public secondary schools in Romania, French and English languages are taught preponderantly and it was easier to find candidates teaching these subjects. Concerning data saturation, after I identified several similarities in the accounts, I considered that the information gathered had quality and was sufficient relative to the purpose of the exploration (Silverman, 2010). Five of the participants had extensive experience teaching in public schools, and well-formed views of the national education system that they were willing to share.

Ethical Considerations and Challenges

The fact that I was myself a foreign language teacher helped to build trust enabling the participants to get past the initial reserve and share their experiences with me, which added to the authenticity of the research. I felt that we shared a common ground and that we needed this conversation. Nonetheless, they were people whom I did not previously know or only knew from a distance, therefore establishing rapport and trust before the interviews was vital. Two of the participants were aware of each other's participation but I did not share any names and details. All the teachers participated voluntarily and each was sent an invitation letter, explaining what the study was about, the reason they had been approached to participate, consent forms, protection of identities through pseudonyms, and data protection. I encouraged the participants to ask further questions regarding the study whenever necessary (see Appendices 1, 2, 3).

Building trust, rapport, and overall good relations with the participants was my main priority in this project so that they could share their stories genuinely, and feel comfortable with being recorded in Zoom interviews. Being recorded could pose a challenge even for the most daring, willing participants, which I completely related to. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative research emphasises the issue of human responsibility and relational ethics, where the researcher has to be able to make sound judgements and decisions adapted to the specific situations that might arise, to ensure beneficence, protection from harm, respect for the participants' sensitivity, dignity, and humanity, and doing justice to their stories. This accentuates the sense of partnership and care between the researcher and participants.

The participants were assured of their autonomy from the beginning, having the possibility to withdraw from the research, if they considered it necessary. Nonetheless, consent is built through the relational process and sourced from an ethics of care rather than participant rights (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While interviewing, I made sure that the participants felt emotionally safe, and I specified that they should provide only the details that they felt comfortable with and were willing to share (Patton, 2002). To ensure protection from harm and the confidentiality of the research, and avoid emotional and reputational distress, I ascribed pseudonyms and removed identifying features from the findings report (Patton, 2002).

I answered all the questions regarding the research and was mindful of the teachers' schedules. Some of them were head teachers and lead class teachers in their schools, while others had various administrative engagements at the school or county inspectorate. Each of them had little time available. During our discussions, they expressed their interest in the research. I explained the specifics of the qualitative design and answered all their questions related to the methodology of the study, the topic of the research, the concept of agency, as well as any confidentiality issues. To avoid deception, I did that until I was sure that they felt safe and understood what the research was about (Babbie, 2013). The concept of agency does not have a good equivalent in the Romanian language, therefore I had to ensure that my explanation and adapted translation of the concept were completely accurate. I provided definitions of the concept of agency and also explained the concept in our phone and WhatsApp communications. To ensure reciprocity, I stressed that I was open to sharing my experience, knowledge, books, and didactic materials in return and they could reach me when they wanted.

Reflexive Summary

This project is a qualitative exploration within the social constructivist paradigm, implying that constant reflection and scrutiny of the researcher's role in the study are essential concerning how personal worldview, professional background, culture, and experiences might shape interpretations, themes, and meaning (Creswell, 2013). To stay faithful to the meanings and perspectives that the participants had about the research problem, I tried to make my assumptions explicit and reflected on issues such as how my background and experiences as a language teacher affected this study. To this end, I wrote down my thoughts throughout all the stages of the research process and after each interview.

I was an English language teacher for 18 years and obtained all the professional qualifications required in the Romanian education system. I obtained an international language teaching certification as well. I took two national examinations to obtain tenure and was successful both times. I worked in both lower secondary school and high school, teaching students of all language levels. I navigated all the intricacies, methodologies, and institutions of the education system and experienced its attempts at reform. During the pandemic, I decided to take a leave of absence, as I could do that as a tenured teacher and applied for the Master's in Educational Research in Gothenburg, Sweden. I left a safe position in what might be called a good school in the city where I lived, for the uncertainty and challenges of living in another country. I do not regret my choice.

Distancing from the national education system, by pursuing a master's in Sweden, was a necessary, existential event. My tutors from the IMER programme contributed both directly and indirectly to my awareness and choice of the topic of agency, through their propositions of literature, and, generally, through discussions, during the programme. It is safe to say that the master's offered meaning to my life, by enabling me to undertake this research.

The narrative approach allowed me to locate the teachers in their contexts, describe what they do, how they perceive themselves and believe others perceive them, the dynamic of their relationships with their school community, colleagues, students, and, more generally, with the education system. The purpose of the research was to explore and understand the political, social, and cultural factors that shaped teachers' working conditions, experiences, sense, and achievement of agency. This helped me reflect on the events, processes, and reasons that brought me to the research and scrutinise my preconceptions and biases. My own experiences, both positive and negative, accomplishments as well as disillusionment as an English language teacher, working in the public education system in my country, have contributed to the creation of a worldview and values that have affected the research

process, from the beginning. Nonetheless, I kept in mind that despite working in a socio-constructivist paradigm, I had to resist any temptation to tell my own professional story and honour the participants' views and stories (Creswell, 2013).

I soon became confident that the experience could become as much a reflection point, enhancing awareness of the phenomenon of teacher agency, and as an equal learning opportunity for the participants as it was for me. To an extent, I enabled a platform where the interviewees could express their emotions, vulnerability, and practical difficulties, regarding their work conditions and perceived status. I was humbled and grateful for the fact that they accepted to offer me their time amidst their busy school schedules, and professional and family lives. Four of them were busy working mothers with lots of responsibilities.

I knew how problematic the recording of an interview might seem for an interviewee, who has the feeling of vulnerability and intrusion and might choose to hold back or withdraw completely, despite reassurance. I hoped that knowing that I was a colleague, who had experienced many of the hardships in the national education system, would build their trust. This was crucial so that the power differentials would be mitigated and they would not feel exploited. Also, I was keenly aware of their sensitivities, dignity, sense of self-worth, and self-reliance. I assumed that they had to manage a lot in their personal and professional lives. They seemed open and ready to share their experiences with me. During the interview, there were also negotiations and slightly awkward moments, when I asked more specific questions. We navigated these moments together relatively smoothly.

In the end, I must also acknowledge the fact that I must take responsibility for the interpretation and my understanding of the narratives. Difficult choices had to be made regarding the selection and organisation of the research material, to accommodate the requirements of the master's thesis. What I imply is that when dealing with the lives of real people, we cannot be sure whether our decisions, choices, and interpretations will not have an unsettling impact on the participants and cause dissatisfaction.

Sustainability Statement

Researching and reflecting on the topic of teacher agency, I find that it has numerous interconnections with issues of sustainability in education, and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). The research study is explicitly related to **SDG 4 Quality Education "**Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". The focus of the study is on language teachers' perceptions and narratives of their agency understandings and enactments, within secondary school education, which provides insights into teachers' values, beliefs, teaching practices, working conditions, and school organisational cultures within the national education system, and also into the broader landscape of societal values and beliefs. Teacher agency is decidedly concerned with meaningful education and students' learning beyond narrow understandings of 'teacher quality' within accountability systems (Priestley et al., 2015). The study illuminates problematic issues that concern the development of teacher agency through initial teacher education and CPD programmes during their career, in the Romanian educational context.

The project discusses language teachers' accounts of resilience, initiative, and commitment to their students' development of life skills, language knowledge, and key competencies. Teacher agency is related to purposeful teaching and contributes to students' development of critical and problem-solving skills. FL teachers' decision-making and commitment to their profession are crucial in the story of their students' success in and outside the country. They enable their students' foreign language learning and certification, facilitating their access to further education and employment,

which connects the study with **4.4 Increase the number of people with relevant skills for financial success** *"By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship"*.

The study also illuminates issues of inclusion and the efforts that the FL teachers make to address the learning needs of disadvantaged students with vulnerable backgrounds who deserve support and access to free quality education, which connects it to **4.1 Free primary and secondary education** *"By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes"* as well as **4.5 Eliminate all discrimination in education** "By 2030, *eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations"*.

Despite precarious school conditions, FL teachers are preoccupied with bringing quality into their profession, according to their professional values and understandings, by proposing meaningful content and activities concerning climate change, environmental protection, or teenagers' interests such as health, stereotypes, history, literature, or popular culture. The teachers promote the inclinations and aptitudes of individual students. Their responsibilities and purposes concern the development of their students' key competencies, intercultural communication, FL communication skills and competence in public speaking, and also their emotional development. They involve their students in essay writing, thematic debates, cultural activities, or national and international projects, which can develop an understanding of citizenship values, innovation and curiosity, shared responsibility, and collaboration. These findings connect to **4.7 Education for sustainable development and global citizenship "***By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development"*

The study unveils that despite the FL teachers' proactive professional agency at micro-levels, concerning methodological decisions in classrooms, their labour conditions in schools are not auspicious and they compensate constantly to address material, didactic, and human resources deprivation, which raises awareness of goal **4.8 Build and upgrade inclusive and safe schools** *"Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all"*. The teachers need to address their students' practical problems or issues of bullying that are linked to social disintegration and students' disadvantaged backgrounds, without consistent help from school counsellors and psychologists. The findings show that schools are challenging environments, where teachers' and students' emotional and physical well-being and security are not among priorities in the national public education system.

The study raises questions of social and economic equality for both teachers and different categories of students which links the project to **SDG 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth "**Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all", and respectively to **SDG 10 Reduced Inequalities "**Reduce inequality within and among countries''. The project reveals that the FL teachers struggle to build a dignified social and professional status within inconclusive reforms and lack of decent salaries while they are expected to perform and produce results. Also, learners from low-income families are not provided equal opportunities to develop through national education, being thus rendered less capable of accessing further professions and altering their lives. The chronic underfunding in national education together with current educational practices and policies deepen the socio-economic divide and promote inequality and inequity, denying students from low-income families a fair chance to perform and

master basic skills and competencies, enabling only a minority of top, well-off students to thrive (Kitchen et al., 2017). A substantial number of students, who represent valuable human potential are lost due to resource deprivation and the replication of unsustainable policies and practices. By further limiting the idea of teacher and learner success to obtaining individual- products fit for market requirements (Mockler 2013; Morgan, 2015), educational policies and practices are relentlessly replicating social inequalities between categories of learners, further fuelling inequalities between countries.

Data analysis

Concerning the transcribed texts, I first had to ensure that the translations accurately reflected the meaning of the original texts in the Romanian language, addressing any issues of register and speaker intention. The texts had to sound natural and intelligible in the target language while capturing the equivalence of thought. My knowledge of the national education context, the languages, and my understanding of the circumstances of the utterances were helpful in this task and, hopefully, ensured the comprehensibility of the texts.

The iterative reading of the stories was an emotionally challenging experience and an opportunity to remember, understand, and reflect on the participants' and my own stories. Some of my assumptions were contradicted, while others were confirmed. Sometimes discussions in the interviews developed beyond the topic and delved into other aspects of the participants' professional lives. Two of the teachers chose not to insist too much on their first experiences and beginnings and preferred to talk about more recent situations because they considered them more valuable. The participants' accounts of events were not necessarily chronological, they switched focus backward and forward, concentrating on the things that each considered relevant and important in their teaching experience. I mostly encouraged a free account of thoughts and events.

The study is informed by the ecological perspective, where teachers are considered agentic, despite unavoidable contextual constraints. Thus, teachers can make choices and take stances that affect their circumstances and school contexts, as their actions are not merely shaped or inhibited by their environment (Priestley et al., 2015). Consequently, in my analysis, I present the teachers as people with personal and professional expertise, responsibility, purposes, and will, who act intentionally. I avoided describing them as victims of their cultural, historical, political, and social circumstances. Further, I tried to unveil the participants' identity transformation and agency in conflicted situations but also supportive ones, the positions that they chose conscientiously or that they felt were available for them in their school environments. All these were illustrated by relevant extracts from the participants' stories.

The first step consisted of iterative readings and immersion in the raw data, memoing, writing margin notes, and developing the initial codes, which assumed both deductive and inductive processes. According to Creswell (2013), codes represent things that researchers are aware of before the analysis. In this case, the ecological theoretical perspective on agency, with the iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions, was essential for the development of the interview questions and analysis of findings.

The first cycle of coding focused on significant influential figures on the personal and professional path, beginnings, class experiences, purposes, teacher and student motivation, student-teacher relationships, collegial and power relationships in school and beyond, goals, and the larger professional context such as accountability and professional development. These were considered formative concerning the participants' professional agency. I examined the patterns related to the

major contextual, social, cultural, and political factors and their relation to the participants' current or projected agency.

In the first stage of the analysis, I re-storied each narrative, to get a sense of the meaning of the texts. As Clandinin & Connelly (2000) advised, the stories had to be re-organised and rewritten chronologically, referring to the past, present, and future that fit the iterative, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions of the ecological theoretical and analytical framework chosen for the study. The stories had a main title, a past, present and future, and titles that captured a specific substory/ account. Each story was interesting and meaningful in itself. The presentation of results in the thesis is a narrative analysis focused mainly on commonalities and particularities in the FL teachers' views and experiences, by creating themes, minding the ecological framework. I followed distinctive patterns, using hermeneutic techniques, comparing and contrasting types of themes across cases but also some of the distinctive vocabularies that revealed and added to the meaning of the stories (Polkinghorne, 1988; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009).

The second stage consisted of more detailed descriptions, classification into categories and themes, and interpretation of data in light of the chosen theoretical perspective and important findings in the literature. I captured the most significant parts of the teachers' trajectories and careers and examined each category, the relationships between categories as well as their relationship to the whole, to reach a holistic understanding of the meaning. I soon realised that the categories overlapped and one influenced the other, which was expected, as accounts of experience are complex, multidimensional, and often contradictory. Also, in doing narrative analysis one assumes in Bakhtinian tradition, that there is a multiplicity of meanings and that the interpretation of the accounts can be always subjected to revision, depending on the reader, subjectivity, disposition, time, and context.

The narrative data analysis focused on both the content (thematic analysis) as well as some of the participants' distinctive vocabulary choices such as the use of pronouns, nouns, modality verbs, and grammatical structures (passive constructions), illustrating positioning or descriptions of others in relation to themselves. Several themes were generated such as **developing a teacher identity, resilience and responsibility in finding resources, and challenges**, each having subthemes, which are analysed and discussed in chapters 4 and 5. The discussion and interpretation aim to highlight the particular and unique but also the general in these individual experiences (Creswell, 2013). As this is an analysis within the socio-constructivist paradigm, it should be treated as unsettled and debatable (Creswell, 2013).

Limitations of the Study

The research is a small-scale study, an exploration based on narrative inquiry and the FL teachers' perceptions, where an important limitation is that I did not benefit from the possibility of spending a prolonged time in the field or having the participants at my disposal, to capture their views and experiences in different moments of their professional lives. Another limitation is the interview protocol itself. I constructed open questions the best I could, relying on Priestley et al., (2015) theoretical framework and followed the main findings in the literature. I acknowledge that my research skills are still developing, thus the way I conducted the interviews and subsequent analysis have impacted the quality of the findings.

To ensure the integrity of the research I tried to make my intentions clear, explain the purpose of the study to my participants, and represent their perspectives, stories, and truths as best as possible. Following Guba's (1981) criteria, Kivunja & Kuyini (2017) assert that in qualitative research the positivist criteria of internal, external validity, and reliability must be replaced with four criteria of

trustworthiness and authenticity such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. As such, credibility refers to the extent to which data and data analysis are believable and authentic and whether the findings align with the reality as constructed by the researcher and the participants (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Regarding dependability, it is assumed that because behaviour is profoundly contextual, allowing for multiple interpretations of reality, we cannot replicate the same results. The value of qualitative research resides in capturing what is particular and unique in the participants' experiences, thus with this study, I cannot make any claims of generalisability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Authenticity was hopefully ensured by having diverse language teachers in different schools and capturing what is different in each story in context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants generously offered me their time in interviews, and I created thick, detailed descriptions, which hopefully enhance trustworthiness, giving value to the findings, which might enable readers to decide about relatability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Chapter 4

Presentation of findings

This chapter begins with the participants' pen portraits, followed by the findings of narrative data analysis. As already presented in the previous chapter, the narrative analysis assumed both inductive and deductive processes and focused on the content (thematic analysis) and the some of the participants' distinctive choices of vocabulary. The analysis and discussion were not confined to the researcher's assumptions, or the ecological theoretical framework, and involved other findings in the literature. The main priority was to capture what was unique and also what was general in the participants' views and experiences, aiming to provide as much context as possible within the Romanian public education system. The narrative analysis is based on the most relevant data that laid the foundation for the creation of themes. Three large themes, with subthemes, were identified as follows: **developing a teacher identity; teachers' responsibility in finding resources,** and **challenges in developing and exercising professional agency.**

Teachers' pen portraits

Chloe is a 26-year-old French language teacher in her third year of teaching. She graduated from the Faculty of Letters and has a double specialisation in French and Italian language and literature. She has a Master's in Intercultural Communication and European Discourse. Chloe worked in three schools with part-time norms in previous years but she managed to obtain a full-time teaching norm in a secondary school in a town. At the moment of the interview, she was a qualified substitute teacher, therefore she had a temporary contract and no job security. She mentioned that she needed stability and continuity in one school. At the schools where she worked, the French language was studied second (L2), from the 5th grade, after the English language, which is generally the first foreign language studied in Romanian secondary schools, beginning with students in the preparatory class 0**.**

Olivia is 30 years old and she graduated from the Faculty of Letters in 2013, with a specialisation in Romanian and English language and literature. She also pursued a master's in the theory and practice of book editing and cultural policies because she found it interesting as a student. From this, she gained valuable skills in correcting, proofreading, and editing books. She admitted that she would have liked to find a job in a publishing company but, as she mentioned, the related job opportunities were scarce after graduation. She has nine years of teaching experience as an English language teacher. Olivia obtained a tenured teaching position in 2018 and her second didactic degree. She was

in the process of obtaining her first didactic degree at the time of the interview. Before obtaining tenure she worked in different schools in two other large cities. She has taught both primary and lower secondary school, from class 0 to class 8. As a tenured teacher, she works in two schools that are not situated in the city where she lives but in two different towns in the same county. English is the first foreign language (L1) taught at the schools where she teaches.

Celine graduated in 2001 from the Faculty of Letters and has a double specialisation in French language, literature and theology. She taught for a while after graduation but then decided to take a break and work in translation, as an interpreter. She eventually returned to teaching in 2009. She is 45 years old and has 15 years of experience as a French language teacher. Celine has taught all levels, both lower and upper secondary school, as well as French bilingual classes at high school. She has been a tenured teacher at a lower secondary school in a city but she has transferred to a reputable high school in the same city. At the moment of the interview, she was in the process of taking her second didactic degree and had been recently assisted in class.

Mia is 42 years old and she graduated in 2002 with a specialisation in applied French and English languages and traductology. She pursued a master's in Intercultural Communication and European Discourse later in her career. She is an experienced English language teacher, with 17 years of experience and she obtained her didactic degrees. She has taught high school since she obtained tenure, by taking the national exam, one year after graduating from university. In her first year of teaching, she worked in a lower secondary school in a rural area, where she felt supported and respected as a beginning teacher. English is the first foreign language (L1) studied in her high school. She is an empathetic and involved lead teacher who supports her students, trying to find solutions to some of their practical problems.

Sara is 41 years old and has been teaching the French language for seventeen years. She is an experienced French language teacher, who graduated from the Faculty of Letters in 2002, with a specialisation in French and Russian languages. She declares herself passionate about learning foreign languages and at the moment she is studying Portuguese. She obtained both her didactic degrees. In her first year, she taught in a rural area, where she mentioned that she had felt the happiest in all her teaching career. After a year she became tenured in a high school in an urban area. She has been teaching there ever since. The French language is studied second (L2), after the English language, which is generally studied first in high school. Sara is also a lead teacher and thoroughly committed to helping her students, who sometimes find themselves in difficult situations and need support.

Marie has been a tenured teacher for 22 years. She is 45 years old and she graduated from the Faculty of Foreign Languages in 2000, with a specialisation in English and Romanian language and literature. After that, she did postgraduate studies in universal literature for a year. She mentioned that she pursued literature for her pleasure. She initially thought that she would remain at the university to teach. She also pursued a master's in Anglo-American cultural studies later in her career. She took two national exams to obtain tenure. During her university years, she taught English at kindergarten and acquired experience with very young learners. She taught in a lower secondary school for two years, at the beginning of her career. She has been working in a strong high school in a town for a long time, and teaches all levels.

Marie obtained her didactic degrees early in her career. She was also a methodologist teacher appointed by the county inspectorate for two years, a role that she later decided to give up. At the moment of the interview, Marie was a mentor and member of the county inspectorate advisory council. She was one of the teachers in her school language department who helped establish their high school as a Cambridge and IELTS training centre involved in the organisation of language exams with international recognition. Marie perceived herself as a positive, proactive teacher, committed to

her school community. She mentioned that she had always been interested in learning and developing personally and professionally.

Laura is 41 years old and she has 18 years of teaching experience as an English language teacher. She graduated from the Faculty of Letters in 2003, with a specialisation in English and Romanian language and literature. She mentioned that after graduating and taking her final exams at university, despite the stress and the amount of effort she had to put in, she immediately took the national tenure exam and was successful. She mentioned that in those times there were many teaching positions available and because she obtained a very good grade on her national tenure exam, she was able to choose any position she liked. She has been teaching at the same lower secondary school in the town where she was born since she obtained tenure and feels content with her choice. Laura obtained her didactic degrees early in her first years of teaching.

Theme 1 Developing a professional identity

Connelly & Clandinin (1999) emphasised the potential of teacher narratives to express and enable teachers' reflection and understanding of their professional identities within challenging and changing contexts. The participants' identities have been shaped and reshaped in interaction with others in a professional context. As Sachs (2005, p.15) posits, identity provides a framework enabling teachers to construct their own ideas of 'how to be', 'how to act', and 'how to understand' their work and place in society. It involves a process of negotiation through experience and the sense that is made of that experience. According to Beauchamp & Thomas (2009), teachers' sense of agency could be regarded as a realisation of their identity. The first theme marks the beginning of the teachers' identity development and represents the iterative component of the theoretical ecological framework, where past personal and professional histories and experiences, both as students and teachers have the potential to impact the development of a sense of agency, and understanding of the meaning, direction, and goals of the teaching profession (projective dimension) (Priestley et al., 2015).

Influential figures

The participants described teaching as inextricably related to communicating moral values and addressing students' emotional needs. The teachers mentioned that they tried to create a non-judgmental and safe learning environment so that their students would feel encouraged to speak the language, collaborate, and express themselves. This appears to be strongly connected to their own educational stories, particularly regarding the support they found from Romanian, English, or French language teachers when they were students. Almost all the participants revealed their thoughts concerning the attributes of good language teachers and what they wanted to become by describing the teachers that influenced their personal and professional trajectories.

Their narratives revealed how teachers, families, and classroom experiences influenced their decisions to become teachers, offering clues for understanding their present rationales, beliefs, values, and teaching practices, representing the iterative dimension of their agency. The participants remembered those teachers who took an interest and nurtured their abilities, which motivated them to learn and eventually pursue a teaching career. Their aspirations to positively impact the development of their students were reiterated during the interviews, which illustrates how the iterative component of their agency reflects in the projective dimension of their work. The teachers affirmed their identities by dissociation from rigid, unjust teaching practices during their early learning experiences, or association with teachers whom they perceived as empathic, well-prepared, and fair.

Chloe suggested that empathy and a more regular formative assessment of skills, through various learning contents and activities, were required so that children who want to progress would not be

discouraged. As a student, she strived to excel but she was discouraged by her French language teacher's approach of overtly labelling and segregating students based on ability:

> However, at secondary school, my French teacher had a peculiar way of defining what a student's knowledge was supposed to look like. She ranked us in rows, according to our skill, from the very gifted to the less gifted ones. I was in the middle, I liked French but apparently, I did not catch on that quickly. I remember that I used to finish the worksheets with exercises fast and immediately began to pay attention to what the most gifted students were working on. My teacher did not like that I did that. Chloe

Similarly, Olivia expressed that she felt discouraged by her Romanian language teacher's indelicate manner that included some of her peers and excluded others, leaving some of them outside what she perceived to be a "*privileged circle*". She contrasted her lower secondary school Romanian language teacher with the Romanian language teacher in high school who gave her confidence. This teacher motivated her to actively participate in classes, nurturing her abilities and self-esteem, which made her participate in olympiads, and later pursue the faculty of letters:

> In high school, I had many role models among my teachers who made me want to pursue the same path, especially the Romanian language and literature who was also my universal literature teacher. She was kind and knew how to stimulate and bring us close to her subject. I remember that my Romanian language teacher in high school gave me confidence in myself. She always encouraged me to participate, respond in classes, and prepare for the Romanian language olympiads. I participated in olympiads from the 10th grade. In the 11th grade, I reached the national olympiad. Due to her encouragement, later I decided to take the exam at the Faculty of Letters. Olivia

Olivia appeared underwhelmed by her English language classes in lower secondary school. She commented that although the English language classes were interactive, she needed a more in-depth, informed, and systematic teaching approach. Her narrative also suggests that a teacher's personality, style, personal and professional values, emotions, and social skills are key points in this profession affecting students in multiple ways, with long-term effects, illustrating how her past learning experiences influence the projective dimension of her work:

> My English teacher at a lower secondary school didn't impress me. I appreciated that the classes were interactive and we did a lot of projects and portofolios, but I needed more. My high school English teacher was rather changeful and I didn't always know if she was ironic, only joking, or serious. But due to her, I participated in English language olympiads, certain public events […] She trusted me. After that, we met again at teachers' meetings in the city. She seemed genuinely pleased that I chose to become an English teacher and she tried to advise me to come to our high school as a teacher, to be colleagues. Olivia

Celine stated that the people who inspired her to teach were not necessarily teachers in the Romanian education system but some friends from the U.S.A., with whom she went on summer camps, as a volunteer. She appreciated their qualities and the fact that they were *"natural and free"*. Celine expressed a preference for non-formal, creative ways of teaching, involving getting out of the rigid contexts of the classroom. She evaluated her experience as a volunteer with children in summer camps as empowering. It enhanced her social skills and helped with her class management skills:

> [...]What helped me the most though was my involvement as a volunteer in these summer camps. I have never been nervous around children in a classroom, I've never felt lost. […] I always knew what to say…When I saw them bored, I quickly found something to invigorate them… My experiences in the summer camps helped me a lot with my teaching. There have never been any complaints […] Celine

Sara remembered her Romanian language teacher in lower secondary school who was strict and demanded that her students read their bibliography. Initially feared by her students, the teacher eventually proved warm, caring, and conscious of her role and responsibility as a teacher. Sara contrasted her primary school teacher's superficiality, low expectations, and deficit views of students, with her Romanian language teacher's dedication and high expectations. Students who had initially been considered less strong, felt stimulated and motivated to learn and push their boundaries, passing their national examinations in the Romanian language successfully, without private tutoring, while some of them participated in olympiads. Another source of inspiration was the Romanian language and literature teacher at high school, who was a captivating storyteller who knew how to form bonds with his students. Sara perceived these teaching approaches as equally valuable and efficient in different moments of her student life. The extract reveals how these past experiences (iterative) informed her principles and values, such as having high expectations from students, being rigorous and fair without being rigid, and also charismatic and creative (projective).

> [...] I am very grateful to my Romanian language teacher at lower secondary school who was strict and very demanding. [...]We eventually found out that she was a very warm human being who knew what her role as a teacher was. She taught us very well and paid attention that we read the novels in the bibliography [...] We had a primary teacher whose teaching purposes concerned only having us learn the basics. Her methods were outdated. Consequently, a lot of parents moved their children to other classes [...] Our Romanian language teacher did not consider that she should put in less effort in doing her job and demanded a lot from each of us, regardless of level. There were five of us who could learn more and she had us read more, and participate in contests and olympiads, but she took care of each of us. I have to thank her for reaching high school easily and successfully, I never needed any private tutoring. At high school, the Romanian language teacher was not as demanding [...] His class ended with a brief story from his own experience and life at university or from the lives of the writers we studied. He captured our attention and captivated us [...] Sara

Laura's parents were Romanian language teachers and she remembered going with them to their classes as a child. She observed her parents teaching and communicating with their students early on and she mentioned that, to a certain extent, these past experiences informed her thoughts to become a teacher.

Chloe developed a strong friendship with her high school French language teacher, who supported her learning through kindness and pedagogical tact and later inspired her teaching as her mentor. Chloe's narrative reveals her thoughts regarding the attributes of good language teachers and what she wants to become and be perceived as by her students, thus the aspirational, projective dimension of her agency. She believes that the information has to be adapted and adjusted to specific learning contexts and goals to avoid overwhelming students with details. The extract reveals the iterative dimension of her agency, through formative and inspiring learning experiences and a trusting relationship with her French teacher that have helped her create personal values and beliefs about the meaning of teaching:

> Later, in high school, I met a French teacher who became my role model and the main reason for becoming a French language teacher. She was not just a teacher to me, she was an empathetic human being. Her dedication and teaching style helped me with my language skills, which, I think, paid off in the end. She nourished my natural inclination toward French and also prepared me for the French language olympiads. She was like a sister, and friend, very humane and available. When I made a mistake, I felt very bad to have made it, but she never reproached me in any way. She just gently asked me to revisit and try again… If I still did not see it, she began asking questions about the particular part of speech and its grammatical categories, logically, until I saw the mistake myself… She never raised her voice, she was always calm, and kind, and she always had logical, coherent, and concise explanations… The amount of information she provided never exceeded the learning circumstance. Chloe

Celine chose not to dwell much on her French learning experiences as a student but she stated that the qualities she treasured in a teacher were warmth and approachability. She considered her previous work experiences in translation beneficial to her personal and professional development and she was proud of the fact that she developed on multiple levels and was not confined only to teaching.

Mia stated that the English language classes in lower secondary school were special and that the students felt unafraid and motivated to participate. She contrasted this pleasant learning atmosphere to other classes where students dreaded that at a certain point they would be asked to come to the blackboard. Her early language learning experiences were inspirational, enhanced her desire to learn the language, and triggered her first thoughts of becoming a teacher. Mia characterised herself as communicative and well-suited for the teaching profession. However, she expressed regret that she was not helped as a student and that the type of teaching she had been regularly exposed to did not nurture students' individuality, self-esteem, and confidence. She regrets that she did not trust her abilities to aim higher, which she perceives as a loss with consequences in her life as an adult. As a teacher, and also as a parent, she found it of the utmost importance

to nurture a child's abilities, discover their aptitudes, help them, and encourage them to reach higher. Mia

Mia reminisced about the rigid teaching methods in the classroom, belonging to an education system that was still reflecting the past, not long after the fall of the totalitarian regime in Romania, when children's personalities, inclinations, and emotions were overlooked.

These influential teachers either perceived their students as subjects, with insecurities, and emotions, or projected deficit views on them, which explains why further in the narratives, the teachers emphasised that they conscientiously chose to pay attention and be emotionally close to their students. From the beginning, the teachers articulated a distinct teaching identity in opposition to some of the rigid, discouraging teaching styles and approaches that they remembered as students at school. The extracts mark the beginning of the development of a professional identity and the teachers' need to create and affirm a personal voice and style, reflecting the iterative dimension of the participants' professional agency. These past experiences have shaped their beliefs and values. What they needed as students and received from supporting teachers in school, they are willing to offer as teachers in return, which illustrates how the iterative influences the projective dimension of their work.

Vulnerable career beginnings

The participants' beginnings as teachers were marked by vulnerability and insecurity, with variations in experiences. Celine, Laura, and Marie chose not to insist too much on their first learning experiences and beginnings and preferred to talk about recent situations insisting on what they considered relevant and important in their teaching experiences.

When inquiring about their first experiences in the national initial teacher education programme, known as the psycho-pedagogical module, the participants stated that their theoretical knowledge was deficient and teaching practice in schools was brief and inconsistent. They had insufficient support from mentors or opportunities to teach classes compared with the hours of class assistance. In theory, this programme should have ensured a solid first grounding for the teaching profession and built their capacity as skills, attitudes, and a functional repertoire of methods and strategies to employ in class. These challenges are part of the iterative dimension of the participants' agency and are analysed and discussed in more detail further in the analysis.

Olivia and Sara remembered feeling vulnerable at the beginning of their teaching careers. They had unrealistic expectations from their students and felt unequipped to face the challenging, crowded

classrooms of "*disrespectful"* teenagers. They lacked authority and felt they were not credible as teachers in their students' eyes because of their lack of experience, personal insecurities, and insufficient pedagogical and class management knowledge. The experience of teaching did not match their expectations and how they envisioned that teaching should be. They also projected deficit views on their students, evaluating them as average in capacity, at least in the beginning. They needed time to build their customised teaching repertoire and their capacity to change their students' mindsets and build a relationship with them. Gradually, they had to transition from a focus on their own performance to a focus on their students' learning needs, which marks the development of the teachers' agentic potential (Edwards, 2017).

Also, non-native FL teachers can have language anxiety and reduced confidence in their language proficiency, which can trigger feelings of inadequacy and lack of legitimacy (Borg, 2006). Chloe's and Marie's narratives captured such thoughts. All the participants acknowledged that they had to continuously improve their language skills, as part of their duty. Chloe remembered that she felt insecure as a student teacher in her classes. She initially feared losing face by not knowing or remembering certain words in front of her students, peers, and mentors. Chloe suggested that teachers should embrace this vulnerability, and transform it into an opportunity to establish rapport. She found it important to be honest with her students when she did not know certain words, by promising her students to come back with the required information:

> My biggest fear is not knowing the response to a particular question or word if asked. We are more stressed as language teachers, I think, afraid of making mistakes or not knowing or remembering particular words or expressions at particular moments. When I am confronted with this, I never tell them that I am not a dictionary like some of my language teachers told me. I just admit honestly that I do not remember and that I will reflect, look it up, and get back with a response. Chloe

Chloe revealed that she was not afraid to take risks and challenge her students' mindset, one of the "sacred stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995), as the common perception that teachers were supposed to be all-knowing. She contrasted her approach to what she observed in some of the veteran teachers' practices, who concealed their mistakes and anxiety, as well as dismissed their students.

Marie was dedicated to the development of her students' language accuracy for a long time, perceiving that language learners should not make mistakes. She admitted to having language anxiety herself sometimes.

Teachers' beliefs, purposes, classroom practices, and students' motivations to learn foreign languages

According to Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004), identity is an ongoing, evolving, and dynamic process, involving a contextualised, unique adaptation of learning professional characteristics. Teachers' professional identity comprises their subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and didactical knowledge (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000) but also their personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985). Consequently, some of the teachers' adaptive, reasoning skills, pedagogic methods, strategies, and convictions are captured among the relationships, affordances, and hindrances of their school environment. This part of the analysis is meant to further illuminate the iterative dimension of the teachers' professional agency (Priestley et al., 2015), explaining how past and present patterns of thought such as professional beliefs and values (the teachers' *habitus*) constructed during the teachers' professional learning or resulting from learning in their classroom and school contexts (iterative) translate into their practice (practical-evaluative) and their pedagogical purposes and aspirations (projective).

When asked about responsibilities and purposes as teachers, all the participants appreciated that these were double-fold. They believed that their primary responsibility was to teach language skills, key competencies, and 21st-century skills according to the national FL curriculum and the CEFR criteria. The teachers also focused on the development of exam skills. The other responsibility referred to holistic teaching and targeted their students' emotional development. The participants got satisfaction in their work primarily from their interactions with students and their feeling of self-efficacy when they were able to positively influence their students'academic development, which illustrates the projective dimension of their professional agency.

The narratives reveal that the participants' language teaching is based on blending tasks that target the development of integrated skills such as speaking for fluency, product writing, listening comprehension, and vocabulary, grammar, and accuracy-focused activities, using teaching applications:

> […] I want my students to understand how the language functions, to know how to speak and be able to manage in real-life situations, to read and understand an authentic document, know how to express themselves both in speaking and writing in the French language… For example with the 5th to 8th graders, I begin with the interpretation of the title and some thematic vocabulary beginning from the title. I ask them to refer to what they did at the weekend using the past tense, or what they will do in the future, to express themselves using the past, present, and future, how to apologise, invite somebody to a restaurant, how to respond or refuse an invitation, to suggest things…Some students enjoy listening activities, other classes enjoy speaking, where I ask questions and stimulate them to speak. I have students who are afraid of "le comprehension de l'oral" and want to do anything but [...] I sometimes begin my lesson with Kahoot, a game that targets revising notions or introducing something new, so they love Kahoot, for example. I use various applications quite often, especially with bilingual classes, where I have 5 classes per week […] Celine

Marie admitted that she became aware in time that her class teaching had involved primarily teacher-centred activities focused on grammar and language accuracy. She acknowledged that she did not promote sufficient learner-centred activities and the development of skills such as listening, but also creativity and communication, at least in the beginning. She adopted certain routines that seemed to work in her context, and, to an extent, she was caught in repetitive ways of action, feeling pressed for time and by insufficient resources in school. Marie's account was blunt and honest, demonstrating self-awareness and critical self-analysis. She learned by reflecting consciously on her teaching experiences, assessing her past and present practices, and what she had to improve, change, or achieve as an English language teacher:

> I was preoccupied …in all my classes…with grammar…the student had to know grammar…lots of exercises and less communication…less listening…because until digital textbooks were introduced, it was difficult to do listening activities in class…either the computer wasn't good enough…or we didn't have a good cd, dvd… It was very difficult…Marie

When asked about the reasons she chose grammar as her main focus in classes, Marie mentioned that it had to do with her desire to achieve perfection, through accuracy in speaking and writing. She admitted that she found it easier to focus on grammar and that there was reassurance in teaching grammar well. It is implied that not the grammar focus in itself is wrong, as grammar can be taught more inductively, through a variety of guided discovery methods and strategies, but rather that teacher-centred, deductive methods have been prevalent in her classes for a long time. She espoused views reflecting historically and culturally ingrained ideas among Romanian learners and foreign language teachers, who had employed teacher-centred methods and direct, deductive teaching, focused on grammar structures followed by solving exercises. Her account illustrates how her own language learning experiences meet professional learning experiences as teacher, which needs to be balanced in

the classroom. This aspect illustrates how the iterative dimension of her agency (beliefs) and past patterns of thought and action (the teacher's *habitus*) influence the practical-evaluative component of her agency, through methodological decisions in the classroom. Structural resources comprising the cultural, relational, and material have mediated her choices from the past to the present. Marie's own reflexivity and professional development have led to the reevaluation of her teaching philosophy, revealing that awareness, reflection, and continuous learning are crucial in implementing changes to one's teaching and developing agency (Edwards, 2017). She emphasises the importance of learning the language for communication and personal development and involves her students in projects as part of the summative assessment, among others. Marie finds it important to develop students' communication skills and competence in public speaking and presentation from primary classes because she wants to help them overcome their reserve to speak English:

> The children in primary classrooms do a project at the end of each unit that they present to the classroom, without fear. I find it very important that my students manage their nervousness and not have stage fright […] Marie

Marie includes peer, formative, and constructive feedback in her classes, emphasising what her students did well as well as pointing out areas for improvement. She engages her students in peer feedback, facilitating their learning from each other's mistakes, comments, and advice. She promotes self-evaluation among her students. She admits that she has also had language anxiety as a teacher, which might constitute part of the rationale behind her focus on language accuracy. She encourages fair play and collaborative relationships in classes, as a crucial component of teaching that needs to communicate values. She considers that the grading system confines students to predefined ideas of performance, which hinders their possibilities for learning and promotes competition:

> […] We mustn't depend so much on grades…We are not defined by grades…grades might define what I am today, but tomorrow those grades will not define me anymore…For me, grading is not that important… I don't want to frighten children… I always encourage them and emphasise what they did well… of course, I tell them what was not good, but I try to do this with their peers' help… I taught children to peer evaluate and self-evaluate, and when somebody presents a project, I ask first what their peers' opinion is about that project, and if what I have to say hasn't been already mentioned by their peers, I come up with a suggestion or comment. I don't want my students to fear speaking English. It is a fear that I still have as a teacher sometimes….You can make mistakes even in Romanian sometimes…Marie

Marie manifests a lot of professional agency in class as an expert teacher, by using graded readers and didactic material from Oxford University Press to develop her students' cultural knowledge, reading comprehension, speaking and writing skills, vocabulary, and nourish their desire to read more generally:

> Apart from the textbook, we also have a reading club, and I gave them important adapted literary texts…we read "Oliver Twist" by Dickens in twenty pages […] I engage them in discussions on these books… I present aspects of British culture and civilisation…Oxford University Press has all sorts of reader series "Read and Discover", on all kinds of topics, such as space, and wonders of the past, and how to stay healthy, that we read. Then we do exercises, and after that, we use the books as a starting point for other things… these work well…Marie

The participants' narratives reveal that they are mindful of the students who might not be strong-skilled in the foreign language for various reasons, emphasising that they are the ones who need a lot of attention, suggesting that the appraisal criteria and especially the culturally accepted idea of educational success focus too much on results with strong students who can participate in olympiads:

> I think it is important to help children evolve and get them from a lower level to a higher one, to encourage them, boost their confidence in speaking… I always encourage them to speak English, get over their initial reserve, and try. I reassure them that there is no judgement if they make a mistake. I do not allow students to judge each other in my class. This is my real duty as a teacher. I do not think that we should only think about strong children who can participate in olympiads. I organised olympiads at the school level and designed subjects for my students as well. Olivia

Olivia manifests strong professional deontology focusing on creating a non-judgemental, safe class environment where her students would feel confident to use the English language, which illustrates some of her teaching goals and larger educational purposes, thus the projective dimension of her agency. She emphasises the importance of involving her students in essay writing, thematic debates, contests, and projects, to improve her students' fluency but also nurture their confidence, problem-solving skills, creativity, and imagination, which illustrates how the projective impacts the practical-evaluative dimension of her work and agency:

> I try to prepare my students for the real world. Apart from the exercises that we generally do in classes, I have organised debates on various topics to get them to speak. I participated with the students in an essay contest where they had to write essays about how they perceived the virtual world. I saw that they can come up with very interesting ideas if they are involved in tasks that boost their imagination and creativity. I sometimes dwell on grammar structures more but I can say that I combine activities that target fluency with grammar and vocabulary-focused activities. I sense it when there is a need in certain classes to move from listening and speaking tasks to something different, I always change my focus. I adapt to the context of my classroom and move on accordingly. Now I insist more on developing writing skills. Yesterday the 7th graders had to write a description of an accident according to a plan using adverbs of manner and time … Tomorrow I will evaluate their final products. Olivia

Olivia's account reveals how teachers, while gaining experience, modify any planned activities to support students' engagement, moving seamlessly through moments of the lesson, to accommodate students' learning needs (Richards, 1998). Olivia's narrative reveals the practical-evaluative component of her agency, through her focus on the students and capacity to discern and adjust her teaching on the spot by choosing from her repertoire those methods and strategies rendered adequate in different moments of the lesson.

Laura perceives herself as an efficient teacher and articulates an independent professional discourse about teaching students of diverse abilities. She considers that her main role is to make her students enjoy learning the English language (projective). She likes challenging students by increasing the difficulty of the learning content, which motivates them to push their boundaries.

Although she uses the communicative approach in her classes, Laura does not adopt these methodological principles uncritically. She first adapts procedures to her learners' levels, abilities, learning styles, and classroom situations, deciding which methods and activities are most effective in her context. Laura's account clearly emphasises the role of teachers' pedagogical reasoning in context, at the confluence of teachers' goals with students' goals, beyond curricular and methodological prescriptions (practical-evaluative), as a prerequisite of agency. She combines inductive methods, which favour acquiring the language implicitly, with deductive, explicit teaching strategies, adapted to her students' abilities and the language structure in context. Concerning grammar she uses concept-checking questions to ensure that students comprehend and are able to use tenses, beginning with examples and gradually getting to the grammar rules in question:

> Some students are naturally inclined toward a foreign language and then I can use the communicative approach when I teach grammar, for example, past tense continuous. I began by discussing with them, I gave them numerous examples using past continuous. I started a sentence and they had to continue it,

> and they used the tense without realising they did that. Then I did a grammar snapshot and told them what all was about… they used that structure without knowing. But there are complex grammar issues, such as the 3rd conditional… As a teacher, through experience, you get to know how to adapt to your classes and see what methods are the most effective. I used a short story by Hemingway to teach them the 3rd conditional, for example. I never go to the board and write the rules…we never begin like that. We discuss, have a conversation, somebody writes a sentence on the board, and then, by asking questions we get to the rule, the structure. Laura

Laura observes that there are contradictions between the communicative approach that teachers are advised to adopt in their classes and the requirements for the written language exam in the 8th grade that have remained unchanged. Some students choose to take this exam to enter bilingual classes, which increases their chances of getting into high school by accessing more classes that are available. Laura points out that the exam is not consistent with the communicative approach to teaching and learning. As a result, many foreign language teachers can justify their focus on grammar usage in their classes to help students pass an exam which increases their chances of accessing a good high school. It could be inferred that many language teachers have to reconcile their principles of language teaching for fluency and communication with teaching exam skills, in two hours per week, suggesting how teachers respond to accountability systems (practical-evaluative) and simultaneously consider their own professional beliefs about language teaching (iterative):

> We are advised to apply the communicative approach in our classes but the written exam for bilingual classes is almost completely grammar usage. I had students who did not excel in conversation but were very hard-working and did well in this exam, achieving high grades. I do not think that this exam shows the child's actual language level. The written exam contains a lot of rephrasing, filling in the blanks with the correct tenses, and word-building. And the oral exam consists of answering some questions but it isn't complicated…Laura

Celine perceives that she combines rigour with being open and warm with the students. She has built harmonious relationships with her students, who manifest appreciation for her teaching style and academic preparation. She believes that she has evolved on a personal and professional level due to the high academic level of the students, which requires constant preparation for classes, from class management to teaching strategies and contents adapted to the level and features of each class. She conscientiously reflects on what methods and strategies to adopt in her teaching and prepares interesting lesson content before classes, tapping into her students' interests. Her roles as a co-learner and facilitator are reiterated in her story, illustrating the practical-evaluative component of her agency:

> […] I work at home, sometimes maybe more than I ought to before my classes. I prepare didactic material, and I search for things, reflecting on what I could do to make my lessons more interesting, and more practical if it feels like some of them might turn bland. I reflect, look for ideas… There is always room for improvement but I think I am on the right track…Celine

Celine's classes have a strong focus on French culture and civilisation, personalised practically, by involving students meaningfully in small-scale social events. Celine encourages her students to make decisions, be creative, and take responsibility for their learning, by organising the learning content and events. She creates opportunities for them to come into the spotlight and prove their cultural knowledge and language skills. Most of the students in her high school are strong, committed, receptive, and willing to demonstrate their aptitudes and knowledge. The level of her students allows the extensive use of the French language and complex lesson content during classes. Her students' positive feedback regarding her abilities to explain language structures well represents the structural resource that boosts her confidence and she seems conscious of her strengths:

> I think that one of my strengths as a teacher is that I explain well, and the students tell me they understand what I explain. …Also, I don't focus exclusively on teaching the language ...from time to time I create a lesson on French culture and civilisation, and do practical things with the students, for example, today with the bilingual class of 10th graders, I had a text about French stereotypes, about what people associated with France and the French, from fashion to wine. And I asked them if they wanted to participate in a project and bring to class something they perceived as related to France, from objects to food, anything they wanted. They had to present and describe those objects […] Students work hard and do their best when they know that the time will come when they will be in the spotlight and do something different. Celine

Celine wants to consolidate her position in this high school and be perceived as a skilled, well-prepared, and dedicated teacher by colleagues, management, students, and parents, who represent the structural resources that she relies on in her work. She perceives her continuous preparation and improvement of practices as her moral duty and gets satisfaction from being appreciated for her work. Her professional endeavours are twofold, taking initiatives benevolently for the benefit of students ' learning leads to positive results, which at the same time consolidates her place as a French language teacher in a strong high school, which illustrates the practical-evaluative dimension of her agency. Celine's account unveils that agency is to be achieved through interaction and by building meaningful relationships with students, parents, and colleagues (Pyhälto, Pietarinen, and Soini, 2014).

Chloe believes in a holistic and interactive approach to language learning, blending methods and activities that require a total physical response with problem-based and guided discovery activities (practical-evaluative). Her choices of content in classes seem to facilitate the correlation to her students' interests and lives, interactive learning, and the development of critical thinking skills. She encourages her students' engagement with new material, such as well-known animation films, through open class discussions. She appears interested in her students' development of language skills but also in raising awareness of ethical values (projective):

> I always make use of linguistic games, riddles, and problem-based and guided discovery activities, this stimulates them. I saw that only when they find out the solutions to a task by themselves, they are truly satisfied. However, in the online context there was mostly individual work … less group work, unfortunately. Now that we are in the classroom again… the 5th and 6th graders love to revise the whole module and more kinetic activities that require movement in the classroom. I always bring films, for example ''Ratatouille'', or ask them to watch films at home and then talk about the characters, such as Remy, for example, their feelings and deeds and what we could learn from them. They love this…" Chloe

Chloe perceives herself as a facilitator, guide, and friend to her students. She felt self-efficacious in her role as an advisor, helping both children and their parents during the pandemic:

> I think my main roles are that of coordinator and facilitator who teaches them how to learn and apply what we learn in the classroom to real-life situations. I try to be their friend. I collaborate with them and now I dare say I am a part of their community and family. I felt that I was helpful in their life during this pandemic event…maybe even a bit of a family counsellor… Chloe

Mia sees herself as a perfectionist, involved, and resilient teacher. She is experienced and has been confronted with a diversity of problems in her school environment. Her sense of self-efficacy and agency in class has been nevertheless mediated by her students' lack of motivation to learn, triggering feelings of powerlessness, guilt, and personal and professional failure. She feels sometimes that she bears the whole responsibility for her students' learning and well-being as if these are matters related only to the quality of her teaching, which adds to the pressure in her profession. She is aware though that her students' motivation to learn depends also on factors such as school conditions, leadership, material resources, or other teaching styles. Her account reveals that her sense of self-efficacy and

agency is hindered by her students' behavioural and practical problems, which she has to address. She feels unsupported and alone and underscores the need for a unified voice, teamwork, and teachers' joint efforts to address these issues:

> I see myself as a committed, hard-working, perfectionist teacher who wants to solve problems. But I do not have the team, the support, and the material resources I would like to have. So I do what I can, the best I can in the circumstances. My satisfaction comes from these classes that work, where I feel that I have engaged them and they have learned something. What disappoints me now is that the students seem uninterested and indifferent to everything. I always wonder why they are not motivated enough, and why they choose not to participate. I think this also relates to the lack of resources and the increased number of students per class. Sometimes the ones who are not interested in participating just skip classes, and I am with nineteen or twenty students who are interested in studying. Then the classes are wonderful… It is tough to manage the class when they are thirty or thirty-two. Either they fear you, which I do not want, or they feel too relaxed and there are always a few who manage to disturb the others… I feel guilty sometimes, and I think that maybe the problem is with me. But sometimes they just do things that lack any logic and common sense. And they know it…Mia

Olivia and Laura expressed similar thoughts, revealing that they have insufficient material resources or time, although their classroom situations seemed slightly more manageable in their lower secondary schools:

> I would like to see that my students are more involved, that they try to do something more, take more responsibility, and exercise what they do in class. I gave them less homework. Sometimes you cannot do everything you would like in 45 minutes. I have about 25 students per class but I also had classes with 33 or 34 students. I feel that I do not have time to address individual students, sometimes not all of them can keep up. I would like to be able to act as professionally as I aim to. For example, despite being ill, I uploaded materials for my students, I made myself available and told them to write to me if they did not understand certain things. I think that the lack of material resources and time are the things that bother me the most in one of the schools where I am working now. Time runs fast. There are lots of reports to write as well, even if they claimed that they wanted to reduce the amount of paperwork…Olivia

Mia has always been preoccupied with creating a harmonious atmosphere in her classes, inspired by her early language learning experiences as a young student, which reveals how her beliefs (iterative) are translated into the projective and practical-evaluative components of her agency. She is an emotionally engaged teacher, who tries to ensure that her students feel comfortable, which appears to mitigate her students' lack of motivation to learn to some extent. She views teaching as preparing students for life, thus learning contents have to be relatable, meaningful, and helpful, especially because her students come from vulnerable backgrounds. Mia finds it important to develop students' intercultural competence and help them expand their horizons and embrace other cultures. Nonetheless, the lack of material resources in school forces her to compensate constantly to create an adequate class:

> The students perceive me as a teacher who is involved and cares about them. I am fond of them and they feel that I am not indifferent to their problems. I also tell them that. They also see the efforts that I make to have a proper class together. I am also the lead teacher of a vocational class. I have always tried to create a relaxed atmosphere in my classes, where everybody learns with pleasure like in my years as a student…The English language class is not only about teaching grammar and vocabulary but teaching lessons for life, the contexts and contents have to be related to students' real lives. I also think that developing students' intercultural competence is very important, to help children become more open and flexible towards other cultures and traditions. If I think about it, most of them cannot even afford to travel… Mia

The participants generally felt that they developed their teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. They got out of their comfort zone, learned, and built on their knowledge of how to incorporate online platforms such as Zoom, Google Teams, or Google Classroom in their classes. They learned from online language teaching webinars and tutorials and experimented together with colleagues and students. They used various teaching applications to develop their students' language skills, analysed various didactic materials online, and enriched their teaching by providing students with stimulating content. All these represent structural resources that have enhanced the FL teachers' professional agency. They all felt that being able to teach using technology was an asset that enriched their repertoire of pedagogical strategies:

> I had my register, I did not grade students but I monitored their presence and their participation. I used worksheets on live worksheets. Through this app, you can create your worksheets and also access other teachers' materials, on different aspects of language, vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. After they do a particular worksheet, students can verify themselves. I also used the app "Write and Improve", developed by Cambridge, aiming to develop students' writing abilities, for example, they have to write an email at the intermediate level, with a certain number of words. They do different tasks, and at the end of each task, the students are verified and given suggestions about what to improve, replace, or change. And they can find this out immediately, test themselves, and receive immediate feedback on how to improve [...] Their texts are thus corrected, they know their level, and where to insist, and I can monitor their participation and progress. Mia

All participants stated that they put a lot of effort into choosing adequate teaching material and finding strategies to support and motivate their students to participate in online classes. It was difficult to engage their students and they felt exhausted and less efficacious. Many students chose to skip classes. Expectedly, they emphasised the benefits of meeting in face-to-face classes and being able to socialise.

Sara and Chloe are conscious of the fact that the socially perceived importance of the French language has diminished over the years, as English has long been established as the lingua franca. They acknowledge the lower status of the French language in comparison to the English language, which is the first foreign language studied in secondary schools, beginning with kindergarten and class 0:

> I feel that the status of the French language is not that high in school and overall students' interest in studying the French language has decreased enormously. I think that students' interest in foreign languages, in general, is low right now. However, they differentiate between the two languages…it seems that although the children are curious about the French language, they also find it very difficult. The English language is all around them in all areas of their life, and has been part of their life since they were in nursery school… Chloe

Chloe and Sara perceive that, to a certain extent, they have to be more creative and attentive in their choices of classroom strategies and activities that could spark and also maintain their students' interest and motivation in the long run, and thus mitigate students' perceived difficulty and the constant comparison to the English language. This indicates the practical-evaluative component of their agency and the way they understand and use their "personal practical knowledge" (Clandinin, 1985). There are differences regarding learner exposure to foreign languages and language acquisition, years of formal learning in school, motivations to learn, and perceived difficulty, which affects language teachers' class strategies in different ways. The French language teachers acknowledge that their students' wish for rapid progress and visible results might turn into a lack of interest and disappointment. They mind their students' opinions and include them in a dialogue:

> They find it (English) much easier. Therefore I need to boost their curiosity and support their initial enthusiasm. The 5th graders are very curious and want to know a lot, but they are also impatient and I have to explain to them that we should take it slowly and build their knowledge gradually. They would

> like to know everything fast and they get easily bored. I always explain how things work, and that they have to learn in gradual steps, and build their strategies for learning…I ask for their opinion as well [...] I always tell them that I am there to help them... I include them in the dialogue and show them that my actual strategies are their ideas. We cooperate and they end up understanding me…I like that I am the one to guide them in a whole new universe because they begin studying French in the 5th grade and I see how they are gradually getting familiar with this. I like entering their world…I remember my childhood and how being at school felt like…Chloe

Sara considers that many of her students are not interested in learning French. She suggested that part of the problem could be related to the fact that her students were not stimulated to learn the language in lower secondary school. Thus, students' motivation, or lack thereof to learn French mediates Sara's actions and decisions in class, inhibiting or promoting the enactment of her professional agency:

> I cannot say that the French language is among their learning priorities, and I think that part of the problem comes from secondary school. I noticed that if they learned this subject with pleasure in secondary school, they continue to do that in high school. They generally do not dedicate their time to learning French. This high school is average. They do not take foreign languages seriously, English or French. English is everywhere and let's say that they acquire it more easily, through games, films, music, etc. […] Sara

Sara is preoccupied with creating robust relationships with her students, therefore, she concentrates on developing her students' collaborative skills and creativity, hopeful that in the process they will learn French with pleasure. She senses that her students need learning opportunities that support their aptitudes and interests and make them feel valued. She perceives that her students' lack of motivation derives from the fact that they have not been encouraged as individuals and because they generally find school activities uninteresting:

> My priority is to attract students to my subject…make them enjoy my class, to at least reach a satisfactory level so that they would manage when they need to use the language. I involve them in contests that combine creativity and the French language. Many of them are talented and inclined to drawing and photography, and I feel that these inclinations should not be lost on the way. They liked this project of creating comics, they imagined a story, drew, and created stories in French. I think these combine well. They also like listening to French songs and singing in French, thus I make this special moment at the end of some of my classes. We choose a song, either they come up with ideas or I propose a song [...] They like that and they acquire vocabulary…They do not learn to get grades, they are not interested in grades, this does not matter to them… You have to find out what they like and tap into their interests … Sara

Although she is aware that her students will never excel in grammar and cannot reach a high language level, Sara brings interesting content, creates activities, and supports her students' inclinations and proposals, to at least motivate them to acquire essential vocabulary. She hopes that by acknowledging their progress, her students will continue practising the language, which reflects the practical-evaluative component of her agency and her capacity to adjust her didactic methods and strategies according to her students' learning needs and personal inclinations. In this way, her profession becomes more pleasant, because she feels she has managed to motivate her students to learn and acknowledge their progress. She feels self-efficacious and motivated when she succeeds in making them enjoy working together and take pleasure in learning activities.

All the participants stated that they promote discussions about ardent topics of the 21st century, such as climate change, and environmental protection, or teenagers' interests such as health, stereotypes, fashion, and history. They involve their students in cultural projects, contests, and activities that promote the development of 21st-century skills, communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity. They observe the inclinations and aptitudes that individual students have and try to

develop and promote them. The participants personalise their teaching, having students participate in activities on topics that attract and stimulate them to study and speak. They invest time to reflect on their classes and think of improvements and ideas to incorporate further into their classes:

> I saw that they enjoy reading texts on appealing, interesting topics …reading and listening activities... Many of them have a natural talent and a good ear so they perform well in listening activities. They are very receptive when it comes to lessons about nature and our planet, climate change effects on animals and planet [...] The students in my vocational classes were interested in French cuisine, and gastronomy… they are conscious that they might need that someday. So you begin the lesson by catching their attention through a story...Also, the videos and listening activities work very well in lessons. They like games as well, where they have to choose the correct answer, competitions to see who scores the highest, multiple choice exercises, and interactive exercises on the internet. They like to communicate in French after they have become slightly more confident in their capacity to speak. I always encourage them and tell them how well they manage [...] I am never satisfied with what I have achieved as a teacher and I always look in retrospect to see what I could have done better in class, and I make plans and improvements for the following class. Sara

Teaching for international language examinations

Laura, Marie, and Celine prepare their students for international language examinations such as the Cambridge language tests or DELF and DALF for the French language. These foreign language diplomas and certificates are valid for life and recognised worldwide, allowing students to officially certify their language learning. Their students' motivations are diverse and both students and their parents are aware of the importance of these language tests required to access further education or secure a job. This reveals a more entrepreneurial, instrumental view of teaching for language certification, where the language is mostly a means to an end, and a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), which ultimately helps to maximise employment opportunities in a globalised market (De Costa, Park, & Wee, 2018). The international language competence certificates also validate the national language examinations for bilingual classes in the 8th grade and the baccalaureate in the 12th grade. Taking international language examinations is not mandatory at school. They also come with a fee that many perceive as considerable, but students, especially in strong schools, choose to take them for personal development or to access a job and universities in the country or abroad.

Celine helped some students pro bono in extra classes, teaching them exam skills. Marie dedicates an extra hour to teaching exam skills in her high school. The narratives suggest that the language competence exam at the baccalaureate in the 12th grade might not be necessarily the main target for FL teachers in strong high schools, which indicates that students' international certification achievements offer authority, legitimacy, and thus an improved social status to teachers. The FL teachers' practical-evaluative component of agency is revealed by how they decide to respond to such certification demands. It is also unveiled how macro factors, such as understandings of FL certification and its uses impact the FL teachers' work, mediating their actions in and outside the classroom:

> The baccalaureate is not a target for me as an English language teacher, for me, the aim is that lots of children take and pass their Cambridge examinations. It doesn't matter which, FCE, PET, or CAE, just have one of these when they graduate from high school… I always tell them that they cannot know where life will lead them. Lots of students have told me" Thank you for guiding me to take these exams because I used them here and there"…So the fact that I convinced so many children and their parents to consider these exams is an achievement for me. This exam validates entering bilingual classes and the language examination for the baccalaureate. That's why I try to convince them…If you give students immediate motivation and short-term goals, they mobilise more… Marie

> I have a student who is from a nearby town and lives in a boarding house. She is very good at French and took the DELF. I prepared her for the exam, voluntarily, we used Google Meet for that…They learn French to be able to study further and access universities abroad. One of the students wants to take the C1 exam to go and study medicine in France. Some students take the A2 level examination to validate the baccalaureate or apply for bilingual classes should there be this possibility…All the students who took this exam passed, and now they will have another B2 examination in May…Celine

> The students want to prepare themselves for PET or FCE. Former students return to me to help them prepare for Cambridge tests. They learn English because they like it and find it important to speak a foreign language because they will need it for a future job or because they want to be able to communicate when they travel. Most of them want to know what their level is and that is why they are taking these examinations. Some of them are advised by their parents to do this because they might want to go abroad and study…so they will need a certain type of international language test. They prepare themselves for bilingual classes as well… Laura

Olivia, Mia, Sara, and Chloe mentioned that their class students were rarely interested in international language tests, due to the considerable fees. Mia and Sara prepare and help their students to pass the language examination for the baccalaureate because their class students are not interested in taking international language examinations. Chloe believes that her students' motivation to learn French stems from the fact that one day they might travel for leisure, and that at some point they would have to communicate the basics and make themselves understood. Olivia and Laura stated that the students who had good English language skills chose to take the language competence exam in the 8th grade because, in this way, they had more alternatives to reach high school:

> The students are rarely interested in international language tests such as KET, PET, or YLE but they took their language competence test for bilingual classes to have more alternatives of getting into high school. They perceive the international language tests as expensive though… Olivia

> The 8th graders are not interested in taking bilingual exams in French or international language tests such as DELF for example. They find it difficult and even though I encourage them to trust their skills and I bring them examples, they do not feel inclined to pursue them. The 8th graders would like to speak and understand French only in the prospect that they will travel there and will have to make themselves understood. Chloe

Emotional involvement and building harmonious relationships with the students

According to Beauchamp & Thomas (2005), Lasky (2005), and Hargreaves (1998) emotions are a significant part of a teacher's identity, shaped by aspects of the profession, and a decisive factor for the ways they approach their professional lives. The participants' narratives revealed that the teachers find the caring aspect of teaching highly important. All the participants stated that they established rapport beyond classes, gaining their students' trust, and being available. The narratives revealed that the participants were genuinely interested in their students and were attentive observers of their school community. They emphasised the importance of collaboration and efficient communication between students, teachers, and school communities, indicating both the practical-evaluative and projective dimensions of their agency in the classroom and school communities.

Laura perceives herself as a passionate, enthusiastic, and empathetic teacher. She regards teaching as having both a directive and a transformative role and she tries to build their students' life and social skills, responsibility, and accountability:

> I am fond of children. I genuinely like working with them and if I had to choose again, I would still choose to be a teacher. I think this is the most important, loving what you do and doing that with passion. They are nice and grow fond of you when they see that you are there to help and listen to them. I think this is the most important role a teacher has, more important than just sharing information. They need to feel that you are their ally, a friend, and also a person who advises them when they are not right and make mistakes. They have to find out about the part where they have to accept that there are consequences to their actions. Laura

According to the participants' professional philosophies, teaching surpasses the transmission of knowledge. Establishing rapport and perceiving students as subjects are pillars of the teaching-learning process, which must be combined with rigorous academic preparation:

> Well, you cannot be a good teacher if you don't have a good relationship with the students, and I have always tried to get to know them, and know how to prepare for them because each class is different. I need to teach well but also have a relaxed atmosphere in my classes so that they would learn with pleasure. They know that sometimes we can have fun, but when they take a test, they know it is serious…So I want to have a high level of teaching, and knowledge, academically speaking, but also have a good relationship with the students because if they learn with pleasure they retain knowledge better, and that remains with them years after…Celine

As a beginning teacher, Chloe is agentive through her capacity to adjust to her learners' emotions by collaborating with them and entering their world, but also by finding the activities that would stimulate them to learn. This empathetic approach to teaching might not be embraced by all teachers in the school, as the following extract suggests:

> My relationship with my students is freer, I think. When I first meet children in a classroom, I sometimes see shame and fear in their eyes, and that is how I know that they have experienced this with veteran teachers before meeting me. I feel that I have to reassure them that I am open, a human being, and their friend and they should feel safe. I encourage them to speak if there are problems even if they are not related to my subject… I make myself available. I am very open to them and they respond in the same way. We have our group and they have my phone number. I also keep in touch with former students, they still contact me from time to time. Chloe

Chloe has developed a special dialogue with her older students, they trust her, and to a certain extent, they consider her "one of them'', almost complicit, which illustrates how she adapts her behaviour and uses her practical knowledge of her environment. This stems from her youth, empathy, and perceived relatedness to students' particularities of age:

> Sometimes they are interested in knowing certain phrases or words to play pranks, and they have developed their special jargon using French, about their teachers. Somehow they think that others will not understand them but then they realise that teachers who teach other subjects do understand and even reply to their comments in French. They are not aware that we know… and were children like them once…I deal with teenagers differently, they are slowly beginning to mature, discover things for the first time, and become conscious, and I like that… I can relate to that and they feel close to me. I feel that my youth is an advantage… I also like that I am the one who sets the 5th graders on a brand new journey and I see their enthusiasm… I like entering their world. They know that they can reach me if they need help but they are at the beginning, and I think they still find it difficult to share their joy... feelings with me. Chloe

Chloe dissociates from teachers of other subjects, particularly from veteran teachers, and she appears confident in her qualities and strengths, which are related to her perceived flexibility, tolerance, and willingness to learn and improve on a personal level. Her use of the pronoun *"we"* suggests that she feels as belonging to the group of young FL teachers, open to learning and communication, still uncompromised or emotionally defeated by the national education system:

> I think that my strengths as a French teacher are my youth and the fact that I have not finished school for a long time. I am empathetic and available. In my opinion, language teachers find it easier to communicate, establish contact with others and exchange experiences. I think *we* are also more inclined to learn new things that get us out of our comfort zone…*we* are also more willing to listen and learn from other backgrounds and cultures, less judgemental, and more tolerant in general. Chloe

Chloe believes that emotional investment, openness, and empathy towards students can break the defensive attitudes developed by students who have been used to more strict teaching styles. She is not willing to abdicate from her preference for more empathic and humane strategies that could boost students' confidence in their capabilities and also the motivation to learn French:

> Concerning the subject matter, the language, I think that we are all prepared to teach lower secondary school at least, but I think that most of us are not so well equipped when it comes to communicating with our students. Students are still advised to stay in their place and behave. If students are genuinely curious about something, they are stopped and told that their questions have nothing to do with the lesson or that they have to concentrate on what they are doing. If they have a personal problem and feel that they need to reach out to their teacher, the teacher builds a wall and does not have the patience and disposition to listen. Chloe

All the teachers emphasised that the children's vulnerability heightened because of the pandemic. The students felt overwhelmed and insecure, acknowledging that they could not keep up with the amount of information that they had to acquire. This made the teachers' task to cater to their students' emotional needs and support their learning, essential:

> Teaching during the pandemic was terrible… the children missed out on quite a lot, and there are gaps that we are trying to fill in. It is very difficult because everybody pressures them, they are pushed to learn a lot because a lot of time has been wasted…A lot of strong students have admitted that they are hardly able to focus, that they have copied assignments to get by, not to go crazy, seven hours per day are not easy… they watched the lessons in Google Classroom, to see whether they missed out on things, assignments uploaded there. I had to check all the assignments and tests, it was very difficult. Celine

There were blurred boundaries in the parent-student-teacher relationship during the pandemic and not only. The teachers' personal space was invaded, as parents phoned with all kinds of problems. The narratives reveal that the teachers have a strong sense of duty to meet all students' and parents' expectations. This could be also an emotional burden that they have carried because they would feel guilty otherwise. It also appears that the public expectation from teachers is their self-sacrifice. The teachers are content though to have fulfilled their duties by being available, and providing didactic material and advice whenever necessary:

> We have WhatsApp groups and communicate all the time. Sometimes I feel it is too much, there are times when you don't know what to do first. I do a lot but it isn't enough. Nonetheless, I feel much better when I have fulfilled all my tasks, that's how I am. I would feel guilty if I didn't. If I see that one of my students has a problem, I try to talk to them. I spent hours talking to each of the girls that were caught in this conflict in my class, to find out both versions and their reasons. I had to listen carefully to understand what the conflict was about. If they ask for specific learning materials and baccalaureate subjects, I send these to them and many others. I do what is required, I feel it is my duty. I try to do all that to help them and be at peace with myself. I barely have time for myself anymore. Lately, I have been involved in a lot of projects, but it wasn't always so intense. Sara

The teachers perceive that their relationships with the students and their parents are harmonious. They generally consider that their efforts and involvement as lead and FL teachers are acknowledged. The participants enjoy the social aspect of their profession, finding reward in the positive energy that they get in return. Teaching, being among students, and communicating with them gives them self-worth

and motivation, although sometimes they might experience problems in their personal lives. It could be inferred that one of the internal resources for enacting their professional agency is the participants' capacity for empathy, emotional involvement, and knowing how to build harmonious relationships with the students.

Sara states that knowing her students' hardships beyond school enhances her understanding and affection and they communicate in a meaningful way. She feels young when she is among them. They share the good and the bad and having fun is possible:

> I think that the students' parents in the class where I am a lead teacher are satisfied with my work, and I was proven this by what they said… they thanked me…If my efforts weren't appreciated at all, I think that I would find it harder to get involved in so many things… I feel that there is some positive energy that I get in return… I enjoy spending time with children. Sometimes I have difficult days and I go to school sad, but I immediately realise that after I have finished my class my mood changes. So I get a lot of good energy from them. The more I get to know my students, the more I like and understand them. And I get to understand why they are how they are, I know their background and their struggles…And there are also extremely funny things that happen sometimes… And you spend a lot of time with them, so you feel young. Sara

Marie is a lead teacher who has frequently organised summer camps, providing opportunities for her students to develop their team-building, communication, and social skills. They have learned and bonded with peers and teachers, in a non-formal environment. Marie is fully aware of the value of getting out of school and willingly took these initiatives:

> The holidays mean having fun, acquisition of life skills… the English language activities that they did weren't so different from what we did at school…We have organised a lot of camps in the mountains, every year we organised one or two camps […] Children grew up with me in these camps…They have known my daughter since she was little...she grew up with them…I consider camps to be very useful…I am going to organise one this year as well…It is a lot of fun, and you begin to see your students in a different light, they are not only students at school anymore, and they perceive you as a human being as well, you are not just the teacher…they see how you eat, how you wake up in the morning. I check on them in the evening in my pyjamas…I meet them in the morning, to see if they need anything…I hug them…I am close to them…it is a different type of communication. Marie

Concluding, the participants' professional philosophies underscore that a teacher's duty is to meet their students' emotional expectations as well as help students identify and reach their learning goals, revealing their sustainable teaching approach. The above illustrates how the iterative dimension represented by the teachers' biographies and experiences influences the practical-evaluative and projective dimensions of their work and agency. The teachers' structural resources consist of their fruitful relationships with students and their parents. It can be inferred that rigorous methodological preparation and acting according to their emotions, ethical and professional values, by promoting honesty, fair play, and collaboration in the classroom are aspects of the realisation of the participants' professional identity and agency.

Theme 2 Teachers' resilience and responsibility in finding resources

Self-reliance and compensatory actions

The availability of material resources in school can promote or hinder teachers' achievement of agency, mediating how they perceive their profession, their motivation to learn and grow professionally, with consequences on the integrity of actual classroom teaching and students' learning.

In the national education context, FL teachers usually use textbooks approved by the ministry which are generally provided in sufficient numbers in schools. Teachers can decide on an approved textbook, from a limited offer. They structure their yearly plans around the curriculum, minding the methodological recommendations and curricular guidelines for L1 or L2, as the first and second foreign language studied in the school. They have autonomy in organising and sequencing learning content. There are nevertheless problematic situations regarding the quality of the textbooks or the quantity that does not cover the needs of a school. Celine, Mia, and Sara decided on different textbooks buying them from the open market, to be able to do their work adequately and help their students, acknowledging that the language textbooks provided in the school were outdated and poorly designed. In Sara's and Mia's contexts, parents are not inclined to buy books due to their financial problems. In theory, the education system provides free education for all and teachers should not be placed in the position to negotiate the purchase of books with parents. All the teachers mentioned that they created and used various didactic resources in their teaching, contributing with personal financial resources to ensure that students had adequate learning material on their desks.

After analysing the content and activities in the textbooks they received from the ministry, Sara and Mia became aware they could not use them and consequently decided not to work with them. Their actions seem commonsensical, as they fully realise that their teaching tools, strategies, and contents have to be up-to-date and connected to their students' interests and lives suggesting the practical-evaluative component of their agency. The narratives reveal that they feel self-righteous, knowing that their judgement is correct, which proves their professional expertise, decision-making, and autonomy in class but at the same time indicates a reduced agency, due to scarce resources:

> The textbooks that are available in this high school are outdated, old, and unattractive. There are some textbooks provided by the ministry, conceived and written by Romanian authors that have audio activities but no CDs…In theory, the ministry should send us an offer of approved textbooks, to analyse them and decide which to choose… We were sent a textbook that was approved but it lacked quality in all respects, activities, language accuracy, visuals, etc. They were supposed to send us other textbooks but that did not happen eventually, and we had to write a report stating that we decided to use this one… I cannot work with it […] Mia

Mia suggested that the ministry was not interested in choosing appropriate English language textbooks for students' language levels or providing didactic and material resources in sufficient quantity. The burden has been left on the teachers' shoulders to self-manage, which indicates a rather forced autonomy. Mia perceived that there were issues of legality, transparency of auction contracts, and quality concerning some of the textbooks that were eventually approved by the ministry and delivered to schools. FL teachers are not always asked for their expertise, based on the realities and needs assessments of their school communities. The evaluation is made by the ministry commission in charge of the approval of textbooks, therefore, generally, teachers are only able to choose from a limited offer. These findings resemble Khalil & Lewis's (2019), who examined English language teachers' autonomy and agency in the Turkish centralised education system, and revealed that the teachers' agency and autonomy were limited to choosing textbooks from a pre-established list:

> So I have to come up with different resources, create my own. I need though an adequate textbook, in tune with the present realities, and the 21st century… and it should be provided by the ministry. They want us to teach 21st-century skills, but we do not receive minimal support to do that. I tried something, I drew a report and asked the person responsible for the textbooks in our high school to go to the inspectorate and tell them about the problem. The person in charge of that at the inspectorate was very annoyed and did not provide any solutions. They told us to manage with what we had. Their textbook alternatives weren't what I would have chosen anyway, what I know that can work, but at least we would have had the possibility to check the other options. Mia

It seems that the situation is more acute in vocational high schools, compared to what the other interviewees mentioned. Mia and Sara decided to teach using free online resources and the textbooks that they bought themselves, trying to provide each student with what they needed, at their own expense. Celine was more fortunate, she changed the textbook after a discussion with her students' parents who decided to purchase the proposed book and help their children. In her case though, the parents had the financial means to do that and her high school had the financial means to ensure that students had printed learning material on their desks when needed. Olivia and Laura seemed moderately satisfied with the textbook alternatives from the ministry for lower secondary school and emphasised that they used a lot of supplementary didactic material. The teachers cannot keep up with the financial costs of copying learning materials for each student. The school cannot assist them and they buy their additional didactic material or speakers, cartridges, and Xerox paper to be able to do their job appropriately. Generally, all the teachers arrange the billboards in the schools and classrooms using their own financial resources:

> I think that they should prioritise education at the governmental level and ensure the resources we need in less crowded classrooms. I do not think that a set of necessary textbooks is too much. I gave money out of my pocket to buy speakers to do the listening tasks properly, paper for the photocopier, cartridges for the printer…I have prepared the billboards and notice boards on the walls in the hallways of the school. We all contribute money to arrange these. Mia

> Textbooks are our greatest problem. They are outdated, uninteresting, and have nothing in common with students' present realities. So I don't rely on them, I've spent my money on books written and edited in France. But the students received the old ones so they carry them to school, we take only small bits from them, some grammar… I buy new books year after year… I found appropriate textbooks of French for specific purposes suitable for the profile of this vocational high school. And I have books that target DELF and DALF, which have audio files, text, everything. The contents are appealing and interesting, such as lessons about stereotypes, the food of the future, nature, pollution, and many other relevant topics. However, students use their phones sometimes because there are not enough resources to make copies for them. Sara

There are also deficiencies regarding how classes are constituted and language teachers in vocational schools are confronted with this problem. Classes are made disregarding the students' language level, ranging from no knowledge to the intermediate level. This ultimately burdens the language teachers' workload, creates class-management problems, and reduces their agency in the classroom. They have to teach these large mixed-ability classes, where students' language levels are very different, which ultimately hinders students' language learning:

> The students come from all the neighbouring towns but are automatically enrolled in this high school, regardless of the language that they studied in the lower secondary schools where they came from. They take an initial examination, and, of course, we observe that they have different levels: no knowledge, beginner, and intermediate. I would have found it normal to form groups according to their real level. Some of them come from schools in rural areas and have not studied English at all. They are all in one large classroom and nobody cares. They take these placement tests, and I've had to grade them up until now but I don't do that anymore. I found this test made by educational experts from Cambridge Language Assessment - an online placement test, with 25 questions, and I can assess them more precisely according to CEFR. They can also take the Oxford English Language test which is more complex. We use these applications that give them their results almost immediately. Mia

Mia and Sara feel they cannot implement the recommendations regarding foreign language usage in the classroom and use the Romanian language to improve participation and prevent students' demotivation and feelings of incompetence. They are experienced teachers who have included online applications and language tests in their teaching, to help develop and assess their students' language skills, which illustrates the practical-evaluative component of their agency. They have involved

students in various school activities, and international and national projects meant to boost their students' motivation to study, build their collaborative skills, and promote their natural inclinations.

The participants are preoccupied with bringing quality to their teaching and, more generally, into their profession. However, despite personal capacity, autonomy, and experience, these contextual factors inhibit all teachers' professional agency, regarding their actual opportunities to do their job professionally.

Teachers' moral decisions and compensatory actions reaching disadvantaged students

All the teachers paid attention to their students in class and beyond. They were committed to helping and guiding their students through their difficulties by building strong bonds with them, based on trust. As lead teachers, Laura, Mia, Sara, and Marie shared a lot about their work experiences and how they found solutions to some of the hardships their students were experiencing. Children felt misunderstood by busy parents who failed to communicate with them. Consequently, as lead teachers, the participants became advocates who spoke in the name of their students. These parts of narratives reveal both the practical-evaluative component of the teachers' agency, by actively addressing the diverse problems encountered in their work, and the projective dimension of their agency, as feeling responsible for their students' well-being and academic achievement. They thoroughly acknowledge the social mission of their profession.

Laura brings her students personal development books to read because she is conscious that the teenagers in her classes are confused and cannot talk to their parents about their problems. She has made several references to how familial background, either parents lacking financial means and education or Roma family traditions to marry their children young, having them drop school, can deprive students of chances for a good start in life. She became involved and negotiated with the parents, trying to resolve some of the social issues to the best of her abilities, without support. Laura observed her students and their circumstances worsening and tried to help a student whose mother was a migrant worker in a Western European country. The boy was deprived of parental care and affection, and placed in his relatives' care, elders who needed care themselves, which is illustrated by Laura's unprompted report:

> There are also the parents who work abroad, leaving their children with their grandparents, there are lots of problems there… I succeeded in convincing a single mother, who works in Germany, to take her boy with her abroad. A child needs to live with his parents. The boy had remained with his grandmother… I saw the regression in all respects. So I am glad that she was able to come and take him with her. This is one of the main problems for students, the lack of communication between them and their parents. Parents who cannot be there for their children…And I do not see this changing because I do not see any preoccupation with this at a higher level, unfortunately… Laura

Mia's and Sara's classrooms reflect the social realities of the country. There are students from disadvantaged families, in this case, vulnerable pregnant girls, whose parents are struggling and seem powerless or indifferent to their children's fate. The subjects that they teach are rendered less important compared to the urgent problems that some of their students face. The teachers feel that they have a moral duty to their students from their position as lead teachers as they cannot ignore what is happening under their eyes in their school community. Consequently, a lot of times they have to take matters into their own hands but victories are few and mainly individual efforts. There are social issues to which the teachers cannot have long-term solutions, as they cannot compensate for the lack of balance and guidance within the students' families and the general social inequities. Nevertheless, they are proactive and do a lot in their role as lead teachers, investing time and care in educating their

students. Their responsibilities and problems in the class exceed the lead teachers' attributions regarding mandatory educational support, counselling, and professional guidance activities:

> Some of the students come from low-income families, with problems. In the vocational class, I have 3 students, girls with problematic backgrounds. Two of them have children, one is pregnant again, and I am struggling to help them graduate high school. I am the lead teacher of that class…The parents are not involved and do not attend parent and teacher meetings. There are difficult problems in these families. I sometimes talk to the school psychologist about my students and she always reminds me that these children are just survivors of their families… Mia

There are insufficient school counsellors in public schools for the number of problems that the students have, revealing the fact that students' mental health and well-being are not among the priorities in the public education system. Teachers have to rely on their judgement and knowledge to help their students, without much support from a school counsellor or professional psychologist:

> I think that one psychologist is not enough, this high school is large…due to the pandemic, the students came with lots of problems, they need to talk… our psychologist is always on the run because she works in two schools. She cannot cope with the number of problems, and take care of everybody who might need counselling. Children need more than one therapy session, there is a need for many psychologists. Another thing, she also has a didactic norm, and she admits that this is not normal, she cannot counsel the students she teaches… Mia

As lead teachers, Laura, Mia, and Sara paid attention to their students' lives and fulfilled to an extent a compensatory role. Parents were either too busy, lacked formal education, or the communication skills required to deal with their children's emotional problems. The students sometimes considered their teachers as the only people they could rely on, which was a considerable responsibility for the teachers. The participants had to mediate between children and their parents, trying to protect the former without antagonising the latter and being considered intruders, which reveals solid communication skills, diplomacy, and strategic thinking. The teachers appeared content because they had made a difference, however small, in their students' lives. To an extent, they gave the students and their parents opportunities to think and act differently, as Sara's account illustrates:

> There was this situation… one of my students got pregnant… Her mother called me, she was desperate, panicky. I eventually managed to calm her down. I told her not to worry because her daughter was not the first girl who ever got pregnant… not that I encouraged that of course... I reassured her that I would speak to the students in my class and that it wouldn't be a problem [...] I explained the situation to them and the children understood. The girl graduated from high school…had the child…then attended the school for nurses… I managed to make them see that it didn't have to be turned into a tragedy…I think that as a lead teacher, you have an extremely important role. You can make a difference in your students' lives, offer another perspective on things, help them approach things differently… help them see that they can get out of their situation…Maybe you cannot save all of them…but at least…convince them to study further…try harder…There are huge problems with the parents, who do not understand their children, cannot grasp what is happening. We have to take care of these vulnerable children with difficult backgrounds, get them out of their problems in their family a little, and show them that other paths are possible. Sara

The teachers created the conditions in their classrooms so that the girls would not fall victim to stigma and prejudice, and consequently drop out of school and run from home. The teachers' moral and social roles were enhanced in such circumstances. They advised, communicated, and offered their help, which represented a resource of immediate support for their vulnerable students, girls who found themselves at a crossroads, in initially perceived impossible situations. This kind of agency is hard to quantify, as the decisions and courses of action that teachers pursue at their discretion, based on their judgement of their environment, for the benefit of their students, representing both the practical-

evaluative and projective dimensions of their agency. Their involvement counterbalances to an extent the familial shortcomings and failure of the education system to provide equitable treatment and support students with disadvantaged backgrounds. This constitutes a priority for these teachers, which is overlooked by the appraisal criteria within the education system. There are unfair judgements and comparisons deciding teachers' worth and what teachers are supposed to achieve, disregarding the unique characteristics of their school environments and communities.

The teachers' moral and emotional dimension, empathy, and care for their students are of utmost importance in this profession, making a difference in complex situations. At the same time though, their personal and professional boundaries have become increasingly blurred and they take responsibilities that+ exceed their attributions, competencies, and personal resources. It seems as if teachers are free to compensate as much as they can for the social inequities and the state's systemic deficiencies and indifference to these children, as well as be held accountable for their students' failures.

Cultivating relationships and teamwork

Teachers' relationships with colleagues, students, and parents represent the domain of cultural and social influences and resources, mediating teachers' decisions and classroom practices. The school environment regarding management, collegial relationships, and the overall organisational culture contributes to the development of teachers' professional agency, providing opportunities for professional growth, improvement of practices, and participation in decision-making (Priestley et al., 2015). The purpose of this part is to illuminate how the teachers' relationships in their school communities help them achieve their professional goals and develop agency.

Sara and Mia stated that they had a few colleagues with whom they communicated openly due to their collaboration on common projects, which enabled them to gain trust in each other. They are people whom they befriended and their friendship expands beyond school-related matters. Laura perceives that her school's organisational culture favours raising issues that teachers consider important for the good of the school. The school management allows space for the teachers' opinions and contributions, and mediates the parent-teacher relationship successfully to prevent tensions. There are strong ties in her school community, which contributes to Laura's professional credibility and agency:

> I can say that I am incredibly lucky because we are friends. There are no mean things, or people belonging to certain groups. Whenever there are special events, we are all together… this is extremely important, going to school with pleasure and meeting your colleagues as friends. The principals… you do everything because you feel that you must, not because they impose things on you…I always feel that I can express myself freely in our teachers' meetings, and I do that, there are no problems to which we cannot find a solution. The principal knows how to manage a problem in order not to escalate. There have never been conflicts with parents, for example. He knows how to approach all parties to manage every situation effectively…We are 3 English language teachers and 2 French language teachers. We get on very well and we help each other when we are in need…Laura

The teachers believe that good collegial rapport and the school management's support nurture their confidence in their skills and encourage them to take responsibility and initiative. Celine felt that she evolved personally and professionally due to the high academic level of the students and the trusting atmosphere in the school. Her narrative reveals openness toward her school principal and a desire to please. She perceives that the school environment helps her to have a voice and affordances for professional development and agency. Celine appears to be stimulated to learn continuously, which she does with pleasure:

> I learned something from every school where I taught, and I admit that I also learn from my students or due to them…What I mean is that now as a teacher in this high school, I have to prepare differently…and I admit that…I had this discussion with the principal before Christmas, that I evolved as a teacher in this high school, by being stimulated, and I think that I do all that is required or that I should do to be a good teacher…Celine

The principals at high school manifested trust in Celine's capacity and openness to cultural activities more generally. She found the space and freedom to implement her projects, thus affordances for the achievement of agency. Celine perceives that the atmosphere at school is relaxed and constructive, which allows her to have initiatives that ultimately prove feasible for her students and high school. She mentioned that she felt appreciated for her work. Although she works in a high school where the sciences are hierarchically at the top of the curriculum, she feels that her subject and activity are valued and considered important:

> I had the freedom to propose activities out of school, which became possible without struggling to write reports for two or three days… It was alright and that is the reason why I initiated these activities where we had to go out of the classroom or school, that is why we've got involved in so many projects. I went to the French film festival in the country with my students as volunteers, it was a very good experience…Celine

> There are different people in this high school, more open. If you do something that works, nobody will come and try to ruin it for you or be envious of that… Celine

Celine mentioned that the teachers in her high school shared material resources and praised each other's successes. They generally collaborated for the benefit of the school and their students.

Olivia's, Chloe's, and Marie's narratives revealed that the collegial support within the language department became a source of motivation for further professional growth, which compensated for what they perceived as unfounded criticism and lack of support regarding their initiatives in school. They believed that some of their colleagues outside the language department were generally interested in their own welfare and overall not inclined to collaborate and support each other:

> I feel that collegiality is the most important…This year, I and my colleagues, foreign language teachers, are creating the school magazine… We are also part of the committee for European projects. I think that my colleagues perceive me as a young, creative resource with potential. The first issue of the magazine was released and I was congratulated on its quality by some of my colleagues. However, the work behind it remained unseen, and not all of my colleagues participated in creating the newspaper. After the first issue was released, there were unfounded reproaches from these colleagues… Our relations at school are characterised more by competition and fulfilling personal interests rather than collaboration. Chloe

Marie's colleagues in the language department are either mentors or methodologists. They are about the same age and have many years of working experience. They are expert teachers who have obtained all their didactic degrees. All the participants mentioned that they were preoccupied with their professional development, due to the dynamic context of language teaching in general:

> English teachers in this high school are very united, we are practically a family, somehow envied by many of our colleagues, who aren't able to build such strong ties within their departments. We have obtained our teaching qualifications, and all of us are interested in personal and professional development. We are 4 English language teachers, of approximately the same age, ranging from 42 to 45 years old, so there is only a minor age difference. Marie

When teachers are active agents of their professional growth, they are a resource for learning and support for their colleagues (Edwards, 2007). Olivia mentioned that the language teachers at her schools collaborate closely, exchange ideas, and share their resources in order to improve teaching and students' learning in class. To an extent, she informally became a mentor, and in one of the schools, she is also the head of the language department. Her past teaching and learning experiences (iterative), which were not entirely pleasant, inform her present actions and decisions (practical-evaluative), concerning her colleagues. She empathised with early career fellow teachers, reflecting on her past experiences:

> Now I have colleagues with whom I collaborate well. We share our didactic resources. Yesterday, I talked to one of my colleagues who will have a class inspection. I gave her some ideas for class… She told me how she approaches teaching the tenses... Primary school students find it more difficult to learn and understand tenses… So we exchanged ideas of how to improve this aspect of teaching in our classes…I and my colleagues, foreign language teachers as well as one of the Romanian language teachers are extremely close. We communicate and collaborate very well, exchanging ideas, books, materials. We keep our personal lockers open, we can take and use whatever we need…I think that I am a resource for my colleagues and I help them whenever I can. When my colleagues, beginning teachers, asked for my help, I guided and advised them so that they wouldn't feel what I felt in the beginning…Olivia

Taking initiatives in school and beyond

The teachers emphasised that they felt best when they were trusted and had the freedom to do what they considered suitable in and outside the classroom, according to their knowledge and skills. They worked better and were more motivated to go above and beyond for the development of their students and schools, perceiving that they were able to make a difference. All the participants involved their students in various regional, national, and international language projects where their students received recognition and prizes for their work.

Celine has involved her students in a lot of intercultural, literary projects due to a fruitful partnership with Alliance Française's representatives in the city, which she has maintained over the years. Her professional agency stems from her ability to develop robust relationships with teachers in other schools and representatives of cultural institutions, in common projects, indicating the practical-evaluative component of her agency. She has initiated projects that are welcomed by her students, who get involved willingly. She thus develops her students' French language communication skills in real-life contexts, their cultural repertoire, and desire to read, revealing her sustainable teaching approach:

> There are 2 or 3 projects that I do every year...One of them is called…*Le Français dans le Rue,* where 8th, 9th, and 10th graders choose a monument in the city that they present in French. Alliance Française knows about my project and they enable me to get in touch with 2, or 3 native French speakers, with whom we walk around the city and the students present those monuments. It is a guided tour and they love this because they get in touch and speak with somebody who doesn't speak Romanian, so they have to manage that. I also had a project with a lecturer from the French Lectorate in the city, a fine activity, *Chase au Tresor* (treasure hunt)...I also initiated this book club in partnership with another high school in the city. I chose literary texts and extracts from them [...] we discussed literature, beginning with those texts, and scaffolding questions… some of them were motivated and eventually read those texts in their entirety, for example "M. Ibrahim and the Flowers of the Koran" by Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt..."Journey to the Center of the Earth, by Jules Verne, or poems by Victor Hugo…Celine

Mia, Sara, and Laura perceive themselves as proactive, involved, dynamic teachers, who despite the hardships, are eager to establish communication and build meaningful dialogues with other schools in other countries within common projects, nonetheless they deplore the lack of predictability within schools regarding both national and international projects. The teachers created possibilities for

meaningful intercultural communication projects and also had access to a few funded opportunities to travel in European countries, which built their own and their students' intercultural knowledge. They designed and participated in regional and national projects to promote their students' language learning, or ensure the financial means to enable teachers to carry out their duties adequately in school, which Sara's account illustrates:

> I was involved in the ROSE project, with MoE and the World Bank so that we could acquire video projectors, intelligent boards, and laptops, to increase quality in teaching, and we obtained funds for remedial teaching activities in subjects such as Romanian language and Mathematics, for example. Technical colleges were mainly included in the project, those that did not have 100 percent baccalaureate graduation rates. That took a lot of hours of hard work… I spent my summer vacations working. We were a team of six but only four of us really did the work. There was no guidance for us either. There should have been this team of specialists to advise us but these people did not answer their phones or reply to our emails. We did not know how to implement such a project, we didn't have any experience in acquisitions and accounting…we were just regular teachers. I was responsible for the coordination of pedagogical activities, but I had to get involved in each part of the project eventually. We managed… We helped each other, and eventually, after a lot of effort, and re-doing our paperwork and plans, we succeeded. But we would have needed somebody to help and teach us how to do those documents. Sara

From Sara's narrative, it can be inferred that the level of knowledge required by the project exceeded the teachers' knowledge, skills, and experience. Nonetheless, they managed to implement the project, learn, and obtain funding, which illustrates their proactivity and determination despite the lack of support. Sara appears to be a resource in her school and she has many administrative responsibilities that she tries to approach professionally and diplomatically. She seems to be able to mediate successfully between her colleagues:

> I have also been responsible for the language and communication commission in my high school for many years, and a member of the commission for the baccalaureate. In the summer I am on the commission for the registration of students in high school… We organise meetings for our language and communication committee, I write the departmental reports and ensure the communication chain. Sometimes there are light arguments that we have to pay attention to, so we have to approach these diplomatically. Unfortunately, there wasn't much time to meet formally and discuss our teaching, but sometimes the most productive discussions occur spontaneously after classes, as a consequence of what happened in class. And we advise each other or share some teaching strategies from our experience on the spot. But we did a lot of contests and activities with the students before the pandemic, which required the involvement of all the language teachers and we communicated our activities to the local press. Generally, I feel that my work has been appreciated, by all the principals that I have known. I think I did a good job…Sara

The teachers were not shy of fulfilling challenging assignments and responsibilities at the school level and beyond. Olivia, Sara, Mia, and Marie are heads of the language departments in their schools and coordinate specific activities and projects.

Marie was a methodologist in the past and now she mentors novice teachers. She is a member of the advisory council of the county inspectorate and her tasks involve designing subjects for the English language olympiads. She chose to get involved at this level initially because she needed practical knowledge and information on how to promote her own language projects and initiatives at regional and national levels, which reveals the practical-evaluative constituent of her agency. She also tried to build a regional community of language teachers. It can be argued that she acted intentionally and took responsibility but she was also granted access because she had been already established as a competent teacher in her English language teachers' community. She perceives herself as proactive and appears to exercise a lot of professional agency due to her involvement:

> My participation in the inspectorate advisory council is voluntary, teachers have to want to get involved. Why I wanted to be there…When I started the contests, I realised that the communication chain between the schools in the county and the inspectorate was inefficient. The information didn't reach our high school. So I went to the inspectorate and participated in meetings to get information and be able to deliver it further to my colleagues. It is a good thing that happens there, that our language inspector really consults us on certain issues…but she cannot simplify our life too much because there are requirements from above…I have always sent the information further to my colleagues […] it was important for me to help create this community of language teachers…and through these contests that I organise, I've succeeded in doing something…When I ask my colleagues something regarding the English language, I can count on all my colleagues' support …because they know that when they ask something from me I keep my word and provide what they need as soon as possible…It is a matter of respect and reciprocity…Marie

One of her other priorities in her high school is to help interested students pass the Cambridge and IELTS language examinations. She was one of the teachers in her language department who established their high school as a Cambridge and IELTS training centre involved in the organisation of internationally recognised language examinations. She promoted her initiatives fearlessly beyond her school, and she conscientiously chose to get out of her comfort zone, devoting time to her students and school, which reveals the practical-evaluative constituent of her proactive professional agency and her risk-taking approach. Nonetheless, she was aware that she was exposed to criticism concerning these initiatives, feeling that she had been under scrutiny for daring to get involved. She feels though that she makes a difference in her students' lives and school, and she did a lot of pro bono work:

> […]We have also been a Cambridge language testing centre for about 12 years…I was the teacher who made this possible in this high school…I don't want to brag…but these are my accomplishments…I've never wanted to limit myself and think only about my child at home….I and one of my colleagues initiated these contests… focused on grammar that we organised initially at the school level, then at the town level, to eventually reach the national level, and we also included a symposium ...It was a very difficult time, because the amount of unpaid work was huge, oftentimes at the expense of my child's wellbeing, but I chose that…I've never thought only about my family …I've always thought about what I might do for others…but what you do willingly takes away a lot of your free time and also makes you vulnerable. Marie

Teachers act purposefully and direct their professional development

During our interviews, all the teachers appeared interested in their professional development, provided that they found it rigorously organised and relevant to their profession. It can be argued that some CPD courses are structural resources that can bring professional fulfilment and agency, and offer a different perspective, compensating to an extent for the various dissatisfactions and disappointments in their school space. There are a few main forms of continuous professional development for FL teachers. First, there are didactic degrees in the national education system, entitling teachers to slightly higher salaries and the possibility to compete for management, guiding, and control positions. Secondly, there are courses provided by the ministry through the Teaching Staff House or various providers. Further, English language teachers had access to the free courses and webinars offered by the National Geographic Society, British Council, Oxford or Cambridge University Press. These have proven vital to building the English language teachers' methodological capacity since before the pandemic. The teachers found pedagogic solutions for their classes but also personal and professional support and resources of motivation and resilience, by accessing a rich and diverse English language teacher network. Mia, Olivia, and Marie have relied extensively on such courses and webinars conducted by well-known methodologists in the field of ELT, which provided practical advice and strategies that could be used in online classes:

> The webinars offered by Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, and National Geographic were life savers though. I remember one with Jeremy Harmer, who reassured me that all my attempts, trials, and errors were the right thing to do, that at the end of the day, my partly intuitive instructional decisions were the right ones. He spoke about our community of language teachers…It gave me confidence and relief. I participated in tens of webinars on teaching pronunciation, vocabulary, and reading, and they taught me how to approach each type of lesson, how to engage and motivate students, practical strategies to make my lessons more interesting, and how to monitor my students' progress. Mia

Nonetheless, during the pandemic, the teachers needed to get familiarised with educational platforms such as Google Classroom, which was mainly used in a national context, along with Zoom and Google Teams which were used for their class meetings. They had little to no support regarding these technologies in their schools, therefore they mainly learned by accessing tutorials on the internet, together with their students and colleagues, and only much later through a course provided by the ministry.

Some of the teachers shared their views about class inspections, which were mandatory in the process of obtaining their didactic degree certification. Methodologists assess teachers' classes according to specific criteria in an evaluation form and draw a report. To be able to obtain this kind of certification, FL teachers need to take spoken and written examinations in psychology, pedagogy, language, literature, and language teaching methodology. The participants believed that their meetings with the methodologist teachers and foreign language inspectors who assisted their classes were overall favourable and fruitful, and, sometimes, they benefitted from their advice. They generally felt that they taught good classes and were appreciated accordingly. The teachers prepared rigorously for classes in general and, for inspections, in particular. Mia, Sara, Marie, and Laura mentioned that they were supported by their supervisors at the university when they prepared their research papers for their first didactic degree.

Olivia's narrative illustrates a rather stressful situation for candidates who have to prepare for classes beforehand and feel compelled to become demonstrative in class inspections. Preparing lessons very rigorously indicates her perceived duty to behave professionally, but also reveals insecurities and worries that her performance might not look well enough for the ones who evaluate her classes:

> Concerning my second didactic degree… the teacher who assisted me gave me some practical advice regarding my classes, and she was satisfied with the way I conceived my activities and the methods and strategies that I chose. She told me that my rapport with the children was good, that students were engaged in the lesson, that the materials I used were diverse, and required that children work either in groups, pairs or on the whiteboard. The other two methodologists who inspected me were eager to finish, and only one helped me with practical advice. I feel stressed when I have inspections as if there is somebody who stays in class and wants to catch me off guard so that they would claim their superiority… Last year I had my first inspection for the first didactic degree… I was assisted online. It was complicated but I managed a good class and the students were engaged. Olivia

Olivia is a mid-career teacher who appears to have gradually acquired confidence in her teaching skills also due to these teaching qualification exams and class inspections. All the teachers stated that they were composed and capable of negotiating with methodologist teachers and justifying their instructional decisions in class when needed. It can be inferred that they have acquired important subject methodological knowledge and gained a lot of experience also by having obtained these didactic degrees.

As part of the assessment criteria for this type of national qualification, the FL teachers had to demonstrate active involvement in national educational projects, various extracurricular activities,

professional development courses, and various administrative tasks in the school. Nonetheless, these forms of accountability and performativity, through class inspections, activity evaluations, national examinations, and dissertations were generally regarded as draining emotional experiences. Marie provided a good account of this, from both perspectives, that of a regular FL teacher, pursuing her national didactic degrees, and that of a methodologist.

Marie mentioned that the majority of FL teachers, whom she assisted in class during the process of obtaining their teaching degrees, were well-prepared and involved actively in their professional development. However, she disliked being the person who monitored and evaluated her fellow language teachers, knowing that they were probably stressed and tired during class inspections. She stated that she was supposed to write lengthy reports, which had been ordinarily done in a wooden language for a long time by predecessors, failing to express a fraction of what happened in class and the assisted teachers' efforts. This reveals how these past habits and practices perpetuate and are hard to break, affecting teachers' beliefs and work. During the interview, she suggested that these practices were improving though, implying that teachers' habitual actions can be altered by taking responsibility for change when perceived legitimate and reasonable, thus challenging the status quo and achieving professional agency.

Marie's narrative unveils, nonetheless, a classic case of performativity, where teachers sometimes feel distressed and at a disadvantage, having to demonstrate their skills to pass the inspections:

> However, I didn't like being a methodologist myself, because I knew from my own experience that the teachers assisted in class were shivering…that they had sleepless nights behind…that they felt compelled to put up these large portfolios to be perceived well. Practically, all that remained after that class inspection was a report, filled with wooden language, that didn't account for at least ten per cent of what happened in class… Marie

It is noteworthy that these national degree certifications do not bring significant changes to teachers' salaries. Marie mentioned that methodologists did not receive adequate incentives for their work either.

Celine perceived that the current methodology to evaluate teachers through competitive theoretical exams based on memorisation was outdated and needed change. She believed that the process of obtaining didactic degrees was neither straightforward nor necessarily based on teachers' constant preparation and activity in class, apart from the mandatory class inspections. She thought that quality class teaching, motivating students, and consolidating their skills should be reasons enough to access these professional qualifications:

> What bothers me is how we are still evaluated and obtain these didactic degrees. I will take another exam in psychology and pedagogy, as well as in French literature and grammar. If the methodologist came to my classes and had nothing to reproach me, the classes were good, effective, and impeccable, and all the yearly planning, learning units, and lesson plans were well done…She felt that the atmosphere in class was good and that the students were eager to participate, which truly happens in each class… She liked my methods, the material I used, how I got the students from one lesson point to another… Well, I work with literature because I like it, but I do not teach literature, and even if I did, why should I take an exam where I have to reproduce what I memorise? Celine

In the landscape of professional development courses provided by the ministry, there is an online course in which teachers are participating at the moment of the interview that seems to stand out. To an extent, this brings hope that educational practices might improve. It is a large-scale course called "CRED" (in translation "Relevant curriculum, open education for all") that involves many teachers in the country and is not paid for by teachers. This project is co-financed by the European Social Fund

through the Human Capital Operational Program. The project seeks to develop teachers' necessary skills for a personalised reading of the curriculum and the development of didactic practices adapted to the learning needs of various categories of students (see https://www.educred.ro).

Olivia, Laura, Sara, and Marie evaluated the "CRED" course as demanding, rigorous, and helpful because it provided hands-on activities and enhanced teachers' knowledge of competencies, methods, and strategies to be readily implemented in class. It is one of the few courses in a national context that almost all the teachers considered meaningful for their professional development. A lot of assignments were required, thus it could be inferred that it promoted teachers' reflection on their practices and how to make instructional changes. All the participants acknowledged their need for meaningful professional training to develop their professional competencies. Through this course, teachers learned from each other, exchanged views and resources, and established networks and informal ties. It could be inferred that these possibilities of reflecting, communicating meaningfully, and networking were resources that contributed to the development of their professional agency:

> I did that famous course called "CRED", and it was okay… I liked that I interacted with other colleagues in groups, and we shared our experiences in class. That feels more relevant and useful... There were lots of assignments. The course was about how to combine general and specific competencies, methods, strategies, and activities and how to express them in your yearly planning. But the difficulty was that you had to come back from school, then participate in the course, 3 hours, 2 times a week, with lots of assignments. Celine

> These courses from European structural cohesion funds are relevant though, the "CRED" course, and there was another one…because they are done properly…they are done with the teachers in mind…and the teacher trainer is very important here…It was a beneficial, meaningful learning experience …I liked the trainer a lot…I liked the discussions that I had with my colleagues…Not one of my colleagues complained that the course was tiring…All of us regarded the course as a privilege that enabled us to share our experiences…and truly learn something…There are colleagues in the teaching staff room who are doing the course now and are complaining…that it is time-consuming, boring…Marie

Olivia's professional development has been consistent, and she appears to have embraced almost all the relevant opportunities available. She had access to meaningful courses and she valued particularly the courses within the Erasmus+ programme, which helped her expand her knowledge through international experiences and interaction with teachers from other European countries. Olivia and Sara described the professional development courses that they attended in the last couple of years:

> I did a course on the topic of bullying, one on the topic of innovative strategies in education, a course in ICT for instruction, a course in inclusive strategies for integrating students with special educational needs, among others. I pursued these because I was genuinely interested in these topics, but you have to pay…I pursued a course on French language teaching methodology, about teaching mixed ability classes, assigning groups, and differentiated, graded tasks, from ordering words, images, and text associations to answering questions, for example. It was useful. I can do that of course but that also means a lot of time for preparation beforehand. It sounds better in theory, unfortunately, we do not always have so much time in class. Sara

> I feel more experienced now. The mobilities helped me a lot. I went to Italy for an exchange experience with my students. The courses that helped the most were the courses in Greece before the pandemic, and Spain, in Barcelona, through the Erasmus+ project SAFE-Systematic Action for Future Education, last summer. They were very interesting and I acquired a lot of knowledge that I applied in my classes and I saw that it works. The course in Greece regarded inclusive education, and we discussed both prodigious, gifted children, and children with special educational needs such as Asperger syndrome, autism, and ADHD […] Olivia

> The course in Barcelona regarded ICT for instruction. A lot of teaching platforms were presented, such as Google Classroom, but I had already used that to upload materials and students used it to upload their assignments and have discussions there. In the beginning, we didn't know whether we would have synchronous or asynchronous classes...Class Dojo, a school learning platform was presented as well, a sort of virtual class, where teachers can meet their students but also invite their parents by giving them a link.[…] I am interested in teaching with platforms such as Kahoot, Quizlet, or Word Wall and I sometimes use them in my classes…I've also attended a lot of webinars offered by National Geographic, Cambridge Learning, and the British Council, during this period. Olivia

Although the teachers only briefly discussed the courses and resources from their CPD, without offering details about their implementation in classes, it can be inferred that their knowledge and use of teaching and learning applications, the teachers' relational resources through CPD, international projects, and discussions with colleagues and teacher trainers, contributed to the development of their professional knowledge and agency (Toom et al., 2015; Priestley et.al, 2015).

Theme 3 Challenges in developing and exercising professional agency

Insufficient initial teaching preparation and mentorship in school

The teachers' accounts about their initial teacher training experiences illustrate the iterative dimension of their professional agency or lack thereof, revealing vulnerable and modest beginnings as teachers, concerning their professional capacity, translated into skills and knowledge as well as professional beliefs and values.

The teachers described the psycho-pedagogical module as an abundance of theoretical knowledge in a specialised language that was not satisfactorily analysed through seminars and discussions with the students. Mia attended the psycho-pedagogical module after she graduated from university and perceived this as a disadvantage. She found it challenging to cope with the amount of theoretical knowledge presented in lectures, which she perceived as mechanical and outdated:

> I did the psycho-pedagogical module after graduating from university, and this was a disadvantage for me. Not all of my colleagues wanted to pursue it because we were prepared to be translators, interpreters… I found it difficult and I prepared by myself... I found pedagogy and child psychology challenging, and the language of the courses was wooden and difficult. A lot of information remained unexplained and the manner of teaching was unattractive. I do not remember any practical discussions…Mia

Chloe stated that either the courses were not delivered or that she could not participate in some of the courses due to the conflicting schedules of the universities she had to attend, the faculty of letters and the faculty of psychology. The schedules of the two universities were not harmonised in such a way as to accommodate the participation of all students, and the teachers admitted that they consciously prioritised their subject courses, while attending the courses within the pedagogical module only selectively. They sometimes chose to be at school for the teaching practice though:

> Regarding the psycho-pedagogical module at university… concerning the theoretical part I was overwhelmed by the information. Some of the psychology courses were not delivered… our teacher was in the last year before retirement…We only had our books as guidance. Also, I could attend the courses during the week when I did not have classes at the Faculty of Letters. I had to be present in both places, our professors at the faculty of letters told us that we had to be present, so naturally, I preferred to be there, skipping the classes for the psycho-pedagogical module. About the French teaching methodology and didactics courses…We learned theoretically about types of methods, exercises, and we did an analysis of different language textbooks but we did not know how to operationalise or had

> any practical knowledge about types of lessons, or strategies that we could employ in our classes… Chloe

At the end of the pedagogical module, despite successful graduation, the participants perceived themselves as insecure and vulnerable in terms of both theoretical and practical preparation to teach in real classrooms:

> I was luckier in the teaching practice part. An experienced teacher from a high school was kind enough to allow me to observe her classes and convince other English teachers to let me stay in their classes. I felt unprepared after that module anyway. I graduated but I was not ready to teach … with all the practicalities that were necessary for classroom teaching…I became familiar with the part of language teaching methodology in time, relying on the well-known authors in our field…But at the beginning, I felt lost. Mia

Laura admitted openly that she had not been thoroughly conscious of the importance of the subjects in the psycho-pedagogical module at university:

> Looking back at the psycho-pedagogical module now, to be honest, I realise that it was just something I had to learn. I didn't perceive its importance back then. Later when I studied to obtain my permanent teaching certification I studied child psychology… Having a few years of experience I began to understand certain things and make connections, which helped. But until then, thinking about the university years, it was just theory that I was obligated to learn, I did not fully grasp its usefulness, what it meant…Laura

Olivia appreciated that the psychology and pedagogy courses at the university were consistent but she was dissatisfied with both the language methodology course and the teaching practicum:

> The psycho-pedagogical module at the university was rigorous, especially concerning psychology and pedagogy, but much less regarding the language teaching methodology part. This was done in a shallow manner, just to check the boxes, and fill in some requirements. I discovered the landmark books by myself later when I had to read for the national tenure exam, for example…Olivia

Both the experienced and early career participants considered class observation very helpful but thought that the hours they taught in real classrooms were not sufficient and they would have needed opportunities to experiment and communicate with students more. During the teaching practicum, Olivia and Sara were not allowed to teach real classes because of the school schedule and the fact that the students' parents would have objected to having student teachers teaching foreign language classes. In Olivia's and Sara's cases, the parents' voices mediated the teaching practice opportunities at school. Their positioning as *spectators* and use of passive constructions unveil their feeling of not having agency and control as they depended on others and were refused access:

> Regarding teaching practice, I did ten hours of assistance but only one class of teaching practice in a very high-profile college in the city. *I was told* that I could not teach there because the *students' parents would possibly complain…* We were simple *spectators*. *It was not as if we could apply things ourselves and get to know the students…*Olivia

> I did ten hours of teaching observation at a high school in the city. I only taught three times and we worked in pairs on a lesson plan. I taught with one of my peers two times and then I taught the final class by myself. There was one tenured teacher who took care of us… she took us to observe her classes. At the end of the classes we taught, she told us about issues that were not in order, and what was not good in our lesson plans, but I do not think that it was sufficient. There was also *this issue that students would miss out on things if we taught them lessons instead of their actual class teacher.* Sara

Sara addressed the uncertainty concerning the status of mentors, namely the experienced teachers in the school who have to help beginning teachers:

> A mentor should take me to his/her classes to observe and learn, then assist my classes and help me with advice regarding methods, strategies, and rapport with students. Some teachers call themselves mentors, informally, but they are not mentors in a proper way, they just take you to their classes once or twice and this is sometimes a huge favour. As a mentor, you have to be prepared, have coherent plans, and time to help a beginning teacher…There are methodologist teachers appointed by the inspectorate who assist teachers in class inspections but those are not mentors who are there to help teachers in need. There are fortunate cases when principals can help you if they teach the same subject as you… I would have liked that a more experienced teacher had helped me, a mentor paid for this, not a teacher to whom I would feel forever indebted because they did me the enormous favour of taking me to their classes…Sara

Similarly, Marie emphasised that the mentor's responsibilities are very important. She suggested that these might not be properly understood by experienced teachers, who need adequate training to become mentors. Marie was a mentor herself and helped novice teachers, receiving them in her classes. She advocates that novice teachers should receive proper support to develop and be spared the deficit views that are sometimes projected on them:

> When the teacher enters the educational system …there must be a kind of help that is relevant for the beginning teacher and not the mentor coming into the spotlight and receiving recognition. Mentors have to know how to work with novice teachers and … really share from their experience…The class assistance mustn't be made to downgrade the assisted beginning teachers, telling them only what they did wrong…but to guide…advise them […] Marie

A few things need to be mentioned, to put that in context. The mentor's role and responsibilities are established in the national law of education. Some courses provided by the ministry prepare experienced teachers to become certified mentors. The Teaching Staff House is an institution represented in each county to help teachers with continuous professional development courses and certification. Despite their certification, mentor teachers cannot fulfil this task in a meaningful way for reasons such as lack of time, support, and a demanding workload comprising teaching their classes as well as having other administrative responsibilities in the school. They have to prepare a portfolio, make time to advise, support novice teachers with didactic material, perform different types of lessons, invite pre-service teachers to assist them, and observe mentees' classes, within a busy schedule. Also, there are not any incentives in place regarding such a task. Schedules in schools are problematic and accepting new responsibilities burdens a heavy workload, affecting the mentorship quality and rigour. What seems to be beautiful in theory, as written in education policies, seems less effective when translated into practice according to present regulations. One needs to distinguish also between mentors' tasks and methodologists' tasks. While methodologist teachers can be mentors should they want that (and vice versa), their main responsibilities consist of assisting teachers in class inspections, mainly in the process of obtaining national tenure and didactic degrees. Therefore, although they help and advise less experienced teachers after class inspections, their main task is administrative, quality control according to pre-established criteria regarding good teaching practices, within class evaluation forms and reports. The teachers who are assisted in class receive a grade and score.

The narratives suggest that the participants were expected to deliver and be able to act as required in their contexts, after a brief, inconsistent preparation. Chloe could be to an extent the only exception in this group, because she relied on her mentor for her teaching practice. This mentor was her supportive French language teacher at high school, which ensured continuity in her professional development. Nonetheless, Chloe, as well as Olivia, felt unsupported by some of their veteran colleagues or school principals. They needed mentors but they evaluated whether there was room for collaboration,

choosing not to intrude if their experienced colleagues seemed reserved. This reveals the practical-evaluative constituent of a reduced relational agency, through this reluctance to ask for support in what they perceived as mostly prohibitive school environments, at the beginning of their teaching careers.

Asymmetrical relationships and weak collaboration skills in the school

Oftentimes the teachers' narratives reveal that the school environment can become a site of tension. This is a commonality across the accounts, with only two exceptions. Laura and Celine stated that they benefitted from harmonious and fruitful relationships with other teachers and the management team in their schools.

From Olivia's narrative, it can be inferred that some teachers intentionally create discord between parents, students, and other teachers, if they are not happy with their colleagues' teaching approaches or professional development endeavours. Her narrative divulges moments of lack of collegiality, solidarity, and fair play between members of the teaching staff. By positioning themselves as the voice of parents and students, teachers can gain personal power and become their colleagues' oppressors. Personal and professional ethics and deontology are revealed as vital aspects of the teaching profession, where the iterative and projective dimension of the teachers' professional agency through personal values and beliefs are central. In the absence of moral and deontological values, relationships at school can be injured and the school environment becomes toxic, as Olivia's narrative illustrates:

> I *care* about my *personal and professional ethics* and recently there were *certain voices* that tried to *question* my *credibility.* I have to leave for this course abroad, therefore, my classes will be delivered by somebody else… a substitute teacher will replace me. It *was suggested* that the parents in a certain class are wondering why classes will not be delivered, but they will, there is somebody who will do that. So *this colleague* suggested that *my leaving to do these courses deprives students of their education* while they do not benefit from it... *This colleague of mine* made this comment on their WhatsApp group so that the students would see… Thus *she appears to be their guardian angel* and *I am the bad teache**r**…*Also, I was down with COVID-19, on sick leave, and I *was blamed* that I did not deliver my classes by that same colleague… So there are *moments like this*… I never encourage *discord among students and colleagues, I dislike* that immensely… Olivia

These *"certain voices*" within the school space come among the teachers affecting individual teachers. Olivia's decisive positioning opposite such practices is revealed by her repeated references to *personal and professional ethics* and *credibility*. Her use of affective verbs *(care, dislike*) and passive constructions *(was suggested, was blamed*) reveals her distress because she was not respected, despite her efforts. She felt hurt but self-righteous and even more determined to assert her values, difference, and resistance, which illustrates the projective component of her professional agency.

An important aspect of English language teachers' work in public secondary schools is teaching primary school children, from the preparatory class 0 to the 4th grade. Laura, Olivia, and Marie taught classes at the primary level and found it important to build harmonious relationships with the primary school teachers.

Regarding her relationship with the primary school teachers, Olivia perceived that she was surveilled and judged by the primary teachers who remained in the classroom during her English language classes, in one of the previous schools where she worked, when she was still at the beginning. She chose not to confront them directly as she evaluated that she would not find support among other colleagues and the management team. She felt insecure, vulnerable, and alone, calculating that she could not jeopardise her position by creating a discussion around her, which clearly illustrates the practical-evaluative component of her agency or lack thereof. It can be inferred that there were unequal power relationships, where the primary school teachers could grant legitimacy to foreign

language teachers by establishing their competence and mediating their credibility among other colleagues, students, and parents at that school. This part of Olivia's narrative indicates the fluctuating component of her agency, resulting from both the process of gaining experience and the quality of her relationships, in different school environments:

> In one of the schools, I always had two primary school teachers in the classroom with me during my English language classes, which I found inappropriate. It is not that I had anything to hide but I did not find that normal. They told me that in the previous year, the English language teacher had taught the English language class differently… they always had something to comment on. In the school where I have tenure now, my colleagues and principals give me the credit that I think I deserve…The principals came to assist me in class, I found that normal and it was done in a collegial manner. They did not comment improperly. I certainly do my best and I think I approach my classes professionally … Olivia

Olivia believes that teachers should be mindful of the fact that their behaviour might not be appropriate and may have long-term effects on impressionable minds. She feels that teachers should lead by example and pay attention to their vocabulary and behaviour, which reveals her principles and professional deontology. This reveals how the iterative dimension through constructed beliefs and values due to prior learning and professional experiences, influences the projective dimension of her agency, illustrated by her principles and purposes when teaching:

> I think that as teachers we *influence and form characters,* the way we behave and present ourselves, our language, gestures, and *the way we speak is suggestive … children borrow a lot from their teachers.* Children in primary classes borrow from their *primary teacher's mannerisms, words…* the way she acts. I saw that happening. So, it is very important to *be aware of how you speak and behave* because you might risk doing more harm than good. Olivia

Similarly, Marie's diplomatic account reveals that young learners in primary classes are influenced by their primary teachers' behaviour, understanding of their role and mission, personal values, and teaching style. It is implied that language teachers and primary teachers might have different values and understandings of educational purposes and practices that need to be reconciled for the welfare of the primary students. As an experienced teacher, Marie is mindful of the relationship with the primary school teachers that she needs to consolidate. Primary school teachers' knowledge of their students is vital for the English language classes, therefore good relationships have to be preserved. They also mediate between the students' parents and the English language teachers. Language teachers need to negotiate and find solutions to any communication and practical problems arising in class, together with the primary teachers:

> Because I teach primary school students*, I always have to maintain good relationships with the primary school teachers.* If I can make decisions independently when it comes to secondary school classes, well, I have to collaborate with the primary school teachers and communicate about the place of the English class in the timetable, what is required from parents regarding the English language class, how to communicate with parents about their children's progress… I have *closer relationships with the primary school teachers* as an English language teacher…and sometimes each of us has good or bad days…We have to understand each other…I am trying to understand the fact that *when someone does something, they have their rationale, which I have to respect before I say that what they did, wasn't done properly…I try to think twice before criticising* … Marie

> Primary school children like communication activities, they are willing to express their personal opinions in English…The primary teacher is very important…essential…The way the primary teachers behave influences their students' behaviour in class…So if primary teachers are open-minded and preoccupied with their personal and professional development… and have a rigorous system of values…this imprints on the class. I cannot do much as a language teacher in primary classes if what I say is the opposite of what the primary teacher says…Marie

Marie's and Olivia's narratives suggest that self-reflection, personal and professional values, and meaningful collaboration might not be sufficiently cultivated among teachers. The development of teachers' relationships takes constant negotiation, good communication skills, and professional development. Their accounts also reveal how their teaching philosophies based on ethical values (iterative) influence how they choose to position and act (practical-evaluative), leading to self-awareness and responsibility in their relationship with their students (projective).

The schools' organisational cultures regarding the management team and collegial relationships are important for teachers' agency offering them opportunities to grow professionally and collectively improve school practices for the benefit of students (Priestley et al., 2015).

The narratives reveal that the teachers prefer to discuss in small circles of people who trust one another. Mia, Olivia, Sara, and Celine said that they were cautious, evaluating whether they could address their problems in teacher council meetings. They are *reserved observers* who choose to preserve their energy, calculating that the situation is not worth their involvement. This unveils the practical-evaluative component of a reactive or reduced agency, due to distrust and caution as they understand that they cannot become vulnerable:

> I think that teachers just *conform* most of the time. *I don't feel that we have a voice or that our opinions truly count.* I am appreciated only by a few of my colleagues and we collaborate well. I *don't express my views so openly* and freely in teachers' school meetings. I am more of an *observer* because *I realised* that there isn't much that you can do, you could only *create animosity and enemies…I do not have the energy to fight these. I just try to do my job a*s best as I can…Mia

> *I do not express my views in teachers' school meetings, I am rather reserved.* Sometimes, *when I needed support with a certain class that was very problematic, I talked to the principal about it. But nothing happened.* I collaborated with the lead teacher of that class though, and there were actions taken to solve specific situations. The grades for behaviour were lowered for the students who did not want to change their attitude…I eventually managed to establish some norms and rules of conduct that were more strict, let's say. Olivia

Marie considers that in Romanian schools it is somehow difficult to work in a team because teachers have not cultivated teamwork and collaborative skills. She perceives that because teachers did not receive such an education, it is difficult to embrace other practices, revealing how prior learning experiences and cultural understandings (iterative), and the teachers' *habitus*, such as past patterns of thought and action, play out in their current school work (practical-evaluative). Marie is aware that she has the same problem. Also, she thinks that collegial relationships in her high school are deprived of fair play and honesty. In Marie's high school, having results in olympiads, contests, and international examinations with the students is an important expectation. Teachers and high schools have a reputation to preserve in their community, nonetheless, this does not seem to encourage collegial relationships or their individual and collective agency:

> In Romania, it is difficult to work in a team…generally…We are not used to working in teams. .. we don't know how to do that…The problem comes from us…We don't know how to collaborate…My opinion is that every teacher was a good student who always looked over his shoulder to see whether another one had got a higher grade than him/her…We were educated like that…It is very difficult to build a team, I observe the departments in the school, and what bothers me is that when somebody has obtained results in olympiads, projects… oh brother…how difficult is it to say "congratulations for what you have achieved"… because there is hard work behind each result…but if someone does a silly thing, everybody is ready to attack…Marie

Marie perceives that the atmosphere at work is not auspicious for either her state of mind or her efforts as a teacher. She considers that her school environment is imbued with negativity, which does not allow her to develop the collegial relationships that she would need. Social relationships are rather cold beyond the language department, although she has an important role and initiatives that have proven beneficial to her high school. She does not feel compatible with her work environment emotionally, therefore she prefers to concentrate on work and she has long decided to assess carefully what truly matters to her at school. Nonetheless, unlike Olivia, Chloe, or Mia, she feels that her position is consolidated and that her opinion counts. Marie chooses to exercise her prerogatives, as an experienced, established teacher, with a lot of administrative responsibilities, both in school and the county inspectorate. Arguably, she displays more agency in her discourse than the other participants. Her colleagues from the teaching staff and management team are experienced and they negotiate their views and positions, in an attempt to solve differences and rise to the various challenges, for the good of their high school. Despite that, they are individualistic and do not have strong collaborative skills. Marie admits that it is difficult to find people with whom she can collaborate easily:

> We are all experienced teachers, in our teaching staff almost everyone was either a principal or an assistant principal at a certain point in the past, only a few didn't have this position at some point…there are teacher methodologists, members in the inspectorate advisory councils, everybody has a justified opinion…and there is *debate…discussion…sometimes more heated…*We try to *reach a consensus*…and the best solution for the high school…these things are okay…we have good people in the position of principals…… but each is a particular case…so *if I have something to say…I say it…I never choose to be silen*t…*if there is something to be done, I do it*…I noticed that if you want to have something done *it is better that you do it alone rather than ask somebody else to do it…I know that this is not good for teamwork…that I should be able to work in a team… share responsibility*…but I noticed that it is complicated to work in a team… …Marie

Celine perceived that the mechanisms of control and surveillance were enhanced at the lower secondary school where she had tenure, and thought that the level of respect for teachers was low. She believed that there was authoritarian leadership and an overt lack of trust in teachers' expertise and judgement, which made teachers feel stressed and less free to implement their initiatives and projects. Generally, it was more difficult to take initiative with the lower secondary students, because there was also pressure and a need for parents' approval. Celine evaluated that she could not afford to take risks, which contrasts her proactivity and initiative at the high school where she currently works, revealing the practical-evaluative dimension and also the changeful, temporal features of her professional agency. It also reveals how collegial relationships and initiatives are dependent on the school leadership's approachability and fairness (Priestley et al., 2015). Her narrative reiterates that teachers are reluctant to voice their opinions when they evaluate their circumstances as prohibitive, as each of them is interested mostly in personal survival:

> At the lower secondary school, I never had any problems working, or interacting with my colleagues, only that when the head principal has certain ways of working or communication, there is this atmosphere in the teaching staff room, where e*verybody feels tense..*, which happened at the lower secondary school in the last 3 years I worked there… *If we don't like something, we do not dare to speak up and say what we don't feel is right…especially when the leadership is authoritarian… teachers do things to survive* and *do not waste their energy* beating the air…Celine

Mia revealed that some of her colleagues targeted favours and privileges in exchange for their support for a future principal, thus connecting to whoever was in a position of power that could assist them in their interests. Sara was also critical of the school administrative committee's manner of making decisions without consulting teachers outside it:

> People are sometimes voicing their preferences for a principal because they think it will benefit them in some way... Some colleagues want certain classes, want to be ahead of others, let's say. I was somehow indifferent to principals. I did my job without considering these issues too much. As a result, I have been the lead teacher of some very difficult classes…classes with lots of problems. There is this situation sometimes: *the ones* who have *self-proclaimed the elite of the school*, and *the others who have to struggle*. The school management team acts for their well-being… They are indifferent to teachers of other subjects. They lack long-term vision as well. Mia

> In my opinion, some of our colleagues obtain certain favours…the principals' friends can take a leave of absence when they want. Sometimes… they either enter their classes or not …Nobody tells them anything… If anyone else was in the same situation for various reasons…the principals would react differently. *Groups have been formed…* It is something visible. But *we never speak* about it…which leads to *frustration*. In teachers' meetings, *we decide only on the minor stuff* or we talk about students and their grades, but the *real decisions are taken in the administration council meetings…* We *are only told about those decisions after they have been taken.* Teachers who are not part of the administration council are not asked for their opinions on school matters. Sara

Sara witnessed repercussions for teachers who spoke up and voiced their dissatisfactions or opinions that were opposed to the school management team's views:

> There are moments when teachers are tense and sometimes there are outbursts and a tougher language is spoken. One of our colleagues had a conflict with the management team because she expressed her opinions that were different from those of the management. And she found at the end of the year that her evaluation score was lowered by the principal and the administration council, on account of poor communication with the management staff. We keep our opinions to ourselves. Nobody is eager to express anything overtly so that they wouldn't upset anybody… There is this feeling that even if you spoke up about the problems, you wouldn't achieve anything…Sara

Mia's and Sara's narratives reveal the lack of relational harmony and solidarity as some teachers are only interested in their personal welfare. The managerial team does not support all teachers equally and acts in an unprofessional, unethical way. The teachers believe that there are visible inequalities due to the preferential treatment that certain teachers benefit from. They also perceive that their subject status, and subsequently their status as foreign language teachers, is low, in comparison to other teachers' status in the school. Mia feels unappreciated and overall the high school does not seem to promote her professional agency. Mia's and Sara's discourses and positioning (*the ones who struggle)* in relation to colleagues in more privileged positions (the *self-proclaimed elite of the school*) reveal their reduced agency by feeling undervalued because their initiatives and efforts for the benefit of students and their school remain to an extent unacknowledged. Sara contrasted the previous school management team, perceived as more authoritarian but at the same time having more integrity, to the current leadership, who favoured some teachers while overlooking others. She felt supported and her activity was appreciated then. All the participants believe that a correct, professional management team encourages harmonious relationships between members of the teaching staff, whereas authoritarian or unprofessional principals enhance anxiety and lack of fair play in the workplace.

Chloe's account is revelatory in this regard. She is still a beginning teacher who needs support and mentors but finds it hard to build a genuine relationship with the veteran teachers in her school. Regarding her relationship with the management team, Chloe displays a strong teaching identity and positioning (*I- young/ they- holders of absolute truth)* in overt opposition to that of her principal, who is also a French language teacher:

> […]My principal, who is also a French teacher, sees me as a *competitor.* She cannot conceive that I could be right in certain matters, only because I am young. *They see themselves as holding the absolute truth*…to them *I am inexperienced… I do not know things and I will be proven wrong* as the years go

> by. *I tell them* that they might be right but I also state my opinions and how I want to do things based on what I see and hear. Chloe

Chloe described a moment when she was assisted in a class by her principal, which ended with comments and evaluations that were related to her style and not to methods and activities that could have been more adequate. Her principal disapproved of her manner of building rapport with students, perceiving that she was too friendly and informal. Chloe believes that they express two different teaching styles, that of a more authoritarian, traditional teacher, and her empathetic approach. She chose to remain true to her principles and close to her students.

Chloe's narrative illustrates the lack of collaboration between her and her principal and missed opportunities for fruitful communication and learning from each other, due to perceived competition and distrust:

> When I was assisted in class, my principal told me that she saw that students participated and listened to me, paid attention, but that I was too friendly, and that I needed to be an authority in my class. She thought that I needed to go through them and check their notebooks. I do not want to do that, to control them and invade their space, I always encourage them to speak when they need help. She described my lessons and what she thought of them…the students in that class are very committed and extraverted, very assertive… They behaved very well and cooperated, and wanted to demonstrate that they were on my side, my partners… I knew that the principal had been their French language teacher before me. Somehow despite feeling uneasy during class inspections in general, I felt relaxed in this one. Unfortunately, there was no meaningful discussion about methods or strategies that might have worked better, from which I could have learned something…only comments about the type of person and teacher that I was … Chloe

The fact that Chloe benefitted from her mentor's advice and guidance during the teaching practicum and in subsequent meetings, made her confident that, at least, some of her class management strategies and methodological decisions were correct. Her mentor was also her former high school teacher, thus a veteran teacher, with a different mindset and pedagogical approach, who inspired Chloe's teaching. Her students' positive feedback represented the contextual resource that Chloe relied on to mitigate her principal's opposition, and achieve agency in class. Chloe's instructional and class management decisions (practical-evaluative) were based on her own experience in the classroom as well as her mentor's guidance and the principles and values that they shared (iterative dimension). Expectedly, Chloe finds it difficult to embrace her principal's teaching approach.

In conclusion, although there might be disapproval of rigid or unfair management team and colleagues' approaches, the participants, though not completely voiceless, choose to preserve their status and only marginally express opposite views, revealing the practical-evaluative component of a reduced and reactive agency.

Effects of educational policies and institutional accountability on language teachers' relationships, motivations, and actions

One commonality across the teachers' narratives was related to the combined effects that macro and meso factors, such as educational policies and institutional accountability, have on teachers' collegial relationships within the language department. The teachers' motivations and actions regarding administrative responsibilities in school, their participation in projects and CPD were also affected by these factors.

All the interviewed teachers mentioned that they developed robust relationships in their language department, in school. They generally supported each other, shared resources, and participated in

projects and school activities together. Nonetheless, the relationships between colleagues teaching the same subject were impacted by norm restrictions and parallel procedures to obtain tenure, revealing how macro factors, such as educational policies, impact teacher agency. Teachers need to fill in an evaluation form, in which they have to demonstrate their participation in accredited courses, national projects, olympiads, and administrative responsibilities at school or beyond, which eventually leads to competition. Ultimately, they have to think about their welfare and position first, thus teamwork and collegiality are mediated by doing activities firstly based on the evaluation forms used to decide who stays and who leaves the school. Although tenured teachers in public schools are protected by the law, which ensures that they have priority and the possibility to complete their norms in other schools, the prospect of being the ones who must leave their work at the school, remains difficult and unpleasant.

Mia perceives that the competition created by parallel tenure procedures has dissolved their possibilities for solidarity in the language department, despite their initially desired cooperation. Mia's colleague obtained tenure in school, through an article in the law of education that was eventually abrogated. It was proven that the article in question allowed obtaining tenure through a parallel procedure, in other conditions than by taking and passing an exam, which was bound to generate discrimination between teachers within the education system. Mia obtained tenure by taking the national tenure exam. Eventually, she was placed in the situation of competing with her colleagues because they could not keep full norms in their high school:

> I have always wanted a colleague with whom I could collaborate and get involved in projects. … They offered tenure to one of my younger colleagues last year, in school… I was glad that this happened and then realised that there were not enough classes so that all of us could keep full norms in the school. I think that affected our relationship irreversibly. Now, each is on their own, with *personal interests that prevail...*I obtained tenure by taking the national examination. However, it was possible for schools according to one article in the law of education to award tenure to teachers whom the principal appreciates and so on. That is not possible anymore, at the moment…Nonetheless, I helped my younger colleague, she had to defend her proposal to obtain her first didactic degree, and I helped her with guidance, offering my thesis as a model. But our *relationship is not open and natural* anymore…Mia

Expectedly, the French language teachers were more affected by the norm restriction issues than the English language teachers, as Sara's account revealed, because French classes are generally fewer, especially in the high schools where foreign language teachers do not have primary level classes. The foreign languages that are studied in school have different statuses, with the French language perceived as less important, given that the English language has been imposed as the lingua franca. Consequently, students' parents pressure the school management to enroll their children in classes where English is studied first, from primary levels. As a result, French language teachers usually begin with students in the 5th grade and far more rarely teach primary school classes. Sara's vocabulary choices (*compared scores/ position threatened/pursue courses/not tell your colleague/ achieve a higher score)* are revelatory, concerning the quality of their relationships when confronted with norm restriction issues:

> There were four French language teachers, but in time we remained only two. We had to build our portfolios as we did not have full norms anymore…we c*ompared our scores* and saw who would leave the school. So much for friendship and collaboration…now you think that you *should pursue whatever course, not tell your colleague about it, to achieve a higher score* and keep a full norm in school. When you feel your position *threatened*… I remember the times when the French language teachers got on well…Sara

Mia's and Sara's narratives reveal that the teachers' rationale behind accepting additional responsibilities in the school has mostly to do with the fact that teachers need a good score, according to the appraisal criteria in various evaluation forms, unveiling the practical-evaluative component of a

reactive agency, when affected by accountability systems. Self-preservation imperatives lead to dishonesty and competition, preventing teachers from having a common voice and solidarity. Although the teachers articulate a fairly critical discourse, revealing that they are perfectly aware of the causes that lead to their problems, they do not perceive that they have the affordances to improve their situation, which unveils the practical-evaluative component of their agency or lack thereof.

The following extract illustrates the culture of surveillance, accountability, and performativity within the public education system, where indicators of quality, are ultimately, yet wrongfully, taken for the quality itself (Ball, 2003; Biesta, 2008). Mia's positioning (*I-we)*, repetition of the modal verb *have to*, and conditional construction (*would annul)* reveal dissonance, exhaustion, perceived inefficacy, and oppression due to the perverse mechanisms compelling her and her colleagues as a group to sustain a culture of performativity, accountability, and falsification. Their mindsets and relationships in school are thoroughly affected, revealing also the projective component of their agency, as aspirations for their practice and students' learning. Mia is also conscious of the fact that without resources, any kind of quality that is targeted is not truly possible:

> So *I accepted* the *responsibility* of the language committee in our school, and *I have to do mountains of reports*. I am also a member of the CEAC (*Committee for Quality Assurance*)**.** *I would annul this committee* because it has *no object***;** there is *no quality***,** to begin with. *We have to report it but we cannot truly sustain it… The CEAC report is a lie*…So *we see and understand that things are not working but we have to draw up the reports and continue like this…* Mia

Mia, Sara, and Laura believe that they cannot do much but replicate practices, expressing their feelings of frustration and powerlessness. There is complacency and acceptance after initial frustration, seeing that little is done to change teachers' work conditions, which indicates both the practical-evaluative and projective dimensions of their reactive professional agency. The integrity of the profession and teacher professionalism and agency, understood as teachers' expertise, responsibility, and control over their professional work are affected by managerial and technical accountability processes and also the lack of resources (Priestley et al., 2015):

> They *overwhelm us with paperwork*…there are *pressures from demanding parents and principals*…The teacher is *caught between conformism and continuous struggle. We try, we buy the books and everything that is required from the resources and money that we have. We feel that we can rely only on ourselves…We are the only ones who actually do something to manage classroom problems…courses, material resources, acquisitions in class*…Also *when I see some of the problems that some of the children are confronted with, I understand the reasons why they are so unmotivated and do not learn…* Sara

Sara and Mia's accounts are abundant in nouns and noun phrases (*struggle, papers, paperwork, reports, pressures, demanding parents, principals, inspectors, resources, money, conformism, problems, personal interests),* active voice verbs *(prevail, overwhelm, ask/ rely on, do, manage, tell, burst),* cognitive verbs *(see/ understand, reflect*) which along with passive constructions (*are buried*, *is required, are confronted with, were promised*) suggest their precarious position and their constant efforts to compensate, meet others' expectations and requirements, which leaves them in a survival state. Students, parents, and teachers seem to be caught in a dysfunctional, oppressing accountability mechanism, revealing that teachers feel frustrated, disempowered, complying with the current state of things:

> *That is why I say it is a struggle…because we try to understand everybody…even parents tell us about their problems…So we comply with doing the hundredth paper that is required and survive…We are almost comical…sometimes we burst and say that we won't comply with anything anymore…and will tell them about everything that is not right… But inspectors still come and ask us for all sorts of*

papers…Recess is so brief, about 5 minutes, you barely manage to get from one class to another…so instead of spending two hours reflecting on my teaching, I have to write reports and other stuff that has to be further delivered and registered. Sara

Teachers do not have the time to meet, discuss their practice, and reflect on their classes. The appraisal criteria in teachers' self-evaluation forms appear as impossible to achieve or simply unjust, which can be perceived as one of the main hindrances to the teachers' professional agency. Also, the value of a language teacher seems to be mediated by how strong their students and schools are. Their performance is measured through olympiads and language tests, the major projects that teachers and schools can access, leading to inequalities and inequities between teachers, students, and schools alike:

> […] I've got involved in the kinds of projects that were possible in this type of high school, with less strong students from modest families. I cannot compare my accomplishments to the ones teachers have in strong high schools, where students come from well-off families, travel abroad a lot, are tutored privately by all kinds of teachers, and participate in international projects or olympiads. The names of the class teachers are associated with their students' results, but this might be because other teachers tutor these students in private. It is shameful that they dare evaluate us in such a form. I've involved the students in a lot of activities where we worked hard and they learned something in the process. I try to do my best, my part of the bargain, but I work alone. I gave up, I do not have expectations anymore…We are buried in paperwork… Mia

There is a lack of alignment between the pre-established appraisal criteria by which teachers score points, and class or school activities that the majority of children need for their learning which are less valued and promoted. These findings are in line with assertions by Biesta (2004) and Ball (2003), emphasising the shift from students' needs to students' performance, along with the pressures placed on teachers to ensure that their students' results lead to a favourable perception of their school in the community. Although the evaluation forms consider teachers' work with low-achieving students, from disadvantaged backgrounds, or children with special needs, these activities are more difficult to quantify. Almost all the teachers mentioned that they felt rather inefficacious when teaching students with special educational needs, despite a few specialised courses they attended. They acknowledge their need for consistent training in this area:

> I participated in a course that helped me to better understand and include children with special educational needs in class…but I think we are not prepared to deal with this situation without help from the school. We do not have a psychologist, a special needs educator that the state should provide in the classroom, or a team that could work together for the benefit of the child. Considering all, I cannot see how these children can be successfully included and helped in a compulsory school…Chloe

> A method that works for a while is the differentiated content and tasks. But there are limits to this. I have to differentiate tasks and activities and when they see that the others work on different contents and tasks they would like to do the same. Despite all my explanations and reassurance, they continue to feel discriminated against and not included. The other children also become impatient, and sometimes frustrated. It is difficult to keep a balance. I feel that I need a partner, another teacher to help with the planning and activities in the classroom…Chloe

Their narratives reveal frustration, disappointment, and anger because they need to write justifying reports that cover the reality of not being able to teach appropriately, due to a lack of material, didactic resources, and a professional team in the school that could advise the class teachers. The amount of administrative paperwork that teachers are required to do in this regard is only meant to mask the systemic problems and preserve the illusion that something is being done for these children:

> The school counsellor was *overwhelmed* by the *amount of paperwork* involved and she asked us, the lead teachers to help with the papers required by CJRAE (County Center for Resources and Educational Assistance). We are *buried in paperwork* instead of prioritising the students with special educational needs. We must learn how to interact with them, adapt the curriculum, and create materials. But we are *writing reports…paperwork instead of taking care of children*. Everything should be made simpler, efficient. I have to get to know these students, communicate with them, assess what they can do, and how to proceed. Mia

Further, the evaluation forms consider the years of experience, authoring textbooks, designing syllabuses, elaborating curriculum, performance in olympiads, or results in national and international projects. Designing syllabuses is a distinct job, requiring special skills that regular school teachers do not have the time or means to develop. It is also reasonable to infer that this exceeds their attributions and purposes. Also, olympiads and international language projects are better sustained in stronger schools with motivated students and more financial means.

What seems very problematic though, as all the interviewed teachers underscored, is that teachers have become too accustomed to the idea that they only need to provide justifying reports about activities that have been more or less rigorously done. Teachers' actual day-to-day work in class has become invisible, rendered as least important, as they have to demonstrate and be able to justify all their activities with documents in large portofolios. Sara's narrative reveals that their salaries are modest and only a few dare to apply for supplementary incentives, such as the "gradation of merit", stating that teachers need to provide special evidence of an exemplary activity, abiding by various indicators of quality or self-evaluation criteria as stated in the methodology. Marie is the only participant who managed to access the gradation of merit, partly because she was a member of various school committees and the inspectorate advisory council. She was also able to promote and sustain her projects on a national level with strong students in a rather high-profile school. Candidates usually submit a thick file of accomplishments backed by justifying documents to the secretary of the school, which must be registered at the county school inspectorate, where the teachers' activity is evaluated. There is usually a fixed number of such gradations, established by the ministry. The appraisal criteria cannot be fulfilled by teachers easily, as schools have structural differences:

> The *requirements for receiving the gradation of merit exceed by far what you can do in school,* you have to do a lot beyond, have results in olympiads, be a methodologist teacher appointed by the inspectorate, write textbooks, receive prizes in contests, participate in various projects… There is a lot to do. There *should be a gradation of merit for your work in school*. Some people write a few articles or participate in activities outside of school, obtain all sorts of certificates, and do not do their work as teachers in school. So it is easier to assess some justifying papers and certain scores, I don't know … how can you assess teachers' daily activity in class… It would mean to consider the profile of the high school, and the initial level of students, to see whether the teacher took the students from five and helped them progress to six. *Large portfolios and papers are appreciated instead.* Sara

The evaluation forms do not meaningfully take into account the profile, the socio-economic background of students, the school communities, and the financial means of the schools. The teachers' actual work in the classroom does not lie at the core of the appraisal criteria. Furthermore, it was fairly obvious that teachers needed a better salary and not an unachievable gradation of merit.

Power relations beyond school

Laura's narrative reveals that the processes that make teachers accountable are numerous, and, despite the functional relationships in her school, there are situations when they perceive themselves as powerless. These mechanisms of surveillance and control from the inspectorate reveal distrust in both the teaching and school management staff. Laura's positioning among the *lazy conformists (not united*

as a nation in general), part of *the teacher union,* and her account of the coming school inspection is revelatory concerning how schools have to display quality within accountability and control systems, and the practical-evaluative dimension of the teachers' professional agency. Teachers are not united and mostly comply with their conditions, regardless of the stress and various injustices. However, Laura also presents a somewhat different perception concerning the foreign language inspector in her county, which implies that inspectors can change their manner of approaching their offices and practices concerning the schools and teachers that they monitor, should they want that. Nonetheless, the centralised structure of the national education system keeps teachers, principals, and county inspectors, accountable to their hierarchical superiors, therefore there is little hope that things can meaningfully improve:

> I would give up paperwork if it were up to me, and keep everything in the computer but in case of any school inspection, everything is on the principal's head. So the principal cannot be radical and has to conform. *There is the teacher union, but it is useless. Some colleagues have left the union. I think we are lazy, conformists.* I think *we are not united, as a nation,* in general. I don't know if others are like this. But that is what I see. There is solidarity in our school though. The principal says that this is the situation and we have to conform otherwise we would have problems. So, out of respect for them…We are expecting an inspection at our school soon, so we know there is a lot of paperwork to do, and if they are not satisfied with certain things, you have to redo everything, print it again…useless things…I can say that the foreign language inspectors have been more open and flexible, so things are smoother. And generally, the inspections in the foreign language class have been a bit different...Laura

The teachers believe that the reports that teachers have to write are not read by the ministry officials in charge. These reports do not seem to be appropriately centralised and analysed to alter teachers' work conditions in schools, provide the necessary material resources, or identify both teachers' professional development needs and students' learning needs. Although Marie is a member of the county inspectorate advisory council, this does not stop her from criticising the general bureaucratic practices within the centralised education system and the lack of finality to their administrative reports:

> […] I think that the way the inspectorate demands papers should change … There are a lot of reports that are required for the next day, or often in an hour, but this is not necessarily only the inspectors' fault because these situations are required from above…We've remained the country of papers, lots of reports… I don't know if they are read by anyone, centralised, and further used as a basis for analysis, and research. Marie

Overall, the teachers who were interviewed perceived that school inspectors did not rise to their task of providing a public service, that of assisting teachers with information and support. They felt that inspectorates served no purpose, apart from that of surveillance and quality control. Excepting Marie, who willingly became part of the inspectorate advisory council for foreign languages, for practical reasons, the other participants felt that school inspectorates were daunting places where they sometimes needed to go or phone, to resolve various bureaucratic situations related to the administrative part of their profession. Celine, Sara, and Olivia expressed disapproval of how the inspectorate representatives sometimes treated regular teachers:

> I don't see what purpose the inspectorate serves anymore…then again, you cannot do much without it…When I went to the inspectorate for the transfer procedure last year…well, when I need to go to the inspectorate, I pray that they won't end up shouting at me …which is awful, and you know…When I need information or an answer to a question, I cannot find anything on their website…and if I ask, they treat me as if I were brainless and ask me to check their website… Celine

> […]I would prefer not to have to go to the inspectorate. I dislike the inspectors' arrogance and how they treat you when you need a piece of information… as if you came to beg for something. Olivia

Professional development courses in a national context

The teachers expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the professional development opportunities offered by the ministry, through the Teaching Staff House, or provided in partnership with various limited liability companies that offer accredited professional development courses for teachers. They evaluated the courses as expensive and lacking substance and relevance. The courses are paid for by teachers, to be hardly ever discounted by schools. The ministry does not ensure funding for the teachers' CPD and schools lack the necessary funding to sponsor these courses, as the following extract illustrates:

> The courses for teachers offered by MoE and the Teaching Staff House are extremely expensive... Also, I do not find them very relevant. I did one that concerned leadership in teaching...These courses are rarely discounted by schools. Further, if I pay, then I want to learn from these courses, but I find the information redundant… it is not something that I have not already heard. *So I think we pretend a lot, they pretend that they deliver the course, get paid, and ''ensure'' that I develop professionally. I get the certificate and thus prove that I have developed professionally. Everybody is satisfied…*Olivia

Olivia's positioning through her use of pronouns *I-we-they* reveals her acute awareness of the compromise and pretense of being professionally developed according to regulations, which she eventually has to do. Sara, Olivia, Marie, and Mia expressed their doubts about what seemed to be a lucrative contract between the ministry and somewhat questionable providers of accredited CPD courses. Due to the current appraisal system, teachers have to take some of these accredited courses and obtain ninety credits every five years. The teachers are compliant with these external requirements to achieve the needed score. They appreciated that some courses were not useful for their class teaching. The form of teaching and learning was not personalised and teachers rarely engaged meaningfully. Also, there seems to be no follow-up to the courses or monitoring of their effectiveness. Further, it appears that teachers cover themselves in professional development certificates that are not necessarily backed by meaningful training and learning that could improve their teaching practices:

> I attend the courses offered by the ministry and the Teaching Staff House only because I have to obtain these credits. But I cannot say that I learned too much from them. I have not attended international conferences for English language teachers because they cost too much. Mia

Marie believes that if teachers had authentic opportunities for CPD, resources, and time to experiment with methods in their classes, they would find the motivation to reinvent their teaching. She suggests that teachers become too content with their situation after they have obtained their national didactic degrees, and are not inclined to learn new things. After that, they merely pursue courses to get further certificates and the credits that are required every five years, which unveils internalised performativity aspects and both the practical-evaluative and projective components of a reactive agency.

The phenomenon of private tutoring

A commonality across the teachers' narratives was the matter of private tutoring. Not all teachers in public schools do that, as private tutoring comes as a response and offer to a demand, especially concerning school subjects that are evaluated in national high-stakes examinations, such as the national exam in the 8th grade, the baccalaureate in the 12th grade, or various national or international examinations. All the participants mentioned that they tutored students privately, particularly the English language teachers. Sara mentioned that students began tutoring from primary classes, especially in strong schools. This seems to decrease students' willingness to become more responsible for their learning. Some participants believe that students cannot develop their abilities for

independent work when they are continuously supported and spoonfed. Further, students who are tutored in private classes get easily bored in class and sometimes disturb their peers, making the class teacher feel disrespected. The implications for language teachers as a group are considerable because this parallel system of teaching attracts unfair competition and a lack of collegiality. It is obvious that teachers in the public education system contribute to the problem and are simultaneously affected by it in class.

Marie, Sara, Laura, and Celine believe that whilst it might not be necessarily a bad thing if students are helped to excel in olympiads or international language examinations, it is not normal that they should receive paid extra classes only to be able to get by at school or pass the mandatory national examinations. Celine mentioned that she did extra classes pro bono to help some of her students who did not have the financial means to take their international examinations for the French language. She works in a strong high school with French bilingual classes and students are interested in taking international examinations. Laura, Mia, and Marie stated that they tutored students to help them take the Cambridge language examinations.

Celine mentioned that private tutoring was a common practice that was not going to cease any time soon. She considers that not all teachers have the ability to teach adequately in class, which might be reason enough for students to pay for private classes. The crowded classes are another reason why teachers cannot meaningfully address individual students:

> […] Generally, it is not okay for children to have private classes because they don't understand in class. Some teachers do not explain well, students cannot understand, so the majority of children who are tutored privately are the ones who do not understand the notions in class. But if they choose to have extra classes to be able to participate in olympiads, then I don't see any problem with that. As a teacher, I can choose to send the students to an olympiad because I know they can excel and accomplish things. But students should be able to get good results in class without any private, additional preparation. Anyway, students have been taking private lessons since my mother's generation. Celine

Marie and Olivia deplored some of the language teachers' tutoring practices, observing that some limited themselves to doing their students' homework and reading one lesson ahead of the one they had in class. The teachers mentioned that they did not tutor their class students. They found it important to help their students find suitable strategies for language learning, and ensure some in-depth language teaching in their private classes, which illustrates the aspirational/projective component of their agency:

> There was this girl, a student who was tutored in private and I think she took one of these tests at her private tutor's advice… What I find problematic though is that sometimes private tutoring is reduced to doing children's homework given by their class teacher, and reading a lesson ahead of the one that they have in class, just to prove that they know something more than their students' peers. Tutoring means trying to fill in those students' gaps and ensure some teaching and learning in-depth so that they can understand something. I have tutored children myself but not the ones in my class or school and I have always tried to teach them how to learn. Olivia

> We have to learn to become a united community, not undermine each other. If I do something in class, the children go to private classes, and the private tutor says a completely different thing, there is a conflict of interest already…When I want to teach present continuous in class, sometimes children come and say, "Teacher we have already learned this and that, when will you teach us…"…I cannot be happy when only one or two have understood the notions, I have to provide equal chances for all…What I do in class has to be respected …I have the freedom to approach and do things how I see fit…in a class full of students…When I prepare children in private classes we never do their class homework…I prepare them for Cambridge exams…they don't have to take them…if they don't want to…but I never do what they do in class…Marie

It can be inferred that some teachers undermine the class teachers' expertise and position. Some teachers choose to do less in regular classes and more in their private classes. They are in constant competition and each feels pressured to deliver, which affects how they view their educational purposes (projective) and approach their profession inside the classroom and beyond (practical-evaluative). Students are customers and teachers in public schools sometimes provide a paid service, entering public market competition, which are direct effects of managerial school cultures and the marketisation of education (Priestley et al., 2015). Further, beyond rationales such as being able to live decently, teachers are also preoccupied with maintaining a reputation of being competent practitioners, capable of helping students pass various language examinations. This comes as a validation of their work together and a form of educational and professional success. Students' results legitimise teachers who are thus respected and validated by the school community, parents, and school management. To an extent, private tutoring can be interpreted as teachers reclaiming their right to a decent professional, social, and economic status, since they have been constantly disempowered by working in deprived school environments without being remunerated decently for their work as teachers. There are, nonetheless, some attempts of the ministry to disrupt tutoring practices, concerning teachers who tutor their own class students. The narratives unveil that private tutoring reduces teacher autonomy and agency leading to compromised relationships between colleagues, tensions with parents, inequity among students, and compromised notions of professionalism despite teachers' good results with their students.

Teachers' projections and aspirations

Performativity, accountability, and audit cultures through external examinations and school inspections, combined with a lack of resources leave their mark on teachers' morale, self-confidence, professionalism, and collegiality (Priestley et al., 2015). The participants believe that, generally, teachers are merely complaining about things, without acting to change their situation, illuminating the projective dimension of the participants' professional agency. They believe that teachers have become too defeatist, passive, isolated, and merely compliant with their situation. Sara's colleagues are split into two different unions, with different leaders, revealing a lack of unity and solidarity, which unveils the projective component of their passive or reactive agency:

> I think there is a lack of solidarity, we are split into two unions in our school…It feels that we have solidarity only when something really bad happens…Otherwise, it is alright if we don't help each other. Everybody manages on his/her own. Sara

Reflecting on what she witnessed in her school, Chloe commented that her colleagues felt discouraged and disappointed. Many of Chloe's colleagues have left the union, which has influenced her actions and decisions as well. Distrust in the union is the effect of the union leaders' betrayals. Leaders have often chosen to abandon their colleagues for positions in the political establishment and further access to power. Teachers' defeatism, distrust, disengagement, and demotivation have not developed overnight, they have been built over tens of years of working in deprived environments, during inconclusive reforms. This also reveals the "learned helplessness" issue (Erss et al., 2014, p. 407), which could be an effect of the country's totalitarian past, and the lack of consistent democratic, participatory practice and awareness of civil rights, inhibiting the development of teachers' agentic potential. Teachers have forgotten that they are the union, which makes them vulnerable to governmental decisions. Chloe's narrative reveals her defensive attitude and reactive agency despite her initial enthusiasm. The impact that this general mindset in her school has on her, as a young, beginning teacher, seems consistent:

> […] I saw the teacher union as an opportunity for teachers to stay united and be heard. The reason I have not joined the union yet is that my colleagues advised me not to. Almost all of them have left the

> union. I asked why and they told me that not one of the union leaders would assist me in any problem I might have or in any situation where I might not know what to do… no one would help me in any way… I am a bit pessimistic that anything will change soon. There are some local initiatives to change something but nothing meaningful. Everybody is interested only in his/her good. Chloe

The participants' narratives suggest that teachers must be listened to, trusted, involved meaningfully, and, above all, respected. Many teachers have ended up seeing teaching as merely a job replicating systemic dysfunctionalities. The education system has far lost its appeal and many teachers have abandoned it. There is a need for teachers, but the system barely retains its good teachers and is not willing to reward the ones who survive in a resourceless environment, making an effort to help students. Marie emphasises that teaching needs to become a profession again for people with an authentic desire to enter the system and adequate academic preparation:

> […]But this is a subject that could be approached from another point of view, that of the intellectual, and academic preparation of teachers. Because lately, there has been a huge problem with the ones who come to the education system…Many enter the system as a last resort…They looked for jobs here and there…didn't find any…and well…it sounds good to be a teacher…Because the education system lacks a workforce …it welcomes anybody who comes…And I am not talking about good high schools, we have good teachers in our high school, but some people enter the schools in rural areas just to have a place to go to and leave from…I hate this…when you have a profession or job, you do it because you like it, and if you don't, do something else…otherwise, be up and ready for it in the morning…Marie

Sara's specific context makes her reflect on the kind of learning environments she would like her students to have, where she would be able to exercise her profession according to her values and beliefs. What she envisages for her students is in stark contrast with the reality of their context. This suggests her inner struggle regarding the teacher she strives to become, indicating the projective component of her espoused professional agency, and what she feels she can accomplish according to the present organisation of the school, thus her realisable agency:

> I think that our school as it is structured now prevents children's aptitudes from being truly discovered and developed. If the education system were financed, we would be able to do a lot. Sometimes, children in this high school discover that they would like to study or do something different…They cannot choose…Some are good at drawing or painting….but they are not encouraged to pursue these, or to put in the effort. Or families cannot afford to…The system supposedly orients them to go for a steady job and such…I think that if children were allowed to nurture their passions, they would develop and communicate better, and be able to establish connections with other groups, beyond the school…get to know new environments, expand their horizons…Sara

Similarly, Marie believes that students' creativity is not necessarily cultivated at home or school. Children seem disconnected, absorbed in playing games on their gadgets, and increasingly unwilling and powerless to express themselves both in speaking and writing tasks as well as everyday communication, in either Romanian or English. The reasons are various and some are related to the way that school is organised, which does not dedicate sufficient time to activities that support children's creativity or independent thinking. Mostly though, the lives that teenagers lead are unhealthy, as they spend too much time engrossed in social media and the virtual world. Students have become withdrawn and less inclined to communicate or collaborate.

Sara, Mia, and Marie perceive that the national high-stakes examinations in Mathematics and the Romanian language do not address the development of a diversity of skills, different types of students, and learning styles. High grades are part of the criteria for reaching a good high school or university and do not always show the real level of the child. This promotes toxic competition and private tutoring, which decreases students' willingness or opportunities for real collaboration. The participants

stated that, particularly in strong schools, students and their parents pressured the teachers for high grades that were required to enter high school or university. Mia, Marie, Sara, and Olivia believed that it was not always possible to have parents as partners. They witnessed situations when parents and students became the teachers' oppressors, mediating teachers' agency, granting, and taking legitimacy away from teachers. They could intrude and decide in schools, imposing their will by pressuring both the school management team and the teaching staff:

> If it were up to me I would never mark and rank children. I would have them take tests just to see how they have progressed, but I do not find that grades are that important…Now all the students hunt for grades… especially in stronger high schools…they demand high grades…because parents want their children to get high grades...because they need those to access universities. Teachers feel obligated to give high grades, so there is a huge pressure…teachers are sometimes even contested if they give lower grades…Sometimes they give up and choose to give them higher grades so that they won't find themselves in the principal's office for discussions…The final average grade counts so much…so everything is a huge compromise[…] Sara

Sara aspires to be able to nurture her pleasure for teaching over the years, find resources of empathy for her students, and avoid growing bitter. She wishes that school schedules would change and that they would have more freedom and funding to implement alternative ways of teaching in school, which would encourage the development of the whole person. Travelling in the country and abroad with the school seems a luxury, thus learning from direct experience and intercultural exchange appears more difficult to implement, at least at the moment. Sara's aspirations revolve around creating memories, socialising, opening to other horizons, and making her students embrace the idea that there are alternatives to their lives:

> If the system were financed we would dedicate more days for trips, at least once per month. We would take all the children from school and go wherever. It is about creating good memories, and having fun…it would be a different atmosphere…we would be able to know each other differently. I would like to stay open-minded and young over the years, be able to understand and relate to these teenagers, remain attentive and curious, and not just feel burdened by the hardships and worries in the system, our profession, and become bitter. Sara

Marie believes that students have to be encouraged and taught to be creative to find solutions to problems but also teachers need to get out of their comfort zone, learn, dare to risk things, and seek solutions to their problems together, illustrating the projective component of her agency. She seems impatient, she is proactive and things seem to be moving too slowly for her:

> One has to be flexible nowadays…prepared for alternative plans…because you don't know…we've lived through some very difficult times…we have to learn to make opportunities out of our difficulties…During the pandemic, people who only complained about how difficult everything was, did nothing but torment themselves…and people who thought "I begin working today"…found opportunities… solutions to a problem…that is what we must teach our students, and what we must teach ourselves…find solutions to problems…not merely complain that it is difficult. Marie

Mia's narrative reveals that the salaries that teachers receive are too low, which indicates governmental disdain and indifference. There is a lot of inconsideration in the media regarding teachers as well. There are sociocultural factors that hinder teachers' professional agency and teachers feel oppressed. The participants believe that teachers have a low status in Romanian society, which unveils the projective component of their perceived agency. The narratives reveal that they are not necessarily optimistic regarding the future:

> We are shown disdain through the salary that we receive. The government despises us…We were on strike for two hours but there was not even a piece of news on TV about that. Mia

> I think that overall teachers are looked down on, by the government, and by society in general. Also, parents can come and tell you what to do and how to do it, even if they do not have a clue, as they have different jobs… Mia

The teachers' projections unveil conflicted feelings, vulnerability, and exhaustion. Some of the participants have entertained thoughts of resigning over the years, mixed with the feeling that they have already invested a lot of effort and personal resources in their profession. Sometimes, their perceived perfectionism contrasts with the arbitrariness and lack of order in their school environment. There is a lot of ambivalence concerning the profession in the narratives, unveiling the participants' conflicted, dynamic identities, and the temporal aspect of their agency during their careers. Despite all the difficulties though, they do not entertain the idea of leaving the public education system to find a job in the private sector. Most of the participants are experienced, tenured, and settled in their career in public schools, conscious that they would have even fewer affordances to have a voice due to the business-like nature of private institutions. The teaching profession, as they comprehend and imagine it, serves a higher purpose, beyond market imperatives, therefore, they perceive that teaching in the public sector is ultimately more meaningful.

Teachers' professional goals

Olivia's short-term goal is to obtain her first didactic degree, which requires researching her classes and the elaboration of a thesis paper, under the supervision of a university professor. She wants to use the knowledge she acquired in her international CPD courses to do that, and thus manifests her proactive agency, by putting her knowledge to good use. Otherwise, some of Olivia's aspirations seem to have little to do with the pre-university education system. She acknowledges her need to find meaning, harmony, and self-fulfillment, by nurturing her passions and learning for her heart's pleasure. Ultimately, she wishes she would find time to continue her studies in literature and do a Ph.D.:

> I would like to succeed in doing my Ph.D., it is something that I promised myself a long time ago. I think that I have delayed this for quite a while. I would like to start with my licentiate research thesis on the topic of archetypology. I've bought a lot of books on the topic because I am interested… I only want to find time to read with a pencil in my hand. It began with Alan Fournier, E.T.A. Hoffman, Herman Hesse… I also want to obtain my first didactic degree […] Olivia

Olivia, Mia, and Sara mentioned that they were determined to enhance their project management knowledge and develop Erasmus+ projects, to advance their professional development and their students' learning. Mia's goals are also related to attending courses that could be meaningful in her day-to-day practice, based on what she experiences in her classes and the realities of her school community. Lack of motivation, bullying, and students dropping out of school are the main problems in her high school and she knows that she and her colleagues eventually rely on themselves when addressing these problems. Many students find it hard to adapt and have behavioural problems, revealing unbalanced, disadvantaged backgrounds, and social disintegration. The above illustrates both the practical-evaluative and projective components of their professional agency. Celine wants to obtain her didactic degrees and continue to teach and implement her projects in a strong high school that is auspicious for her professional development and agency. Chloe is still at the beginning of her career and her goals are related to taking steps toward professionalisation, according to the standards imposed by national laws and procedures. She would like to obtain a tenured position and have stability in one school, although she believes that the national tenure examination is a nuisance:

> I think that national tenure examinations are an unnecessary pain. One solution would be to have continuity in the same school if there are classes, thus to be tenured in school if there is a possibility to

> have a full norm in the school. In such cases though, teachers do not have the same rights like those who are tenured through the national exam. Chloe

Chloe believes that teachers should have the possibility to obtain a tenure position at the school where they have worked, so that their activity could be evaluated directly by their school community, from the school management to students and their parents. Nonetheless, it is sensible to infer that this could be perceived by many as problematic, due to possible issues related to transparency and equal chances, as it depends directly on the rectitude of school principals and administrative councils, who will decide who can occupy the position.

Chloe's narrative draws attention to the issue of tenure in the national pre-university education which undoubtedly requires a thorough rethinking. The procedures have undergone numerous changes over the years, frustrating teachers. There are practical problems that teachers face after passing the national exam to obtain tenure. There is a scarcity of vacant positions in schools in urban areas which makes obtaining tenure through the national examination only a matter of personal record. Many positions are usually occupied in the different stages of teaching staff mobility, according to regulations, before the national tenure exam. Consequently, the majority of the vacant positions in the cities disappear by the time teachers take the exam, and, sometimes, there are only possibilities to teach in distant rural areas for newly- tenured teachers. Many choose to keep a substitute teaching position in schools in the cities where they live. The effects on rural schools can be easily implied.

Chapter 5

Discussion

RQ: How do the language teachers in Romanian public secondary schools understand and enact agency by way of their relationship with their environment?

Following the definition of professional agency from an ecological perspective, this project aimed to examine the participants' beliefs about their roles, responsibilities, and educational purposes in the classroom, to understand how they considered themselves agentic in the classroom and school. Firstly, I inquired into the teachers' biographies as learners and beginning teachers intending to capture how their identities and experiences (iterative), influenced their perceptions of professional responsibilities, goals, and aspirations (the projective). The inquiry into teachers' priorities and goals revealed some of their teaching methods and purposes in the classroom as mediated by students' motivations. A second aim was to shed light on the teachers' professional habitus, as the teachers' ability to choose the most appropriate actions within their contexts, namely how the iterative dimension plays out in the practical component of their work (the practical-evaluative) (Priestley et al., 2015). Further, I wanted to capture how the teachers utilised their contextual resources (relationships, professional development opportunities) to achieve their goals. Thirdly, I aimed to scrutinise some of their contextual constraints and how teachers responded (decisions, actions- practical-evaluative) and were affected by them (motivations, aspirations-projective).

SQ1: In what ways do the language teachers consider themselves agentic, based on their personal and professional philosophies and experiences?

Mediational systems impacting the FL teachers' identities, purposes, and classroom practices

All the participants displayed their independent professionalism in distinct ways represented by their values and views of teaching and classroom processes. Intertwined with their own learning experiences as students (iterative), the participants' educational purposes were related to having high expectations from students, by asking them to make an effort (projective), and adopting documented teaching methods and strategies in class (practical-evaluative). Being non-native FL teachers, they considered language proficiency essential to their professional identity and development. The teachers have developed a confident classroom identity demonstrated by the strong focus on their students in classes (Pennington & Richards, 2016). Some teachers revealed that they taught in a bilingual mode to address practical problems and prevent students' frustration and feelings of incompetence in their classes. One could argue though, that they also project an ideal professional identity, that of being able to teach only in the target language (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

The participants' personal and professional learning experiences over time influenced their classroom practice, which resembles findings from Buchanan (2015) and van der Heijden et al., (2015). All of them employed a mix of grammar-focused and communicative activities and procedures, and appropriated CLT requirements, adapting teaching to their students' learning styles and purposes. They also admitted that being pressed for time, they more rarely engaged in collaborative reflection on their practices.

The participants' teaching goals and practices range from purposeful language activities and projects that develop their students' cultural knowledge, communication, and problem-solving skills, to more instrumental ones, represented by students' attainment of language knowledge and skills. Most of them mentioned that they used formative feedback in their teaching, to improve students' participation and learning. They acknowledge roles such as critical friend, guide, facilitator, and co-learner. Findings show that language teachers have to reconcile their ideas of educational purposes that target the development of the whole person, socialisation, the 21st- century skills, or teaching the language for intercultural communication, and their instrumental role, as responsible for students' development of exam skills for national FL examinations, olympiads or international language certification. Students' rationales behind learning foreign languages often concern international language certification offering access to universities in the country or abroad and certain professions. This mediates the FL teachers' practices inside and outside the classroom (practical-evaluative), and their exercise of professional agency.

The narratives reveal that the participants want to be authentic language professionals by embracing the professional standards of competence established within the international community of language teachers (projective). Concerning this, all the participants are committed to their students' attainment of foreign language skills or certification as regulated by CEFR language assessment criteria. They are also aware that their students' certification more clearly proves that they have developed specialised knowledge and expert competencies in line with these standards, which fully unveils the practical-evaluative component of their agency.

Language teaching is imbued with moral values and established criteria of qualification, knowledge, and behaviour for members of a professional community, therefore the participants are aware that they are never free to do whatever they want in their classes and schools (Richards, 2010). Having professional agency does not assume such freedom. The participants' narratives reveal their

responsibility to commit to the academic development of their students and be professionally apt to act as required in their contexts, indicating the projective dimension of their professional agency. Their beliefs about teaching languages subscribe to European language policy understandings, unveiling the interaction of macro-level (international/national) beliefs about learning languages, adopted at the meso (school) and micro (individual) levels, impacting their enactment of agency.

The level of accountability is high in the participants' schools, with differences between strong and less strong schools, therefore the participants' rationales and perceived responsibilities are complex and varied. The teachers who work in strong schools, such as Celine or Marie, display beliefs of educational and professional success associated with teaching good students who are motivated and choose to study further in the country or apply for scholarships abroad, by helping them excel. Celine and Laura felt supported by colleagues and the leadership team in their schools, which could imply that their professional growth and agency were promoted in their environments.

At a micro level, the language teachers in less strong schools, though not only, have to accept that their learners' motivation to learn mediates their professional agency and shapes their classes. It can be inferred that the participants have been in the process of transitioning from more teacher- centred to learner-centred teaching approaches such as CLT, with various degrees of appropriation, adaptation, and success, to keep up with the requirements and the principles of a learner-centred curriculum based on competencies. Nonetheless, this proves to be difficult to achieve in practice, since not all learners are self-directed nor do they take responsibility for their learning (Nunan, 1988; Freeman & Richards, 1993).

The teachers' sense of self-efficacy and their opportunities to enact their professional agency in class according to their principles and values are also mediated by the teaching practices in school, material resources, or students' being neglected in disadvantaged families. This affects students' motivation and active involvement in their learning. These findings are similar to Glas's (2016), who showed that language teachers' efficacy in the classroom was mediated by students' apathy, lack of interest, and feelings of incompetence, as well as by the prevalence of less innovative teaching practices in school. The participants' dissatisfaction is triggered sometimes by the way their students work, the lack of time and material resources to do what they aim to do in class, and the possibilities to address individual students.

Expectedly, language teachers such as Mia and Sara feel disadvantaged and have to compensate constantly to mitigate their students' lack of motivation and the lack of resources in their classrooms and school communities, which unveils how the practical-evaluative component of their agency is affected. Their idea of educational success is sometimes limited to improving graduation rates and helping disadvantaged students graduate school and overcome some of their difficulties, which is a complex social endeavour. Nonetheless, the teachers' proactivity, emotional involvement, and passion manifest by supporting their students' natural inclinations, proposals, and interests, through interesting content and creative and interactive activities. This mediates to an extent, students' attitudes, motivation, and engagement in learning foreign languages.

Expectedly, the French language teachers (Sara and Chloe) perceive that the status of the French language is low in comparison to the status of the English language in school, which leads to various negotiations with their students. They feel that they have to be attentive in their choices of content and strategies to sustain their students' motivation and prevent discouragement, illustrating their personal practical knowledge of their environment (Clandinin, 1985) and the practical-evaluative component of their agency. The teachers have contradictory feelings concerning the status of their language subjects in school. Some perceive that foreign languages do not hold a privileged place, which depends mostly on the profile of their schools.

Teaching for international examinations

Some participants prepare students for international and national language examinations and projects and go the extra mile to help and please parents and students. This divulges their need for communitarian legitimation, which to an extent resembles findings from Namgung et al., (2020) concerning the teachers' realised and espoused agency. Students' results are also teachers' results and international language exams have become a common request, especially in strong schools. It is also noteworthy that the level of accountability involved in the preparation of students for their international or national language examinations does not appear to affect the FL teachers negatively, because they embrace their responsibilities willingly. It can be argued that some of the participants feel that they can enact their espoused professional agency to the extent that they feel alignment between their philosophies, practices, and purposes while being supported in their school community. However, this was a conflicted and contradictory idea along the narratives and sometimes they also felt pressured to perform in the mechanism of communitarian and market imperatives for language certification, which can reveal a reactive agency. Although these international examinations are not mandatory in school, some of the teachers feel obliged to help willing students take them, which ultimately improves their professional and social status.

Responsibility and capacity for empathy mediate professional agency

The participants try to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive atmosphere that could allow all students to express themselves, by being honest and attentive to their needs. They have high expectations and trust in their students' abilities to succeed (projective). All of them emphasise the role of establishing strong connections with students, being emotionally close, open, and committed to their students' emotional and academic development, which is supported by prior findings by Lasky (2005), who underscored the role of teachers' identity and emotions in achieving agency. The participants are interested in knowing their students' backgrounds, and supporting them to reach their learning goals, by adjusting instruction and creating diverse didactic material. They have involved students in debates, contests, national and international projects, summer camps, as well as olympiads and international language examinations, which illustrates their focus on students as well as the practical-evaluative component of their agency.

The participants feel self-efficacious and get professional and emotional rewards from the positive feedback that they receive from students and parents, thus it can be inferred that this validation represents a resource for resilience and professional agency, a motivator to further develop as teachers, and continue in the profession. These findings resemble Miller & Gkonou (2018), contending that teachers' emotions in teaching can sustain their agency, through their commitment to their students' learning.

As lead teachers, the participants are very involved. They advise, communicate, and generally perceive that their efforts are fruitful. They managed to help and motivate many students with problematic backgrounds who were struggling in their lives to pursue their studies further. They acknowledge the social and moral mission of their profession and act for the benefit of their students, fulfilling a compensatory role, which fully illustrates their short and long- time goals and projections, revealing their professional agency (Priestley et al., 2015). The teachers have advised parents lacking formal education or parents failing to communicate and be emotionally close to their children. They have also dealt with the sensitive issue of absent parents, who work abroad and have to leave their children in their relatives 'care, which is a national social issue, albeit neglected by the national government.

The above reveals that the participants' professional agency is intertwined with their identity through their ideals, goals, commitments, emotions, and ethical teaching to promote their students' development and well-being (projective), which is supported by findings from Lasky (2005), Buchanan (2015), or Pantić (2015). Although the teachers never mentioned social justice, their narratives reveal that their teaching is inextricably concerned with equity, through their awareness and constant efforts to understand and support disadvantaged students in their immediate problems and thus mediate social imbalances (practical-evaluative).

Due to the insufficient specialised human resources in the national education system, the participants have little help from school counsellors, psychologists, social services, or special needs educators. Blurred boundaries between teachers' personal and professional lives are unveiled by the participants' references to exhaustion, dissonance, administrative chores, vulnerability, duty, care, responsibility, ethical conduct, and moral values. Therefore one must consider how teachers' emotions and beliefs are culturally and historically constructed, within the discourses of "teaching-as-caring" and "good teaching", examined by Miller & Gkonou (2018). The participants in this study seem to be able to decide how to act and invest themselves emotionally, through critical self-reflection and responsible choices. They are committed to developing close relationships and more ethical teaching approaches that could benefit their students, unveiling the projective dimension of their agency as feeling responsible for their students' wellbeing.

SQ2: What do the language teachers perceive as the available contextual resources enabling them to address challenges and act on their professional goals?

Proactive agency through resilience and compensatory actions

The participants mostly rely on their personal capabilities and resources, proving independence, critical thinking, and proactive, intentional action by deciding on the didactic and material resources that could adequately sustain their students' language learning, and, more generally, their profession. They seem to have a lot of autonomy, concerning didactic material selection, methodological decision-making in class, or taking action at their discretion in their daily work, nonetheless, this indicates that this kind of autonomy is forced by the lack of resources. However, the scarcity of material resources has compelled them to become creative and resourceful, which illustrates how teachers actively shape their environment (Edwards, 2017). Some have refused to comply with the textbooks sent from the ministry, taking responsibility for selecting, organising, and ensuring didactic material, to be able to approach their work professionally. This reveals how the iterative (personal and professional standards and beliefs about language learning and teaching) affects the practical-evaluative (choices of content, methodological decisions) and the projective (educational purposes in the classroom) dimensions of their professional agency. Sometimes the participants collaborate with parents and purchase adequate learning material for their students. Parents and students represent to an extent the social and cultural resource that teachers rely on.

Arguably, the FL teachers manifest proactive agency through their resilience and compensatory actions to ensure necessary material and didactic resources and sustain their students' engagement and motivation for language learning. They also try to support them in their personal lives. These findings resemble Glas's (2016) findings, asserting that language teachers' freedom and internal capacities to choose or adapt materials enhance their learners' autonomy and agency. The above also reveals the FL teachers' need to act according to personal and professional beliefs and values (projective) to practise their profession decently.

As Toom et al., (2015) contend, enacting professional agency represents more than coping with scarcity and adversity in challenging professional environments and entails being creative and

innovative. The participants are up to date with the latest foreign language textbooks, materials and teaching applications, finding ways to improve their teaching processes, by resisting external regulations when they contrast their practical knowledge and what they perceive as commonsensical and legitimate action in their classrooms, which resembles findings from Lasky (2005), Buchanan (2015), or Lennert da Silva & Mølstad (2020).

Proactive agency by building productive relationships in the school community

The participants state that the students and parents usually understand and support them in their endeavours, which reveals that the teachers are diplomatic and perceived as competent in their school communities. From the narratives, one can infer that their school communities' trust has been a resource, revealing the relational component and the practical-evaluative dimension of the participants' agency. The participants appear as active learners and proactive thinkers who build meaningful relationships in their school communities and beyond, revealing their proactive agency.

The teachers perceive that they can navigate the complex and sometimes difficult relationships with parents or colleagues proving diplomacy, strategic thinking, and efficient communication skills. Some felt successful in affirming their values and opinions in difficult circumstances. Not abdicating from professional deontology and personal values when justified and reasonable represents an enduring feature of the FL teachers' agency, and a recurrent idea throughout the narratives, underscoring the moral dimension of the teachers' identities and work when subjected to various tensions. They manifest a strong sense of identity positioning themselves and others, which guides their actions. This involves negotiation and challenging ways of doing and thinking in their school space (Varghese et al., 2005), illustrating how their personal and professional experiences or values (iterative) influence their decisions in current work circumstances and relationships (practical-evaluative) (Priestley et al., 2015).

The participants' narratives suggest that they are valued members of their school communities, who have responsibilities as mentors, methodologists, members of the inspectorate, heads of language departments, or lead teachers, and participate actively in the development of their schools, finding affordances to address their purposes within the unavoidable performativity aspects of their work. They have established partnerships with cultural institutions supporting language learning or participated in projects attracting funding for their schools, revealing the practical-evaluative component of their proactive agency. They have developed and participated in regional and national language projects and olympiads, promoting the development of their school working and learning environment. They support their students, colleagues, and the management team, reflecting on the impact of their actions in their workplaces, which leads sometimes to self-efficacy beliefs.

Generally, teachers in the language department collaborate on school projects, share resources and ideas, and ask each other for advice, finding ways to improve their teaching practices. This shows how teachers can develop a personal system of knowledge, beliefs, and understandings drawn from their practical experience of teaching, known as theorising from practice (Borg, 2006). Sharing resources, discussions, and other forms of collaboration help less experienced teachers understand the rationale behind certain teaching decisions and the thinking processes employed by more experienced teachers (Edwards, 2017; Toom et al., 2017).

These findings align with assertions by Edwards (2007) regarding teacher agency as relational, as the capacity to both offer and ask for support, and develop meaningful relationships in the school community and beyond. Three teachers state that they have benefitted from a professional management team and have found support to implement their initiatives. All the participants believe that a fair, supportive professional management team is vital for the well-being of teachers' collegial

relationships and participation in decision-making, based on their prior and current experiences, which is supported by Toom et al., (2015). School leadership shapes teachers' decisions, practices, and relationships in schools, inhibiting or promoting their professional agency.

Proactive agency by directing professional development

Concerning professional development resources, findings show that the teachers mostly value language teaching courses, webinars, and mobilities in an international context, such as Erasmus+ programme, for example. Expectedly, English language teachers have had more opportunities to access professional development resources, through the British Council, Cambridge Language Assessment, or National Geographic. The participants manifest their proactive agency by accessing the opportunities deemed relevant for their professional growth and learning. Their narratives illustrate their agency through their desire to gradually become their best professional selves, according to the professional standards established within the FL teachers' community (projective dimension), which is supported by Toom et al., (2015) and Pyhältö et al., (2013).

Generally, the teachers keep themselves informed and invest in their learning, through their finances. They have applied appropriate digital language teaching applications and platforms to their teaching contexts. Also, to an extent, the COVID-19 pandemic promoted the FL teachers' learning. They have developed skills for language teaching online and participated in various online webinars and courses. These resources have supported their work and provided relief from anxieties. Despite that, the teachers emphasise that face-to-face teaching and the human factor through emotions, socialisation, and empathy are most important and meaningful in education, which illuminates the aspirational, projective component of their professional agency, where student-teacher relationships based on trust and direct communication are central.

SQ3: How do contextual factors moderate (or inhibit) the language teachers' professional agency, in terms of actions, beliefs, and aspirations?

Insufficient initial teacher training and mentorship

The role of teacher education programmes in developing teachers' sense of professional agency, through authentic opportunities to engage with educational theories, research, and experiment with methods and strategies in the classroom, was proven essential (Soini et al., 2015; Heikonen et. al., 2017; 2020; Toom et al., 2017). Albeit rendered insufficient, these first experiences need to be appropriately addressed through mentorship, modelling peers, discussions, involvement in the school community, and reflection, to develop student teachers' professionalism and agency (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate 2015; 2016).

An important hindrance to the FL teachers' development of professional agency was their inconsistent initial teacher training. The participants felt that they could rely only to a small extent on their theoretical knowledge from the psycho-pedagogical teaching module or the teaching practice hours at the beginning of their careers. Their narratives illustrate their dissatisfaction and a deficient organisation of the partnership between universities and the schools designated to offer possibilities of teaching practice. Almost all the participants in this study stated that mentorship in school was insufficient and poorly organised. The participants felt that they were not supported as novice teachers at the beginning of their careers, which confirms the OECD (2020) findings. At the same time, they were expected to perform as teachers despite their inconsistent preparation.

The above are supported by findings from empirical comparative studies showing that the foundational courses promoted by the initial training programmes in Romanian universities focus

preponderantly on theoretical instruction (Duşe and Duşe, 2014). Also, the Romanian teacher candidates are not provided sufficient mentorship, professional guidance, or teaching practice hours, supervised by an experienced, licensed teacher (Salajan, Duffing, Glava & Glava, 2017).

To a certain extent, at least for some of the teachers who were interviewed, becoming a teacher was an afterthought due to a lack of job alternatives at the time of graduation. This illustrates how the profession has been regulated, organised, and perceived over time and how its social status has continuously deteriorated, reflecting a lack of governmental respect and vision. The experienced teachers in the study, Laura, Mia, Celine, Marie, and Sara were the most exposed to traditional, direct, deductive teaching methods, before and after the collapse of the totalitarian regime in 1989. Their narratives divulged some of these ingrained perspectives that have influenced FL teachers' beliefs and teaching practices for a long time. They have also experienced all the curricular changes in education and socioeconomic transitions in the country. Generally, they had few opportunities to access methodological and didactic material upon their graduation in the early 2000s, at the beginning of their careers. Eventually, representatives of publishing houses such as Macmillan or Oxford University Press, among others, began attending FL teachers' meetings to advertise their language methodology studies, grammar books, or textbooks. FL teachers began purchasing these books as they gradually appeared on the market. Important theorists in second language education were sometimes invited to language teachers' meetings organised by county inspectorates, especially in large cities with universities. Some courses were offered to build FL teachers' capacity to adopt CLT in their classes.

All the participants were conscious that their initial teaching preparation was deficient, mainly theoretical, and that they had to prepare through an ongoing learning process surpassing the accountability processes concerning mandatory CPD. They were aware that they needed to polish their language knowledge as well as pedagogical and methodological skills. The participants' narratives reveal that their learning and developmental efforts have been purposeful and significant despite poor resources. They directed their learning through master's studies and various professional development courses, being conscious of their professional development needs, which implies that they manifested proactive agency in this intentional learning pursuit.

Reactive agency as a response to mandatory CPD in a national context

The development of a pedagogical, didactic, and practical skills repertoire began after graduation, when the teachers began to practise in schools and had to take subsequent teaching qualification exams to obtain tenure and secure a teaching position in the national education system. The qualification process demanded that teachers prepare more conscientiously, both on a theoretical and practical level. Generally, the participants consider the achievement of didactic degrees as a form of learning and development, as well as a form of success and validation of their professional development efforts. This may also illustrate internalised performativity aspects and an uncritical acceptance of the current processes leading to didactic degrees, which reveals the practical-evaluative dimension of a rather reactive agency.

Nonetheless, the narratives also reveal ambivalence or critique concerning the organisation and processes leading to teacher qualification. Obtaining tenure or didactic degrees through national examinations is based on competitive theoretical exams, and takes time and thick portofolios of accomplishments and justifying documents as proof for teaching quality, overlooking teachers' constant efforts in the classroom. These processes involve repeated class inspections, and internal and external evaluations, which cause a fair amount of stress and displays of quality and performance (Priestley et al., 2015). Some of the teachers benefitted from advice from the inspectors and methodologists assisting their classes, but overall, these class inspections were not perceived as relevant to their day-to-day classroom work, which resembles the findings in Priestley et al.,'s (2015)

study. Although the teachers have been compliant with these procedures for practical reasons, (they had to obtain tenure, their didactic degrees, and secure their teaching positions in their schools) their sentiments regarding the processes leading to these qualifications are not exactly favourable. This is supported by findings and assertions by Priestley et al., (2015), that there is a gap between agentic judgement or awareness and agentic action, caused by working for a long time in performative cultures, which makes teachers feel that it is inconceivable or impossible to change their situation (p. 124- 125).

Further, recent quantitative studies (Lăzăreanu & Apetrăcheoae, 2023) in the Romanian pre-university contexts show that teachers strongly evaluate that capacity to adapt the subject matter knowledge to students' needs advances students' learning and eases teachers' classroom work, which the teachers in this study also strive for. This view is opposite to the theoretical part of the tenure exam (or second didactic degree) based to an extent on subject matter knowledge as teachers' abilities for memorisation and accurate reproduction of content, without considering teachers' attitudes, creativity, or innovation. National student assessments are conceived similarly (Lăzăreanu & Apetrăcheoae, 2023). Also, as one of the participants observed, after obtaining tenure and didactic degrees teachers become passive, reaching a plateau.

The participants find some of the accredited, mandatory CPD courses organised by the ministry expensive, poorly organised, redundant, and not truly meaningful for their classroom contexts. The exception was the "CRED" course which addressed the teachers' development of necessary skills for a personalised reading of the curriculum and the development of didactic practices adapted to the learning needs and development of competencies of various categories of students. The FL teachers fully acknowledged their need for authentic professional development and generally perceived that the course was a relevant resource for professional learning. Some appreciated that they had knowledgeable trainers who facilitated meaningful discussions about their classroom practices and what they had to improve or change. They were enabled to reflect, build relationships with other teachers, and share ideas and advice to improve their teaching.

Findings also showed, nonetheless, that the FL teachers complied with the requirement of attending courses amounting to 90 credits, every five years, despite their dissatisfaction concerning the quality of the courses, which suggests a reactive agency and resembles findings by Khalil & Lewis (2019). The teachers mentioned that they needed funding for national CPD, exchange opportunities within common projects with schools in other countries, and participation in international FL conferences. They had few opportunities for international travel and first-hand experiences that could develop their own and their students' intercultural competency and social awareness. These findings are in line with Slapac's (2021), who explored the challenges that EFL teachers in a Romanian high-profile school faced, concerning their resources and opportunities for development and overall capacity to teach global and intercultural competency in their classrooms.

Reactive agency as a response to educational policies and institutional accountability

Macro factors such as the centralised structure of the education system, the lack of school autonomy, and excessive bureaucracy are the contextual factors hindering teachers' possibilities of improving their students' learning and participation. Educational policies, appraisal criteria, norm restriction issues, parallel procedures to obtain a tenured position, staff mobilities regulations, or structural differences between strong schools and schools with disadvantaged students induce tensions and inequalities among members of the teaching staff. The narratives illustrate the participants' perception that the school context and the centralised education system inhibit their agency and decision-making.

At the meso level, the participants' professional activity is shaped by the cultures of performativity in their schools, indicative of institutional professionalism, as established by regulations and policies (Priestley et al., 2015). Regardless of how agentic or autonomous they might feel in class, the participants are aware that they eventually have to abide by institutional accountability rigours set by inspectorates and the ministry, through results in the national baccalaureate, olympiads, contests, and projects. Having autonomy is experienced as having the freedom to manage an increased workload and responsibility for students' achievement, whilst compensating for the lack of adequate material and didactic resources. This indicates a reduced agency, which resembles to an extent Erss's (2018) or Khalil & Lewis's (2019) findings. Teachers' evaluation forms do not meaningfully take into account the profile, socio-economic background of students, school communities, and financial means of the schools to ensure that teachers are being evaluated fairly and that their actual work in the classroom is being taken into account. Their narratives reflect the dissonance between FL teachers' views about teaching and institutional practices in schools. Schools are externally evaluated and have to project quality, which can inevitably lead to the fabrication of administrative reports and results (Priestley et al., 2015). The narratives reveal that students' learning is not a priority within accountability systems, where schools' performance and displays of quality come at the forefront (Priestley et al., 2015). Accountability rigours impact collegial relationships, participation in projects and school committees, and motivations to pursue CPD. This leads to teachers covering themselves in justificative documents attesting participation in mandatory CPD that is not always relevant to their class teaching.

Meso-level factors, such as school conditions affected by insufficient governmental funding, inhibit the teachers' possibilities to develop both their sense of and enactment of agency at the micro-level, leading sometimes to discouragement. Teachers are confronted with a lack of time and material resources, busy schedules, and mandatory administrative paperwork. They also deal with crowded classrooms, heterogeneity of language levels in class, students' disadvantaged backgrounds and lack of motivation, and insufficient school counsellors and psychologists. These factors also inhibit the teachers' opportunities to meet, discuss, and meaningfully reflect on their FL classes, to improve their practice and their students' learning and participation. The FL teachers mainly conform to institutional pressures and demands and perceive themselves as powerless to change the situation, indicating internalised aspects of performativity and constructed feelings of helplessness, which clearly suggests the practical-evaluative component of a reduced agency (Priestley et al., 2015). The participants mostly expressed distrust in inspectorates, teacher unions, or ministry representatives, feeling that they could mainly rely on themselves. Their capacity for collective agency is inhibited by inertia and sustaining the habitual practices in schools, revealed by their conflicted views and projections of their profession and the national education system. It is implied that the teachers manifest reactive and reduced agency, trying to survive in their environment by complying with school routines. The sustainability and integrity of the teaching act in the classroom (micro-level), and the possibilities for teaching innovation to be able to meaningfully engage students, are compromised due to poor resources, hierarchical relationships, and administrative workload.

Collegial relationships

The authenticity of the teachers' collegial relationships is sometimes affected by competition, weak collaboration skills, lack of awareness of developmental needs, and different sets of values and understandings of teaching. Some of the participants perceived that their school spaces were populated with ambitions to climb the career ladder, lack of deontology, or rigid and unprofessional school management teams and administrative committees, which resembles findings by Huang (2021), Khalil & Lewis (2019), or Lasky (2005). This impacted the participants' decisions and morale, making them feel vulnerable, isolated, cautious, and reluctant to express their views openly in school meetings. In their school spaces, dominated by cultures of low trust, few overt actions attempt to constructively settle differences, evaluate things from different perspectives, find solutions to problems, and improve

relationships in a meaningful way, which reveals the practical-evaluative dimension of the teachers' agency and its reactive features (Priestley et al., 2015). Relationships are often asymmetrical and lack reciprocity. Therefore, although the teachers' situation requires honest debate, they distrust one another. This further hinders the improvement of school practices, possibilities of collaboration, and both their individual and collective agency. These findings do not resemble TALIS (2018) findings contending that 91.4 % of Romanian teachers agree that there is a collaborative school culture characterised by mutual support.

Private tutoring

The phenomenon of private tutoring is common in the country and promotes further competition, lack of fair play, and inequalities between students and members of the teaching staff. Helping their students in their pursuit of language certification and building a solid professional status is important for the FL teachers and they try to respond to their school community demands, revealing rationales beyond augmenting income. Many of them have tutored students privately to help them pass international language examinations, and some of them do this pro bono rejoicing in their students' success and their own professional recognition. Nonetheless, the narratives reveal that the FL teachers' actions are also pressured by the neoliberal discourses that pervade Romanian society, favouring privatization, profit, and competition. The FL teachers sometimes take on the identity of language technicians preoccupied with ways of effectively transferring knowledge (Morgan, 2015) so that students can achieve their desired language levels and skills, and subsequent language certificates and diplomas. Language learning has micro and macro-economic values attached to it, being viewed in instrumental terms, as increasing a learner's cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; De Costa et al., 2019). Foreign language knowledge is a means to an end, enabling access to further education and a future job.

The centralised public education sector is perceived as unproductive and inefficient, therefore it might not merit funding, including funding for teachers' salaries. Private education is perceived as more effective. Particularly English language teachers (though not only) in public schools may feel compelled to compensate and participate in this market competition, by tutoring students privately, not always or only for an additional income but to maintain a decent social and professional status, revealing the practical-evaluative component of the FL teachers' agency. In this way, however, education stops being a right for the many, especially students in low-income families, and becomes a consumer good and a privilege of a few, replicating social inequalities. Some of the participants perceive that private tutoring frustrates their efforts in the classroom, causing class management issues, competition, and tense relationships with parents, who preserve this situation, demanding performance and high grades. Both parents and students contest teachers' work. Cultural factors such as ingrained beliefs about the goal of education, the quest for performance, as well as power relationships and positionings of teachers, students, and parents, cause tensions and affect teachers' work, decision-making, and agency (Priestley et al., 2015). The topic deserves in-depth analysis of personal, social, political, economic, and cultural factors, in a national context. This was not one of the objectives of this research paper, yet the participants acknowledged that private tutoring, although necessary and common, promoted inequality, inequity, and lack of solidarity and agency among all educational stakeholders. The phenomenon raises problems of ethics, social equality, professional deontology, and teacher professionalism, which affects all teachers' professional agency. Some of the issues concerning private tutoring were empirically researched by Popa & Acedo (2006) in a small-scale ethnographic study, in the Romanian context. They found similar explanations to those presented here. Teachers need to reclaim and rebuild a professional status, which has been eroded by inconclusive reforms and insufficient funding for education and teachers' salaries, within a public education system incapable of providing the desired results. Also, Bray (2006; 1998), Silova, Budiene,

and Bray (2006), and Silova (2010) provide relevant discussions of the global phenomenon of private tutoring, with its root causes and implications, in regions such as Eastern Europe or Asia.

Bearing responsibility for their students' achievement can reduce the teachers' professional agency. From the narratives, it can be inferred that the parent-teacher relationship has not always been without tension, as parents can use their power to establish the competence and status of language teachers in the school community, which is similar to findings by Namgung et al., (2020). It was suggested that the parents and students acted both as a resource and an inhibitor of agency, as not all of them understood and supported the FL teachers, which resulted in various tensions and negotiations.

The teachers' projections

The participants perceive that the teaching profession does not benefit from societal respect. They believe that few consider becoming teachers, and not always the most academically prepared or dedicated ones. The participants' projections on the public education system are sometimes pessimistic. Some of the participants imagine a profession without a grading system, where teachers would have more opportunities and funding to implement projects and teaching that would develop the whole person, discover and nurture children's aptitudes, boost their motivation, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills, in front of an unknown, unpredictable future. They also expressed their worries about their students' lifestyles, as lost in social media, and their lack of support or accountability in the family. Many students are impoverished while a minority is supported financially by their families. Both categories seem to lack a moral and emotional compass. The teachers sometimes felt powerless in front of such societal challenges or perceived as having only a minor role and contribution, revealing the projective dimension of their agency and how cultural and historical factors impact education and teacher agency (Edwards, 2017). The national education system is far from being developed and cannot provide answers to current or future demands and challenges.

The participants have obtained or are pursuing their didactic degrees and national teaching certification, nonetheless, these are not necessarily the main career objectives that the teachers strive for. Their thoughts were ambivalent and contradictory during the interviews, impacted by current and past experiences. Some suggested that they either considered other jobs or that they remained in the profession for lack of better alternatives, nonetheless, they also expressed that they believed in their mission within public education. Some of their aspirations are related to finding or redefining meaning in their profession and life, by developing professionally and personally, to be able to persevere and maintain their drive to teach.

The narratives reveal that despite precarious school conditions and disappointment, the participants pride themselves on being foreign language teachers. They position themselves as being different from teachers of other subjects. They identify themselves as flexible, curious, communicative, open to learning and professional development, focused on getting involved in cultural, and international projects, and exchanging experiences with teachers abroad. They are concerned with their students' academic development and well-being and work toward building a dignified professional status in their school communities.

Conclusion and recommendations for further research

This project was an exploration of internal and contextual factors mediating language teachers' professional agency in Romanian public secondary schools, through the teachers' perceptions and stories. The project aims to contribute to research on language teachers' professional agency and

encourage other practitioners/ researchers to address this phenomenon in the context of Eastern European countries and not only. The thesis relied on Priestley et al., (2015) ecological framework and a narrative methodological approach based on in-depth interviews, meant to facilitate understanding of the participants' complex rationales, positioning, and relationships, revealing their sense and enactment of agency in context. To do that, the research inquired into the most influential factors impacting the language teachers' motivations, profession, the development of professional identity, practices, goals in the classroom and school, initiatives and capacity for decision in school, relationships, reasons for professional development, and aspirations.

The result was a snapshot of the language teachers' identities and current challenges and opportunities for the development of professional agency, which revealed the temporal, fluctuating features of the construct. The teachers were different in their manifestations of agency due to their different contexts. During their career, they taught in different school contexts where they manifested both proactive and reactive agency. They might perceive and approach things differently at present and future moments, implying that longitudinal and mixed- methods studies could better capture the rationales for proactivity, reactivity, and self-protection, within the dynamic interplay of contextual influences and relationships.

The study was restricted to exploring teachers' perceptions, where various forms of bias, the researcher's, participants', their contexts, the chosen methodology, and the interview itself combined with the researcher's skills impact the direction and quality of the findings. A more valid and relevant picture of the construct of agency could be obtained through quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, classroom observations, journal entries, school and policy documents, and artifacts. Exploration could involve various educational stakeholders, principals, inspectors, students, or parents, in both rural and urban areas, and approach teacher agency in specific contexts, such as professional learning, national policies and curricular reforms, or social justice, through a combination of theoretical frameworks. The debate on language teacher agency can continue by scrutinising the effects of European language policies, the globalisation of language education, and their effects on how teachers enact the curriculum for foreign languages and how they construct their knowledge about teaching foreign languages. The discussion had to eventually end in the project but I regard it as open to further research and understandings. I contend that the research is a starting point offering ramifications and opportunities for reflection on the problem of teacher agency in language education and not only.

Scrutinising teacher agency in the national context reveals issues of sustainability of the national public education system, concerning its real possibilities to form and retain talented teachers. The attractiveness of the teaching profession is impacted by inconclusive reforms, modest working conditions in schools, a low social and professional status, and low salaries. The narratives reveal that although the FL teachers are mostly settled in their careers, they experience dissatisfaction and distress, and need to redefine their purposes, invigorate their careers, engage with research, and position more strongly on a social level. It can be inferred that teacher agency is a prerequisite for the sustainability of education. Schools must be enabled to create supportive teaching and learning environments so that teachers can practise their work professionally, equitably, and safely not only for the benefit of diverse categories of students but also for themselves. Also, teachers must be supported to strengthen their professional discourses and knowledge, through meaningful in-service CPD programmes and by creating favourable conditions for the development of authentic local, regional, and national professional networks, which could build a consistent dialogue and enhance reflection and awareness among teachers (Priestley et al., 2015). This can lead to the improvement of teaching practices and to challenging the status quo and work conditions. The narratives reveal that the teachers' constructed feelings of hopelessness and disempowerment are a major barrier to the teachers' agency and their willingness to act for the betterment of their social status and labour

conditions. Fortunately, this general mindset has not decreased the participants' willingness and motivation to learn and develop professionally, but one could infer that this can happen to many teachers. Further, many feel discouraged and eventually abandon the national public education system. The teachers' proactive professional agency is manifested mostly through their responsibility to their students' well-being and academic achievement and less through their resistance and responsibility to take action for change for both students' and teachers' benefit. Whilst this is understandable and justified to an extent, given their experiences, teachers' responsibility needs to transform into a decisive response toward solidarity and collective action. Teachers must demand governmental accountability whenever they feel that their right to professional and social dignity is obliterated. After all, teachers are called to develop their students' democratic citizenship and participation skills.

The project offers implications for initial and in-service teacher education programmes in the national context. The recent implementation of the didactic master's is meant to address the issue of teachers' initial teacher training and gives hope for a future reconfiguration and invigoration of the profession. Further, the problem of mentorship for language teachers could be resolved by providing meaningful training opportunities for mentors and adequate school conditions for them to become efficient, creating mentorship programs, and establishing personalised professional development plans for both in-service and pre-service teachers. Such integrated programs could facilitate teachers' engagement with educational theories, teaching methodologies, reflection on their practices, the development of a functional repertoire of methodological and practical skills, and a smoother transition to practising in real classrooms and schools. Also, the appraisal criteria should meaningfully consider structural differences between schools to ensure that teachers' efforts in the classroom are taken into account and benefit from a fair evaluation. The current methodologies to obtain tenure and didactic degrees were also discussed, revealing the teachers' ambivalent beliefs concerning the procedures leading to these teaching qualifications, which implies that responsible stakeholders in universities and policymakers need to address them.

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Appendix 1: Invitation to participate in research

Dear colleague,

My name is Camelia Dragomir and I am writing my degree project for the International Master's in Educational Research (IMER- Department of Education and Special Education, University of Gothenburg, Sweden).

The title of my master's thesis is **Exploring foreign language teachers' professional agency in Romanian public secondary schools"**. The study aims to explore and understand how Romanian foreign language teachers in urban public secondary schools understand and enact their professional agency and how contextual factors mediate, support, or constrain its achievement. Professional agency refers to the teachers' capacity to exert judgement and control over their work, as mediated by their professional contexts.

The study is qualitative, based on interviews with open-ended questions that will take place on Zoom. Your views and discourses will constitute the foundation of this research study. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without consequences, in which case the data you have contributed to this study will be deleted. Also, you can refuse to answer any particular question without stating a reason. Your name will be kept strictly confidential and will not appear in the project. Your contribution will be anonymised by ascribing pseudonyms. The name of your workplace will not be revealed. Data from recordings will be transcribed verbatim, and translated into English, followed by the deletion of the recordings.

I cordially invite you to contribute to my study. My study will collect interview data that will be used for analysis and presented as part of the thesis. Your participation is highly appreciated and important. I will ask you to participate in an in-depth interview (about 1 hour and a half).

If you agree to participate I will contact you to schedule a convenient time for the discussion. Interviews can be scheduled in February and will be held online via Zoom.

Please do not hesitate to contact me and ask for further clarification.

Looking forward to hearing from you!

Camelia Dragomir

e-mail address: gusdragca@ student.gu.se

Appendix 2: Interview protocol

Hello, and thank you very much for your participation in this interview. The interview is not intended to assess your teaching skills, although aspects of your experience may come up during the conversation. Your opinions and accounts can go beyond the scope of the questions and reveal new aspects important to the topic and discussion, which is desirable and actually forms the basis of the interview. During our conversation, I may ask you to expand and give further details based on your answers. As you already know, the information you provide will be kept strictly confidential. The interview will be recorded on Zoom so it can be transcribed and the camera can be turned off if needed to make you feel comfortable. Please let me know if any clarifications are needed. Ask me any questions you feel necessary.

Thank you for your availability and generosity!
Do you want to ask me anything before we start? I am happy to answer.

QUESTIONS

1.Background information**:** Please tell me about your previous education, qualifications, age, years of teaching experience, levels of students, school/ college, classes/week.

2. What motivated you to become a language teacher?

3. Tell me about your first experiences as a language teacher.

4. How do you feel about being a teacher now?

5. What do you believe to be your roles and responsibilities as a (language) teacher?

6. What are your priorities but also larger educational purposes when teaching? (Follow-up: How do you put them into practice?)

7. What are the expectations related to the language that you teach? (Follow-up: Does that affect your profession, and if so, in what way?)

8. What kind of support do you rely on in your daily classroom and school work?

9. What do you find challenging in exercising your profession?

10. What professional development courses have you pursued and why? Can you give me an example?

11. Do you feel that the work atmosphere in school promotes your professional growth and agency, and if so, how?

12. Have you had any initiatives/ specific responsibilities at the classroom and school level, or beyond school ?

13. Do you think that you have an influence on your students, school, and work community (colleagues), and if so, in what ways?

14. What are your professional aspirations and goals?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add that you feel is important for our discussion? Is there anything you want to ask me?

Thank you for your participation!

Appendix 3: Consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Research project: "Exploring foreign language teachers' professional agency in Romanian public secondary schools''

Researcher: Camelia Dragomir (Master's student at the University of Gothenburg)
Supervisor: Adrianna Nizinska (Senior Lecturer at the Department of Education and Special Education at the University of Gothenburg)

I agree to participate in the research project led by Camelia Dragomir and to my interview being recorded. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project and being interviewed.

1. I have been sufficiently informed about this research project. The purpose of my participation in this project as an interviewee has been explained to me and is clear.

2. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and the researcher has answered any questions about the study to my satisfaction.

3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that although I agree to participate at the moment, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences.

4. I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially. In any report on the results of this research my identity and that of my school will remain anonymous and confidential.

5. I consent to the use of the data in the research, its publication, sharing, and archiving.

Participant's name: Date:

Researcher' name: Date:

Contact details:

Researcher: Camelia Dragomir e-mail: gusdragca@student.gu.se

Supervisor: Adrianna Nizinska e-mail: adrianna.nizinska@gu.se