Exploring the Relational Nature of Teachers' Agency Negotiation through Master- and Counter-narratives

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Teachers' agency has recently been vastly studied from a sociocultural perspective, emphasising that teachers' action is shaped by the structures within which teachers work. However, this study provides a different perspective, introducing relational sociology to the research on teachers' agency. Here, agency is seen as embedded in interdependencies and relationships, either personal or impersonal. Finnish newly qualified teachers were interviewed concerning their teacher training and work to explore how they negotiated agency in their narratives. The analysis shows the entanglement of master- and counter-narratives in agency negotiation as the teachers drew on prevailing societal master narratives and simultaneously provided opposing categories through counter-narratives. The results reveal three aspects of relationships through which the agency was negotiated: *political, cultural,* and *epistemic*. The study contributes to the understanding of teachers' agency, paying attention to language and the plurality of relationships in agency negotiation and formation.

Keywords: agency; teachers; teacher education; narrative; relational sociology

Introduction

Teachers' agency has recently been a common research topic, utilising various theoretical and methodological approaches. This study adds to that research by employing a relational approach to teachers' agency negotiation on their teacher training and work. Relational sociology (Burkitt 2016; Dépelteau 2008, 2015, 2018; Emirbayer 1997) offers a nuanced picture of agency by bringing forth that action is always embedded in relationships, which can be personal (i.e., between oneself and other people) or impersonal (i.e., stemming from, for example, work or organisations). Many studies on teachers' agency have employed a sociocultural lens, arguing that agency is not simply the outcome of teachers' judgements and actions, but shaped by the structures and cultures within which teachers work (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2017). However, that perspective does not adequately address the interdependencies of social processes. In this study, these interrelations are taken into account.

The context of this study is Finnish teacher education and teacher profession. Finland has been deemed a model example of a high-performing teacher training system (Darling-

Hammond et al. 2017). In Finland, the teacher profession is rather strong, and teacher training is one of the most attractive university programmes (Mikkilä-Erdmann, Warinowski, and Iiskala 2019). Relative to other countries, Finnish teachers have a high degree of autonomy in their work, which has been seen as a component of agency (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015). However, recently, teachers' work satisfaction and burnout have become issues (Malinen and Savolainen 2016). Furthermore, the Finnish comprehensive school system has faced critique concerning increasing school segregation (Peltola 2021).

Therefore, teachers' agency cannot be taken for granted or only grasped through external factors but requires a more nuanced approach. Although Finnish teachers are not subject to traditional accountability mechanisms such as school inspections or a detailed national curriculum framework (Simola et al. 2017), they must still negotiate agency within political, cultural, and epistemic frames, as this study illustrates. Prior research, for example, in the US, has suggested that accountability policies – emphasising measurable performance-based on instrumentalist notions of teaching – can become increasingly internalised by teachers (Buchanan 2015). The status of Finnish teaching has been developed through historical situations and contingencies, and is, therefore, open and vulnerable to changes (Simola et al. 2017).

Applying relational sociology requires new methodological tools to deal with the high complexity of the interdependencies (Depélteau 2008). This study demonstrates how the analysis of master- and counter-narratives, referring to prevailing and alternative narratives in our everyday speech (Hyvärinen 2020; Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt 2020), provides means to dig deep into the agency negotiation. A vast tradition called narrative inquiry (e.g. Connelly and Clandinin 1990) focuses on emancipating teachers' voices and telling their autobiographical stories. However, the linguistically-minded tradition of narrative analysis, which considers narrative in a more analytical and functional way (de Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008), has the potential for a methodology to study teachers' agency from a less egocentric perspective. In this study, the teachers seemed to draw on master narratives (Hyvärinen 2020), such as their need, as teachers, to keep up with societal changes. However, agency was manifested when opposing these master narratives and, instead, telling counter-narratives, such as, for example, expressing the idea that young teachers should rely on their own views and not become exhausted under the pressures of

keeping up with society's constant changes. In this way, master- and counter-narratives unfold the relational nature of teachers' agency as teachers negotiate their views in relation to other views.

Teachers' Agency Emerging through Relationships

Recently, the agency of both student teachers (e.g., Brevik et al. 2019; Juutilainen, Metsäpelto, and Poikkeus 2018) and in-service teachers (e.g., King and Nomikou 2018; Lefstein et al. 2018; Melasalmi and Husu 2019; Pantić 2017; Teruya 2021) has been vastly studied from a sociocultural perspective. These studies lean on the analytical divide into agency and structure. Most of that research does discuss relationships but in an implicit way. For example, Juutilainen, Metsäpelto, and Poikkeus (2018) highlight emotionally safe atmosphere for student teachers and the significance of breaking traditional authority relationships. Lefstein et al. (2018) show how playing multiple roles creates opportunities and obligations for a teacher team coordinator to become agentive in her work. Pantić (2017) describes how, in a Scottish primary school, relationships with students and their families, colleagues, and other professionals were significant to teachers' agency and to the features of the structural environments enabling such agency. Teruya (2021) analyses the relationship between education and the state in the tensions of teachers' agency in reshaping teacher identities in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While these studies creditably add to the understanding of teachers' agency, they seem to perceive agency as an individual property, detached from the interdependencies of social processes. In that tradition, agency is considered something that individuals or groups can achieve, which results from the interplay of each person's capacities and environmental conditions (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015). However, these structures and cultures are seldom pursued more fully (Imants and Van der Wal 2020), and, thus, they remain abstract and outside of the actor her/himself.

Necessary attempts to surpass the gap between the self and the outside world have been made to acknowledge that individuals are tied together by chains of mutual dependence and that they are inseparable from their social contexts (Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Raffo and Roth (2020) argue for a relational perspective, which implies that the activities of an individual can never be fully understood in isolation. Reviewing the literature of learner agency in urban schools, they result in suggesting a pragmatist approach to agency, which

pays attention to concrete actions in the various social fields that locates agency in experience (Raffo and Roth 2020).

Ideas under the rubric of 'relational sociology' (Emirbayer 1997; Burkitt 2016; Dépelteau 2008; 2015; 2018) have potential to answer the needs to reconceptualise agency from a less individualist perspective. Relational sociology points out that instead of assuming the social world as static entities it should be understood as dynamic, unfolding relations (Emirbayer 1997). Relational sociology criticises the substantialist perspective according to which the substances such as things or beings constitute the fundamental units of research (Emirbayer 1997). Instead, it takes the dynamic relationships as a point of departure.

The change of the viewpoint turns many of the traditional conceptualisations of sociology over. Accordingly, relational sociology suggests that agency appears only among people through their interdependencies and that people produce particular effects in the world and on each other through their relational connections (Burkitt 2016). It also maintains that social actors can assume different simultaneous agentic orientations, whereby agency can be understood as an internally complex temporal dynamic (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

In addition, some of relational sociology abandons the terminology of 'structure' because how people act does not rest on their relationships with an abstract structure but their interdependence with others (Burkitt 2016; Dépelteau 2008). In the structure–agency dichotomy, agents are seen as lone individuals, who must deal with external structures that either enable or constrain that agency. In previous research on teachers' agency, this has often resulted in a quite dualistic listing of these enabling and constraining factors or identifying agency as strong or weak. By the relational connections, Burkitt (2016) means webs or networks of relations and interdependencies that can be both interpersonal and impersonal. Dépelteau (2015) argues that scholars should avoid unnecessary analytical distinctions and examine the complex associations between various human and in-human actors.

Some relational sociologists (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) hold on to the concept of structure but seek flexibility by bringing the temporal aspect to the conceptualisation of agency. Either way, the relational point of view sees agency as inseparable from the unfolding dynamics of situations (Emirbayer 1997). Less individualistic understandings of

agency have recently been called for in this journal (Lee 2019; Raffo and Roth 2020). Using Burkitt's relational view of agency, Lee (2019) adds that scholars must renew the prevalent rationalistic notions of agency by alternative conceptualisations that highlight affection and emotion, which impact other individuals and society. New understandings of agency are needed because embedding agency in an individualist and calculative conception of action underlies many Western accounts of freedom and progress (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).Thus, relational sociology is important for the conceptualising of agency because it surpasses the dichotomies and pays attention to the relationships through which agency emerges.

However, a conceptual confusion exists in terms of what is meant by relationality concerning agency. Melasalmi and Husu (2019), labelling their view of agency as relational and situational, suggest that agency is constructed within complex relationships involving predicting, interpreting, and assessing others' thoughts, emotions and behaviours. However, Melasalmi and Husu (2019) hold that relational agency is a capacity of teachers. Also, the concept of relational agency points out to capacities of individuals or groups to work relationally with other practitioners and to draw on joint resources (Edwards 2005). Thus, relationality can, on the one hand, refer to resources that individuals or groups utilise to fulfil 'their' agency, or, on the other hand, a key feature how agency comes about in the first place as in this study.

A central aspect of relational sociology is that agency is not an individual property or capacity. (Dépelteau 2008) points out that even humans' most personal thoughts and habits are linked to interdependencies in one way or another (Dépelteau 2008). For example, thinking alone in the bedroom involves words and ideas, which have been learned, appropriated, memorised, and modified in the webs of interdependence, and, thus there is no pure 'individual' agency (Dépelteau 2008). However, this does not mean that humans cannot have a *sense* of agency, but even this sense is highly situated. As the previous research on teachers' agency has at least in some degree involved examining relationships, it would benefit from relational sociology.

In this study, relational sociology is utilised to examine teachers' narratives. Seeing agency as a phenomenon of interdependence, means that people do not simply *have* agency; they *negotiate* (Edwards 2015) agency in the narratives they tell and through the narratives told by others. In these negotiations, there is a plurality of voices as a person's 'own' and

other narratives are tightly entwined and inseparable. Emirbayer (1997) states that agency is always a dialogic process. A linguistic approach to teachers' agency has been called for (Edwards 2015) to grasp this plurality and an agent as a separate entity has been deemed as an insufficient unit of analysis to explore agency (Raffo and Roth 2020). An approach that does not concentrate on individuals but on texts is needed. In this pursuit, counter-narratives (Hyvärinen 2020; Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt 2020) are especially interesting since they take on meaning through relationships with other narratives. The methodological choice of analysing master- and counter-narratives alleviates tensions, which may arise from understanding agency as a traditionally individual phenomenon. Similarly, it provides a novel way to focus on relations, decentring the individual and emphasising the interconnections. Thus, the study seeks to explore *how Finnish teachers negotiate agency in their narratives when discussing their teacher training and work.*

Methodological approach

Data Collection

The data for a detailed narrative and linguistically-minded analysis, consisting of 186 pages of rich narration, was collected from ten teachers' interviews. The teachers were trained in Finland's class teacher education programme. Upon graduation, they had received general teacher qualifications and were qualified to teach grades 1–6 (pupils' ages 7–13) in comprehensive schools. Fairly newly qualified teachers were chosen to retrieve insights from both their teacher training and work.

Class teacher education is a five-year academic study programme leading to a master's degree. The study programme across Finland is research-based – requiring students to major in educational science and engage with various theories of learning, teaching and education in general (Heikkilä, Iiskala, and Mikkilä-Erdmann 2020). Students' own research and a researcher-like stance towards teaching are stressed as the students study research skills such as research methods, information seeking, research ethics, data analysis methods, and scientific writing.

The teachers had begun their studies between 2010 and 2013 and had been working as teachers for approximately three to five years after graduating. This was beneficial, as they had work experience as teachers but could still remember their training. The interviews were conducted in University of Turku, Finland, as part of a wider project entitled "Student Selection to Teacher Education in Finland – Anticipatory Work for Future", gathering both

qualitative and quantitative data. However, this study only presents the data relevant to the particular research question.

The interviews were semi-structured, including an outline of the topics to be covered and suggested questions (Kvale 2007). This method was chosen to gather themes from the teachers' perspectives and to obtain descriptions of their lived worlds concerning the interpretation (Kvale 2007) of agency. Neither agency nor narratives were elicited to gather 'authentic' data, from which agency negotiation could be interpreted in a data-driven manner.

Initially, one pilot interview was conducted with a teacher who had a similar background. The pilot interview helped the interviewer to prepare for the interviews and showed that the themes were appropriate. Then, seven teachers who had begun their studies in 2010 were interviewed in the spring of 2019, and, in the spring of 2020, three teachers who had begun their studies in 2013 were interviewed. The transcribed text constituted 186 pages (Arial 12) and provided rich insights. To pursue a highly detailed linguistically-minded analysis, the data were considered to be sufficient because qualitative research focuses on unpacking how people construct the world around them in terms that are meaningful and that offer rich insight (Kvale 2007). To protect the interviewees' identities, pseudonyms were used.

All interviews were conducted by the first author. Six interviews in 2019 were completed live, and the seventh was done by telephone. All three interviews in 2020 were conducted via Zoom video conferencing because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These three interviews were conducted at a very early stage of the pandemic when the extent of its length and effects were not realised. In addition, the interview themes were general, whereby the interviews were not affected by the pandemic as much as they might have been if the topic was more day-to-day. The interview themes were: 'teachers' work in general', 'teacher training', 'continuous education', 'work satisfaction as a teacher', and 'research base of teacher training'.

The interviews lasted from 26 minutes to 78 minutes. The total length of the interviews was 490 minutes; thus, on average, they lasted 49 minutes each. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A notice regarding the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was presented, and the interviewees were informed about any data security issues related to the research such as storing the data and the interviewees' rights.

Seven interviewees were female, and three were male. They ranged in age from 26 to 52 (average: 34). Some interviewees had begun their studies fairly quickly after high school, while others had worked in different fields before entering teacher training. From those who had begun their studies in 2010, six teachers were in permanent teaching posts or had been accepted to such posts. All three teachers who had begun their studies in 2013 were working in fixed-term positions. Most of the teachers had taught regular classes during the term, but one teacher had taught a class preparing immigrant pupils for regular instruction, and another had taught a class of special needs pupils (a participant who had also graduated as a special needs teacher).

Method

In this study, master narratives were understood as sequences of culturally expected events (Bamberg 2004; Hyvärinen 2020) to which people refer in their speaking or writing. Although they are master narratives, they can be contested and local, since people live in different and highly internally differentiated societies with numerous coexisting, interacting, and conflicting life patterns (Kölbl 2002). Master narratives play a twofold role in agency. They constrain and delineate agency as they reduce the range of people's actions, but they also guide and direct people's everyday actions (Bamberg 2004).

In their talk, people break or violate these established expectations (Bruner 1991; Hyvärinen 2020) by positioning themselves against or critiquing their themes and ideologies (Lueg 2018). Thus, a counter-narrative is a narrative that takes on meaning through its relationships with other narratives. Counter-narratives do not necessarily compete with master narratives, but, rather, they offer opposing categories (Lueg 2018) and only make sense in relation to that which they are countering (Bamberg and Andrews 2004).

The process of master- and counter-narratives should be considered, analysing how tellers draw on different master- and counter-narratives (Hyvärinen 2020; Lueg, Bager, and Lundholt 2020). When expressing counter-narratives, people must offer explanations and arguments because there is a conflict between their thoughts and the master narrative (Hyvärinen 2020). Thus, it is relevant to examine how master- and counter-narratives create and constrain agency (Bamberg 2004) and how people negotiate between culturally dominant models (master narratives) and produce personal narrative versions (counter-narratives), which may challenge these models (Meretoja 2020).

Data Analysis

To examine the interdependencies in the narratives, the interviews were first handled as a whole, instead of looking merely at individual teachers' narratives. This was done to grasp a wider picture of *what* the teachers were telling, *how* they told it, and *why* (Hyvärinen 2008). Soon, it became clear that agency negotiation could not be handled by 'common-sense coding' (Müller and Frandsen 2020) but was embedded in the entanglement of master- and counter-narratives the teachers told. Thus, the approach of master- and counter-narratives provided a lens to rise beyond separate individual experiences. It was examined how counter-narratives took stances in relation to master narratives and through what word choices teachers opposed master narratives and justified their counter-narratives.

In the data, master- and counter-narratives were identified, and their main ideas were summarised in a short sentence after each narrative. At the same time, the nature of agency negotiation in the counter-narratives was analysed in more detail, giving strong attention to the teachers' word choices. During this phase, it was soon found that the counter-narratives contained, and could be categorised into, three relational aspects of agency: political, cultural, and epistemic. The aspects were partly overlapping but, however, indicated distinct features. Thus, part of narratives seemed to point out to societal matters, which could be solved by political decisions, part of them highlighted the cultural models and images of being a teacher, and part discussed the epistemic basis of teachers' training and work.

Therefore, the second phase involved identifying each of these aspects within the counter-narratives and analysing what kinds of relationships they included. Both personal relationships and impersonal relationships (Burkitt 2016) were analysed, again paying attention to the teachers' word choices (Hyvärinen 2008). The existence or simply the amount of the relationships was not the target of the study as relationships are not static connections happening between clear-lined entities. In place, uniting the relational aspect of agency to individual narratives enabled to examine how various and dynamic relationships coexisted in teacher's sense-making. Table 1 depicts the phases of the analysis and shows insights in each phase that led to the subsequent phases.

[Table 1 near here]

After these phases were complete, all political, cultural, and epistemic aspects were gathered into another document. The topics of these aspects and the relations they included were listed in a table so that they could be examined separately. Thereafter, different topics

within the political, cultural, and epistemic aspects were gathered into larger topics. These topics are presented via separate passages in the Results section. Quotations were chosen that best illustrated how the relationships were linked to each aspect and best showed how the methodology of counter-narratives was implemented into analysing relations.

Results

Relationships to Political Aspects

Relationships to political aspects were featured in narratives concerning society and how it is organised – especially societal problems, which could be solved by political decisions. In the following example, Sandra discusses the value of the teaching profession after being asked how she feels about the appreciation of the profession in Finland:

> It could be better. It can be seen already in the salary that it could be better. Especially if you compare it to the private sector, you can see that salaries are higher there from the beginning. Besides, somehow – I am the only teacher in my family, so it can affect this – but I feel like others do not see it as being so valuable. People see the value of the work mainly based on the salary because when you produce some kind of results or products it is held as important. However, maybe in discussing in a different kind of group it can be seen as of utmost valuable. Among teachers, we do understand the value of it and see why it is important. But in general, in society, the appreciation could be higher.

Several master- and counter-narratives are present in this quote, and Sandra draws on all of them. The first master narrative on which she draws is that, because teachers' work produces no concrete, measurable products, they should not receive high salaries. She speaks against this master narrative as she insists that teachers' work is valuable. Another master narrative holds that, among teachers, the value of their work is acknowledged. However, Sandra does not settle for this. The counter-narrative asserts that this in-profession appreciation is not enough; teachers' salaries and the levels of appreciation from those outside the teaching profession should be increased. It is not through separate narratives that agency manifests itself but by entanglement of several master- and counter-narratives that are entangled in her negotiation. Thus, Figure 1 shows how master- and counter-narratives are intertwined, as one narrative leads to another. In the figure, MN stands for 'master narrative' and CN for 'counter-narrative'.

[Figure 1 near here]

Various relationships are also present in this quotation as Sandra negotiates her views in relation to views she has heard or imagined. First, there is the private sector to which she compares teachers' salaries. Then, there is her family, who do not seem to appreciate her work enough. Sandra offers an explanation for this, saying that her family members have no experience with teaching work. Next, there are 'people' (laymen), who do not see the abstract value of teachers' work, and, finally, there is the relationship to the others in her group – that is, teachers with whom she agrees. The quotation illustrates how agency is negotiated by comparing 'own' thoughts with many other perspectives. Thus, it is not the existence of the relationships as such that makes the agency but that these relationships exist in a dialogical and dynamic plurality in teachers' sense-making.

More generally, the teachers depicted how *the role of the teacher in society* has changed greatly over time, and teachers are now responsible for various tasks other than teaching and raising children. They explained that their work now includes pedagogical documenting and reporting, as well as taking part in different development projects and initiatives. Thus, the master narrative was that teachers' work should only include teaching and raising children, but, according to the counter-narratives, this was not the case. However, the teachers, in part, seemed to welcome this change. They considered much of the documentation work to have a purpose, and they considered many of the projects to be useful and empowering. Interestingly, the teachers often referenced a relationship to an imagined 'some other teacher', who would feel these tasks were unnecessary.

Another large theme was matters related to *the rapidly changing world*. According to the master narrative, the core of teachers' work stays similar across decades, but the teachers told counter-narratives indicating that their work changes rapidly. In recent years, Finland has seen an increase in asylum seekers, which has heightened the levels of multiculturalism in the educational system. Many teachers expressed positive relationships with multiculturalism; however, they also evidenced that they felt pressure and a sense of inadequacy, and, as a solution, they wished that future teachers would receive more training in these issues.

Also, as part of the rapidly changing world, the teachers found the current increase in digital educational tools to be puzzling. Many criticised the ideal of a teacher mastering all kinds of digital tools, which would solve all classroom problems. Others (particularly young

teachers) felt empowered because they could help their colleagues use the new digital tools. Here, agency was negotiated in relation to the colleagues. The political aspect of digitality was embedded in the resources available. In their teacher training, the teachers had learned to use different tools and platforms, but, in their schools, there were fewer resources to purchase those tools, which restricting their work. Interestingly, other political aspects widely reported in recent literature – such as accountability mechanisms, other forms of output regulation of teachers' work (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson 2015), or national and school curricula (Imants and Van der Wal 2020) – were not evident in the narratives. This was probably because of the high autonomy of teachers in Finland.

Another political topic unpacked from these narratives was *job markets* as the number of teachers trained is a political decision. Contrary to many other countries, in Finland, there is no shortage of class teachers – at least, not in the biggest cities. Many teachers quite carefully described their experiences applying for teaching jobs.

In several narratives, the teachers' positions, and especially their training in Finland, were compared to those found in other countries. The teachers were proud of their *research-based teacher education* because they could count on all the content and teaching methods in their training being based on scientific knowledge. In their narratives, the teachers expressed that they enjoyed and appreciated having the autonomy to plan their lessons as they saw best. They did not take this freedom for granted, as the master narrative seemed to be that teachers' work was somehow supervised, though, according to the counter-narrative, autonomy prevailed. Thus, it may be concluded that political decisions made to boost research-based education and teachers' autonomy have been fruitful for teachers' agency. However, the teachers were not entirely satisfied with the position of the teaching profession among other professions in Finland. They called for increased salaries and for decision-makers to listen to their hopes (e.g., smaller group sizes). This implies that the autonomous position is not so much of help if the practical circumstances do not enable to realise it.

Relationships to Cultural Aspects

In the data, agency particularly emerged in narratives related to socially shared customs and today's ways of life (Oxford 2020). First, the expressed relationships covered how *the role of the school and the teacher* are used to understand the prevailing society over time. According to a master narrative expressed in the data, these changes make teachers' work uncomfortable, but, in the counter-narratives, there was agency as the teachers

discussed coping with demanding parents and becoming accustomed to seeing comments about themselves on social media.

The teachers discussed their views of how their roles as teachers had changed, particularly concerning the public nature of the teaching profession and the authority of teachers, as well as how all this has affected their possibilities for action. For example, the teachers' relationship with the public nature of their work was twofold. They felt restricted because pupils and parents could comment on their work so freely, but acknowledging and accepting this fact enabled the teachers to act within these frames. The following quotation concerns changes in teachers' authority over time. Before, it had been was obvious that neither pupils nor parents questioned the teacher, but, today, the culture had shifted towards more horizontal relationships between teachers and pupils/parents. In this quotation, Anna was asked what principles or guidelines she has for her work:

> And the same applies to the parents, so you have to create trust with them. On the other hand, what I have learned during these years is that you have to keep your limits. You have to very strictly set these boundaries to both parents and children; that is where they are and inside which things happen. You have to, in a sense, take your own leadership there. I mean, those things I determine, I really determine, and I do not have to be flexible about everything and negotiate and discuss and contemplate.

In the above quotation, the underlying master narrative is that listening is important for today's teachers. However, in the counter-narrative, setting boundaries is important for teachers' wellbeing. Anna depicts a relationship between herself and the pupils' parents as a common group. She is, perhaps, referencing the parents of her current pupils and also the parents of her prior pupils, particularly when she refers to what she has learned 'during these years'. Anna very clearly explains what she means by setting these boundaries as there is much repetition in her narrative. Anna also depicts a relationship between herself and the cultural ideal of a nice teacher who listens. Anna balances between these different positions as she hints that, in previous years, she was an intent listener, but later years have taught her to be strict about her boundaries. Overall, in this quotation, agency emerges in relation to the parents and the prevailing cultural ideal of how a teacher should behave.

Another important concept was the teachers' relationships to *the image the media had created about their work*. The teachers described how the media had projected a

negative image of their work, highlighting the school problems, such as student misconduct. In this way, the media had made the teachers' work seem hard and even disgusting. The master narrative expressed in the data was that the media's image of the teachers' work was correct, but, according to the counter-narrative, that image did not correspond to the reality in schools at all. Thus, the teachers' relationships with the media were very negative and critical, and they wished to see more nuanced and positive newspaper articles about schools. Here, the agency arose out of resisting the prevailing image applied to them. Similarly, narratives on social media were present. As in other media, school problems were presented on social media, but the teachers felt empowered by people's positive comments about their efforts, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The teachers also highlighted all kinds of *openness in the school culture*. According to the master narrative expressed in the data, the teachers' work was adequately done when they took care of their own groups. However, in the counter-narratives, the teachers stated that teachers could no longer shut themselves off individually. They must now work collaboratively, and their work must be visible to other teachers. In this sense, the teachers often contrasted themselves with their colleagues (who had received their teacher training less recently), and they negotiated agency by claiming that they wanted to be more open than those colleagues.

Finally, an interesting feature was the teachers' narratives about *finding their own purpose as teachers*. Such purpose seeking is a societal discourse, which urges individuals to specialise themselves, gaining expertise in one field rather than being unsure of what to do for a living. However, this discourse can also refer to changes in the information society and teachers' work; a vast amount of material is available and shared on the internet, and teachers' must wisely choose what to use. The relation towards finding one's own purpose was, again, twofold. The process was not depicted as easy, but, once the teachers had found that purpose, it brought them well-being as they understood that they no longer had to concentrate on everything or take societal pressures so seriously.

Relationships to Epistemic Aspects

'Epistemic aspects', in this study, mean features related to how teachers' work concerns knowledge and how it can be understood as knowledge work. Epistemic aspects are visible in the following quotation, where Adam explains what the expression 'teacher expertise' brings to his mind:

> Well, I think I am an expert in teaching. Maybe I am not the best expert in every subject, but I think that our education trained us well to teaching. At least, I grew as a teacher, and in my opinion, a class teacher, at least in our school, class teachers are experts in teaching. And subject teachers are experts in their subjects, and maybe they have left without teaching….Sometimes when we have discussions it seems like now they have, in a sense, because they maybe can't do the teaching, so they have made a problem, in a sense, that they feel like the pupils are the problem. And it is not necessarily [laughter] it, but the teacher has made him/herself a problem about it. I, in a sense, think that, especially for subject teachers, one should maybe stress the teaching even more. I don't know if this a restricted view based on my couple of years' experience, but….

This quotation seems to deal with a fundamental divide in teachers' work between subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. According to the underlying master narrative, the pupils might be a problem. However, Adam tells a counter-narrative by explaining a solution; maybe there is no problem at all, but the subject teachers (teaching grades 7–9 in Finland) have made a problem themselves, as they do not know enough about pedagogics. Different relationships are evidenced in this quotation. First, there is the relationship to subject teachers, as Adam contrasts class teachers' expertise with subject teachers' expertise. This might be interpreted as a rhetorical means to highlight the areas in which class teachers excel. Although Adam uses many expressions showing that he is unsure about his stance (such as 'in a sense'), it seems obvious that Adam's relationship to subject teachers is critical, and he negotiates agency with them. On the other hand, he also indicates a relationship with his pupils, pondering whether they might be a problem, and ending up saying that, usually, this is not the case. Finally, Adam expresses a relationship to teacher training as he states that, in subject teachers' training, pedagogics should be more heavily emphasised. In Finland, subject teachers study educational science only during one year of their masters' degree, compared to class teachers' five-year training in educational science.

Concerning epistemic aspects, the narratives involved also *the nature of teaching and, overall, learning*. In the master narrative expressed in the data, both teaching and learning were, somehow, automatic and rational functions, but, in the counter-narratives, they were complex processes requiring interaction, care, safety, metacognition, and sense of agency. The teachers saw themselves as experts in this multifaceted process. Thus, agency

arose in verbalising this expertise, which was often contrasted to other people without teaching qualifications. A common master narrative was that anyone, just walking in off the street, could teach because it seemed so easy. However, the teachers strictly defended their profession by saying that only receiving teachers' education can qualify someone to teach. This hints that the profession has its weaknesses as the teachers must defend it so vehemently. The nature of teaching was also visible in the narratives on *continuous education,* which was seen as a constituent part of their work and identities as teachers, not an obligatory duty. However, there were restricting factors as not all teachers could take part in continuous education due to financial problems in their municipalities.

Another epistemic theme covered *knowledge in teachers' work*. According to the underlying master narrative, teachers' work is so practical that theories and research are not necessary to the field. However, in the counter-narratives, the teachers expressed how they needed to understand knowledge construction in society, how educational theories could explain school phenomena and how teachers could create new knowledge themselves by mastering research skills. Thus, teaching was seen as closely entwined with knowledge because the teachers depicted how they were responsible for the accuracy of the knowledge they transmitted to their pupils. A common assertion was that the teachers had, over their working lives, slowly realised the significance of the theoretical basis of their training. Some teachers, however, sought to balance the importance of research-based knowledge since the impact of such knowledge was indirect and not always visible in their work. Thus, agency was often negotiated in relation to teacher training and teacher educators. Some narratives also discussed the natural self-development, as teachers' challenged themselves in relationships with themselves, pupils, parents, colleagues, and other people.

Another important theme was *the applicability of knowledge in teachers' work*. Many teachers balanced a phenomenon called the theory–practice gap (e.g., Heikkilä, Iiskala, and Mikkilä-Erdmann 2020), which concerns the applicability of theoretical knowledge in teachers' work. The relationships to theories were not seamless as the theories did not always help in practical teaching situations. On the other hand, the teachers also described that, during their training, they had learned to process knowledge into a form that was useful to them. For example, one narrative discussed a terror attack in Finland, which had to be discussed with the pupils and turned into pedagogical material because the children were already pondering it. The relationships to the applicability of theories were, thus,

twofold. Theories did not always help the teachers in their everyday situations, but they provided a mind-set that enabled the teachers to make quick pedagogical decisions.

Yet another epistemic aspect extracted from the data was the *boundless nature of the teachers' work*. All teachers expressed relationships with this point. On the one hand, this was positive as it was linked to their autonomy to work without taking orders or being told how to do their jobs, and they had the pedagogical freedom to make decisions as they saw the best fit. On the other hand, the teachers discussed needing to set boundaries. The teachers, for example, chose not to work from home and would not allow parents to connect with them via their private mobile phones. These boundaries were also set in interactions as some narratives mentioned teachers directly defining, to pupils and parents, the limits they had set.

Discussion

This study has aimed to understand how teachers negotiate agency when discussing their teacher training and work. In doing this, the study has provided two major contributions. First, by widening the theoretical understanding of teachers' agency from a sociocultural perspective towards relational sociology, it has revealed how teachers' agency is negotiated through personal and impersonal interdependencies. Second, the study has introduced the analysis of master- and counter-narratives (e.g. Hyvärinen 2020) to the research on teachers' agency by illustrating how teachers balanced sequences of culturally expected events, while also expressing alternative ways. By showing the entanglement of teachers' master- and counter-narratives, it has illustrated the interdependencies, visible for example in narrative expressions such as 'a lot of people' or 'somebody else'), as the teachers negotiated with both real-life and imagined encounters, which were not always harmonious and included comparisons.

To further explore the content of the agency negotiations, this study has presented three aspects of relationships: political, cultural, and epistemic. The political aspect has shown how political and societal matters were present in the teachers' narratives, although the interview questions did not ask about such matters. Teaching is embedded in the interdependencies of society – in societal changes and in political decisions – and teachers form relationships with these factors. However, these relationships are not formed merely with some distant political headquarters. Sometimes, agency was negotiated through

colleagues by imagining how those teachers would respond to various demands, such as increased workload, multicultural teaching or digital tools.

The cultural aspect has illustrated agency negotiation in relation to the cultural images that prevail for teachers and their work in society. This was most clearly visible in narratives concerning how the public image of schools and teachers' work did not reflect reality. Although the teachers were confident in themselves as teachers, they simultaneously suffered from this negative image and viewed their jobs through the eyes of imagined others.

Concerning the epistemic aspects, the teachers' relationships to knowledge involved both their training and working lives. Agency arose from setting oneself against 'the man in the street', who could legally work as a substitute teacher in Finland but did not have the knowledge or skills because of a lack of qualifications. Thus, agency was visible in verbalising one's expertise. In this way, epistemic aspects come close to professional autonomy because defining which knowledge resources should inform everyday work and how is a key source of professional autonomy (Hermansen 2017). Similarly, agency arose from showing various forms of teaching and learning and finding a personal balance between educational theory and practice.

In presenting these aspects, we hope to have evoked new kinds of thinking and perceiving (Huttunen and Kakkori 2020) of how narratives can reveal the interdependencies of teachers' agency. An effort to show the plurality in empirical material instead of common-sense coding (Müller and Frandsen, 2020) brings forth new visions of power relations concerning teachers. It implies that agency should not be conceptualised as absolute power, categorising agency as strong or weak but as a matter of degree, where teachers are always active and passive, powerful and yet vulnerable at the same time (Burkitt 2016).

Contextualising the research (Huttunen and Kakkori 2020), in the Finnish context is important, because both teacher training as a master's level education and teachers' work as a valued profession, are quite unique. Nevertheless, along with the theoretical and methodological contributions, the study offers valuable insights into teachers' agency that are worth considering across contexts because the main aspects – political, cultural, and epistemic – are general. In addition, it unites the perspectives of both teacher training and teachers' work, which sometimes are examined separately.

The study also holds several practical implications for initial teacher education. First, the political aspect indicated how political matters were negotiated, whether consciously or –

rather often – unconsciously. Viewing teaching and learning as neutral and without vested interests is dangerous because it separates teaching and learning from their societal, historical, and philosophical frames (Biesta 2015). Therefore, teacher training programmes should include sociology of education, or otherwise, understandings of learning and teaching can remain decontextualised for teachers (Simola et al. 2017).

Second, concerning relationships to cultural aspects, and the themes of publicity, privacy, openness, and being enclosed in teachers' work lead thoughts to the information society. Teacher education should prepare student teachers to act in this world, in which the already public nature of teaching is further heightened by social media. Teachers need to be trained for epistemic agency that helps them navigating in the changing knowledge cultures featured by fake news, troll targeting, and hate speech (Heikkilä et al. 2020).

Third, the epistemic aspect indicates that teachers' relationships to knowledge should be considered in teacher education. Making it evident that teachers form relationships with knowledge, negotiate between theory and practice and personally apply theoretical knowledge in usable forms will help student teachers better comprehend their roles as knowledge workers. This will also increasingly mean that the relationships take account the aspects of the epistemologies of the global south, allowing oppressed social groups to represent the world as their own and in their own terms (Bhambra and Santos 2017). Increasing the research base of teacher education is a current target in many teacher education systems worldwide (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017). However, it does not automatically bring about positive consequences, but its meanings are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated by the student teachers and in-service teachers. Teacher educators should also consider how student teachers negotiate their agency in relation to the educators and to the teacher education unit as representatives of educational science.

This study also has practical implications for teachers' continuous education and professional development. In the teachers' narratives, colleagues played a distinct role in agency construction. Peer-mentoring in groups, a format of continuous education recently developed in Finland (Korhonen et al. 2017) can offer a space in which teachers may discuss their teaching and learn from others. However, to promote deep learning, it is necessary to integrate theoretical and critical viewpoints into discussions about practical experiences (Korhonen et al. 2017). Also, formats that allow teachers to visit other teachers' classes, could inspire them to negotiate agency in relation to their colleagues in a productive way.

Also, concerning strengthening epistemic relationships for professional development, enhancing the possibilities for teacher research can encourage teachers to create new knowledge in their own right, focusing on topics that they find important in their work.

Finally, a current stream of pushing both teachers' and their students' agency has been seen in both the policy level (Raffo and Roth 2020) and research. Studies that bring forth the formation of agency through interdependencies and in the plurality of the negotiation, can theoretically, methodologically, and practically extend the understanding and support of agency in nuanced ways, escaping the labelling of agency as merely strong or weak.

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