"Game face on" when doing "good enough" teaching: Manifestations of professional agency in teacher educators' perceptions of a transition to remote work

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This study investigates manifestations of professional agency in teacher educators' (TEds) perceptions of being in changed work circumstances during higher education's transition to emergency remote work. This analysis applies the subject-centered sociocultural (SCSC) approach to professional agency. In this approach, agency is understood as exercised, and the social context (the sociocultural conditions) and the individual's agency (professional subjects) are mutually constitutive but analytically separate. Fourteen semi-structured interviews with Swedish teacher educators at five universities were analyzed using directed content analysis. The analysis shows that in an acute transition, the TEds exercised agency when trying to frame a blurred context, a connected space, and a screen identity. They exercised agency for many purposes, from retaining professional pride to transforming the teaching practice, which involved coping with the "good enough" discourse shaping their professional appearance but was foremost for the individual's well-being. The associated actions were in a social context containing, for example, expectations of availability and feelings of being in control. The study's results contribute to understanding university educators' and teacher educators' professional agency and professional development in an ever-evolving digital work environment.

Keywords: professional agency, professional development, professional identity, subject-centered sociocultural approach (SCSC), teacher educator

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Introduction

The year 2020 marked a profound global shift as the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted societies worldwide, affecting various sectors, including education. By March 26, 2020, schools and universities had closed in 165 countries, and the impact of this on education was devastating (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020; Education International, 2020). Among those significantly affected were teacher educators (TEds), who experienced an abrupt and mandatory transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to remote teaching (Carillo & Flores, 2020). This transition intensified their workload and necessitated rapid adaptation to new pedagogical methods and digital tools (Allen et al., 2020; Mäkelä et al., 2022; Sahu, 2020).

Before the pandemic, online teaching practices varied, encompassing distance education and blended learning (Carillo & Flores, 2020). However, digital tools were predominantly used for administrative tasks rather than as pedagogical aids to enhance student learning and teaching effectiveness (Amhag et al., 2019; Lillejord et al., 2018). The onset of the pandemic tested the adaptability of TEds, as digital resources became pivotal for all aspects of their professional practice — working, teaching, and learning. Amidst these challenges, TEds were compelled to maintain the quality and equity of education in a digital format (Howard, 2021; Kidd & Murray, 2020), necessitating individual digital development.

This study examines how TEds navigated the acute transition to remote work during the first semester of 2020, focusing on manifestations of professional agency in their perceptions. By examining these experiences, this study can shed light on implications for the professional development of TEds in adapting to future educational challenges in the ongoing evolution of digital technologies. TEds worldwide experienced an abrupt transition; therefore, the study's findings hold significant international significance, providing insights that can inform proactive strategies for anticipating and adapting to forthcoming technological advancements among university educators, teacher educators, and students alike (Assunção Flores & Gago, 2020; Narayanan & Ordynans, 2022).

Background

Initially, research on agency and its interaction with individual professional development is presented. This is followed by a section addressing agency in teaching with digital tools, and thereafter, a section explores how TEds navigate the digital educational landscape.

Agency and Professional Development

In research, agency is an important concept when understanding how and why individuals act and learn in a changing work-related context (e.g., Goller & Paloniemi, 2017; Tynjälä, 2013). Agency is generally understood as "the capacity of human beings to shape circumstances in which they live" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 965). Sociocultural conditions influence agency in constraining and resourced ways (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), creating a professional space framed by contextual opportunities and individual abilities (Helleve et al., 2018). Leibowitz et al. (2012) assert that the individual TEd must be given the professional space to exercise agency and influence how they can advance in expertise and knowledge for organizational development. However, at the same time, how the TEd exercises agency can potentially hinder their professional development (Roumbanis Viberg et al., 2021; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Therefore, the TEd's actions have long-lasting and far-reaching effects.

As earlier research shows, when implementing new educational policies such as the transitioning to remote work, limitations within the policy can frame a professional space and present opportunities for the individual to exercise agency in the form of making creative choices regarding compliance with requirements or even active resistance by transforming policies (e.g., Bartlett et al., 2017). However, policies within the academic environment have earlier led to the de-professionalism of the educators; moreover, the policies challenged their creativity and autonomy thus having an emotional impact on them (Connolly et al., 2018; Wilcox & Lawson, 2018). As a response, TEds have exercised agency foremost to feel well (Hökkä et al., 2017). Therefore, the individual's exercise of agency depends on, for example, the degree of autonomy they are given, the perceived boundaries that may limit them, and the amount of support they receive (Roumbanis Viberg et al., 2021).

Agency and Teaching with Digital Tools

Before March 2020, prior studies have demonstrated that TEds exercised agency to retain autonomy in the teaching practice, commit to the educational task, and maintain the ideals of learning and teaching (Roumbanis Viberg et al., 2021). The TEds felt a broader professional space opened regarding decisions to "digitalize" their teaching practice and have teaching autonomy, but this space became smaller when trying to influence the work context and implement educational reforms (Roumbanis Viberg et al., 2021). However, many TEds faced challenges due to inadequate digital competence and institutional support, leading to a varied exercise of agency among individuals — from solid resistance to online teaching to the transformation of teaching practices (Damşa et al., 2021).

Research also shows that teaching with digital tools affects the TEd's professional identity, knowledge, beliefs, and experience in addition to the exercise of agency. For example, Howard (2021) investigated university educators' lived experiences and beliefs when they were faced with transitioning from F2F instruction to a blended learning model; their professional identity was hindered by reduced self-efficacy, challenges to professional agency, and less qualitative interaction between teachers and students. According to Howard (2021), the professional identity of university educators has been shaken because they perceive that they have reduced autonomy and feel uncertain about their technical skills in the transition to a more ICT-based pedagogy. Chaaban et al. (2021) focused on how TEds exercised professional agency and renegotiated their identities due to personal, relational, and contextual factors when facing personal and professional challenges in the initial transition phase to emergent remote teaching. The results show that the TEds exercised different forms of agency, such as resistance, coping strategies, resilience, and transformative agency, and that their emotional experiences guided the various forms of agency that were exercised and thus influenced the consolidation or rejection of the renegotiated identities (Chaaban et al., 2021).

Moreover, when individual TEds encounter new challenges, studies indicate that the collective frequently assumes a significant role. With joint reflection and the enactment of collective agency, the group gains a sense of cohesion, solidarity, and collective power (Taylor et al., 2014) while also resisting and consolidating power (Green & Pappa, 2021). Damşa et al. (2021) explore how online teaching practices function and identify the challenges and supportive factors for effective teaching

during crises. The results show the importance of being part of a collective when transitioning to emergent teaching. The university educators attempted to create learning environments that facilitated knowledge transfer and interaction and sought to solve problems through self-help and support from colleagues and networks ((Damşa et al., 2021).

Navigating the digital Educational Landscape

Other studies show that despite transitioning to a blended curriculum and being required to adjust their routines and the professional skills and knowledge they use daily, the TEd holds on to their beliefs about teaching, learning, and education (Jonker et al., 2018). Kidd and Murray (2020) assert that TEds sustain qualitative practices by integrating traditional beliefs and values into the new context of an online space — a shift that, according to Carrillo and Flores (2020), significantly impacts the TEds' social, cognitive, and teaching presence. More specifically, *social presence* pertains to issues of belonging and participation, *cognitive presence* involves collaborative practices and experiential learning, and *teaching presence* addresses aspects such as learning design and facilitation. Furthermore, Dam (2021) investigated the discussions of university educators in terms of balancing the new circumstances and their pedagogical practices during the sudden shift to remote teaching and found that the discussions focused on compassion for student- and instructor autonomy. Compassion for their students involved their well-being and possible academic modifications. Instructor autonomy affords the TEds' with the agency to decide on implementing asynchronous versus synchronous remote instruction and the content of the instruction. Dam (2021) concludes that a positive relationship exists between autonomy and job satisfaction, which means that for TEds to achieve satisfaction in their work, they must have the autonomy to determine how to conduct their teaching and instruction.

Previous research shows that this not only affects the TEd's work but also the psycho-social circumstances of university staff and students (Mäkelä et al., 2022; Sahu, 2020). The pandemic created uncertainty and stress when coping with the new work context. Related to this, Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) emphasize how the sudden transition to remote teaching also became more complex from a learner's perspective, which placed new demands on the TEd. The learner's possibility to exercise agency, be flexible, make choices, and take responsibility for the learning process had changed; nevertheless, the TEd was expected to create an effective learning environment (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

As we continually undergo digital transformation, delving deeper into research on how individuals, including TEds, exercise agency becomes crucial. Researchers have previously emphasized the need to further investigate the impact that digitalization and digital technology in higher education has on individuals' beliefs and behavior (e.g., Castañeda & Selwyn, 2018). More specifically, there has been a call to explore the multifaceted nature of TEds' professional agency in digitalization and higher education (e.g., Hinostroza, 2020; Vähäsantenen et al., 2020). Understanding how individuals navigate and react to digital changes in educational settings can inform policies, practices, and professional development initiatives that effectively support educators in this evolving landscape.

Aim and Research Questions

As a way to discuss possible implications for professional development, this study investigates manifestations of professional agency in TEds' perceptions of being in an acute transition to remote work in the first semester of 2020.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How is professional agency manifested in the TEds' perceptions?
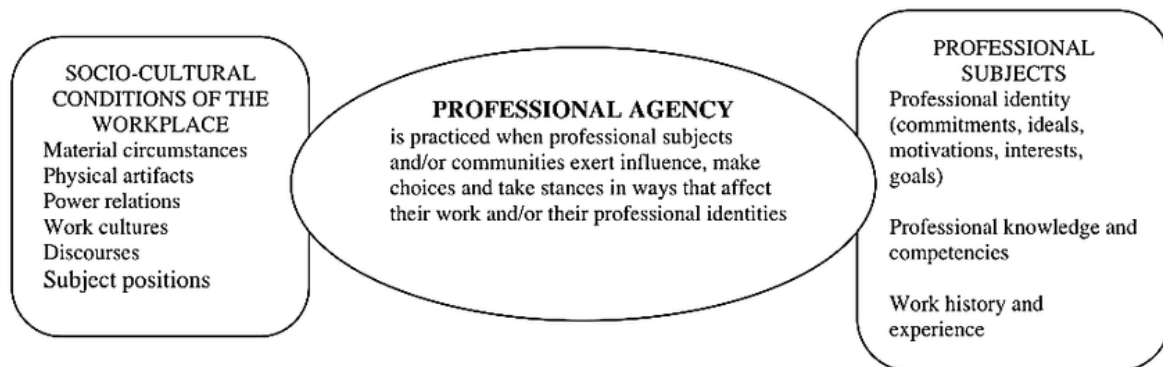- What are the possible implications for the TEds' professional development?

Theoretical Framework

This section describes the theory of the subject-centered sociocultural (SCSC) approach to professional agency developed by Eteläpelto et al. (2013), which is used as an analytical framework in the study to analyze manifestations of professional agency and renegotiations of professional identity. Using the SCSC approach means understanding agency as exercised and as an ongoing process, relationally and mutually constituting a social reality that is contextual, situational, temporal, and volatile (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). The exercise of agency aims to reach a congruence between a person's beliefs and actions (Green & Pappa, 2021), and thus always has a purpose. This purpose can vary from resistance to transformation (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2015) and is influenced by sociocultural conditions in ways that are constraining as well as resourced.

In investigating the TEd's manifestations of professional agency in their perceptions of being in an acute transition, the SCSC definition of professional agency is used as a theoretical and analytical tool (Figure 1). These manifestations take the form of what the TEd chooses to state in a semi-structured interview — utterances based on what the individual has appropriated about their professional life, influenced by individual and sociocultural conditions. Here, professional agency is understood as something that "professional subjects and communities exercise when they exert influence, make choices, and take stances affecting their work and/or their professional identities" (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61). An understanding operationalized by Green and Pappa (2021) is as follows: to *exert influence* relates to the power dynamics at the workplace and the possibility of influencing structures or relations. The exercise of agency is often based upon needs or desires. *Making choices* relates to agency exercised within the perceived professional space framed by sociocultural conditions and structures and the individual's capacity. Therefore, the exercise of agency is understood as free will and as being intentional. Finally, *taking stances* is linked to the professional subject's values, convictions, and beliefs, which are part of their identity and related to what motivates them.

Figure 1.

Definition of professional agency within a subject-centered sociocultural framework.

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONDITIONS OF THE WORKPLACE
Material circumstances
Physical artifacts
Power relations
Work cultures
Discourses
Subject positions

PROFESSIONAL AGENCY is practiced when professional subjects and/or communities exert influence, make choices and take stances in ways that affect their work and/or their professional identities

PROFESSIONAL SUBJECTS
Professional identity (commitments, ideals, motivations, interests, goals)

Professional knowledge and competencies

Work history and experience

Note. From Eteläpelto et al. (2013 p.61).

Therefore, in capturing the manifestations of professional agency, the professional subject and the sociocultural conditions are analytically separated but viewed as mutually constitutive. This action is with the knowledge that it does not necessarily reflect the actual situation but rather is a way to investigate how these interrelate by separating them.

The exercise of professional agency is, according to SCSC, intertwined with the professional subject's work-related identity, as in, their professional sense of self. *Professional identity* is defined as the individual's values, ideals, beliefs, interests, and ideas about who they want to be as a professional, with goals, ambitions, and future wishes (Eteläpelto et al., 2014). An identity comprises the individual's sense of self and presentation of that self to the surrounding world (e.g., Day & Kington, 2008). The construction of a professional identity is multifaceted, dynamic, and socioculturally embedded, thus an interconnection between agency and identity. On the one hand, agency is exercised when the professional subject acts; this is the externalization of their identity, but on the other hand, agentic influence and (re)negotiation of identity are then also part of the continual shaping of their identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011). The professional's identity influences and internalizes agency; it is mediated through exercises of agency (Hökkä et al., 2017) and is activated and sustained by agency (Wilson & Deaney, 2010).

When investigating the TEds' manifestations of professional agency in a sudden switch to remote work, it is vital to consider how the TEd, the professional subject, exercises agency in the work context and in relation to professional identity. This identity is formed by ideals, motivations, commitments, et cetera and is interrelated with the sociocultural context. Professional identity influences the work practice, and transformations of the work practice place demands on (re)negotiations of the professional identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2014). When transitioning to remote work, negotiations of professional identity are most likely to happen given that university educators must adapt their work.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate TEds' perceptions of professional agency in their acute transition to remote work. This section describes the context and participants, data collection, analytical procedure, and ethical considerations.

The participants were 14 university-based TEds working in Sweden's primary teacher education program for grades 4-6. They represent a variety of disciplines and departments. See Table 1 for further information on the participants. Given that the TEds have several tasks, Table 2 shows the participants' tasks during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1.

Information about participating TEds

	Number of TEds (n=14)
Female	9
Male	5
Age range (years)	30–60
Mean teaching experience (years)	12.6
PhD	
BA in Education	9
Both a PhD and a BA	13
	8

Table 2.

A summary of the TEds' tasks at the time

Tasks	Number of TEds (n=14)
Teaching	12
Tutoring	4
Doing research work	3
Commissioned training	2
Practicum visits	3
Part of pedagogical-technological support team	1

The four ethical principles based on (a) respect, (b) competence, (c) responsibility, and (d) integrity have been upheld throughout the study (Swedish Research Council, 2017). The participants had previously taken part in a 2017 study on TEds and the digitalization of teacher education, during which they consented to be contacted for a follow-up interview. The author subsequently contacted the participants via email, inviting them to an online follow-up interview to collect new empirical data regarding the experiences of being a TEd during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. The email included an information letter and a consent form outlining the study's details and the procedures for participation, explicitly stating that the interviews would be conducted via Zoom recordings. Additionally, it was communicated that the participants' names and the educational institution would be anonymized, and that participation was voluntary and could be terminated at

any time. Fourteen participants of the original 18 TEds were willing to participate. The drop in number was due to having other assignments, a workplace change, or being on sick leave.

The interviews were carried out (in the time frame) from May 10 to July 2, 2020. Prior to the interviews, the participants verbally consented to participating and being recorded. Data was collected from five universities in Sweden that differ in contextual conditions: the number of students, the structure of the 4-6 program, geographical location, and the profile of the university and campus. The empirical material has been anonymized and processed in compliance with the guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2017) solely for research purposes. Furthermore, the data have been stored by Högskolan Väst's storage and archival practices, which adhere to the Swedish Data Protection Authority and The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Law 2018:218). This qualitative study does not claim generalizability given the small sample size and the educational context consisting of one country. The objective is to reveal insights that could further the understanding of TEd professional agency in the change processes in higher education.

Due to the lockdown, all interviews were carried out using a video communication tool (Zoom) on a laptop, with the duration of the interview lasting between 35 and 55 minutes (in total, 667 min, 162 pages of transcription). The participants were emailed an informed consent form to be returned before the interview, and they also gave verbal consent on record at the beginning of the interview. When unable to do face-to-face interviews, online interviews are the closest method with audio-visual interactivity and textual synchronicity. Online interviews have advantages when the geographical distance is not decisive for participation, and the digital tools allow video recordings when interviewing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers can review and explore the interview further later. However, some disadvantages are that the participant is required to download and install the software, the technology must function smoothly, and confidentiality must be maintained, which can be compromised online.

During the interviews, no technology failures occurred; all participants had access to the videoconferencing tool, and all were familiar with its functionalities and how to use them. In this study, the semi-structured interview guide was designed to investigate the following topics, starting with one overarching question regarding the task, the workday, interaction with students, the objective of the teacher education program, and teacher education's place in society. The decision

was made to not ask the participants about their exercise of agency explicitly using the theoretical lens for the study. Instead, the interview guide focused on the changed circumstances of being a TEd in times of transition. Asking questions about agency could have resulted more prepared answers and thus not spontaneous. The participants were interviewed in Swedish, and at the end of the interview, they were able to add to or comment on the topics discussed. All 14 interviews were transcribed verbatim.

The data have been analyzed using qualitative content analysis with a directed approach, according to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), when investigating manifestations of professional agency in the TEds' perceptions of being in an acute transition to remote work. A directed approach is suitable when an existing theory or theoretical concept is the basis for organizing the initial analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The SCSC definition of professional agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) (Figure 1) is used in this study to create the initial coding matrix with the categories (a) agency related to work and (b) agency related to professional identity in identifying manifestations of professional agency, when the individual makes choices, takes stances, or influences their work context and professional identity. Like Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) process of analysis, the analysis started with reviewing all transcripts carefully several times, identifying and highlighting all text units that appear to be manifestations of agency, as in, why and when the TEd exerted influence, made choices, or took stances (using the software NVivo 12). The units differed in length. The identified units were condensed and abstracted into codes — the manifested content — using the two initial coding categories: agency related to work and agency related to professional identity. This process of condensing codes and categorizing was thorough and iterative. Each code placed in the two initial categories was examined to determine if subcategories were needed. Codes with similar content and that relate to the same variation of the phenomenon were combined into a subcategory. Given that the two initial coding categories contain a variety of dimensions and aspects, all codes could be organized within these. Table 3 shows the final categories and subcategories.

Table 3.

The final categories and subcategories

Category	Subcategory — manifestations of agency
Creating professional balance — professional agency related to work	Maneuvering through blurred contexts Expanding the professional space Coping with the "good enough"
Forming the professional self — agency related to professional identity	Shaping the professional appearance Asserting a professional presence Retaining professional pride and a professional role

Ultimately, this resulted in manifestations of agency that took the form of maneuvering through blurred contexts, shaping the professional appearance, and influencing factors such as demands for accessibility from others. Representative excerpts illustrate the content and meaning of each subcategory in the Results section. The excerpts are labeled with the interview number corresponding to the interviewed participant.

Results

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the TEds were restricted to working from home using information and communication technology (ICT) tools. Sweden did not issue a ban on being at the workplace; however, the pandemic created a strong incentive for the TEd to follow the recommendations regarding maintaining social distancing. The results should be understood in terms of these circumstances. The TEds manifestations of professional agency are presented in two categories based on the two dimensions of professional agency in SCSC: (a) *Creating professional balance* — agency related to work and (b) *Forming the professional self* — agency related to professional identity.

Creating Professional Balance — Agency Related to Work

The TEds' manifestations of professional agency in an emergency work context, as a way to create a professional balance when the sociocultural conditions change, are manifested in three

subcategories: (a) maneuvering through blurred contexts, (b) expanding the professional space, and (c) coping with the "good enough."

Maneuvering through Blurred Contexts

This subcategory addresses how the TEds expressed their professional agency when coping with the increasingly blurred boundaries between the personal and professional elements of the day and the intertwining of contexts. Professional agency was exercised to manage the new screen-controlled working environment and respond to expectations of availability and attendance. Some influencing factors were personal interests and needs, feelings of inclusion, and the screen as a gatekeeper for work.

The participants exercised agency by creating personalized routines and making choices according to their interests and needs. This included questions about how they planned/organized the working day and tried to create a work–life balance. The opportunity to, for example, avoid commuting, be able to drop children off at preschool in the morning, exercise, and choose what was currently interesting and motivating: "A whole day to just work on my own is a great advantage" (1). On the other hand, when the layout of the day changed, participants experienced greater personal responsibility for ensuring that they were not working all the time: "I can work by myself in that way; otherwise, I just keep going all the time . . . I can make my own decisions and say, 'Now I will work and now I will take a break'." (3). At home, the individual TEd needed to be able to set boundaries for themselves in order to feel well.

When the demarcations for work became more fluid, the participants were expected to be informed and available. In addition, the number of meetings increased — they followed one after another — as well as emails: "We are drowning in email" (14) was one comment. The participants perceived that they were required to be constantly available for management, colleagues, and students; they explained that the ease of being just a screen away raised the expectation to attend all work meetings. However, the participants exercised agency when managing demands from others; they made certain choices based on whether they were crucial for managing the immediate task at hand, who expected/demanded something of them, and their agenda.

Regarding the TEds' need to still feel included and part of a workforce, and to communicate and collaborate with colleagues, the participants themselves chose who and when to communicate and

collaborate with. The participants mentioned that they chose to make fewer new contacts, opting instead to keep those they had already established: "You stay in the same old constellations, but not many new ones are created" (6). The same also applied to spontaneous contacts; those were fewer via the digital space because the participants felt that the screen created an emotional barrier. It was more difficult to connect on a more personal level. The screen created a barrier to conversation, making it more challenging to tap into or keep up a lively dialogue. However, at the same time, this provided the opportunity to have a more withdrawn approach to meetings and, for example, multitask while attending a meeting.

Expanding the Professional Space

This subcategory represents the TEds' perceptions of exercising professional agency when following the recommendation to work off campus and framing the "new" professional space. Factors such as the organization's recommendations, society's requirements, the TEd's sense of autonomy and solidarity, and the educator's well-being delineated a screen-demanding and connected professional space.

When the ability to choose one's workspace on campus changed and became limited, it was perceived as unfavorable for most TEds. The participants expressed foremost that they followed the recommendation to maintain a physical distance from campus to show solidarity with their colleagues, avoid exposing others to infection, and minimize the risk of becoming ill. The exercise of agency now became a matter of choosing to do their work in the best way possible so they could gain from the new workspace. Working remotely made it possible to choose where to work and spatial flexibility. As long as the internet connection was dependable, the participant could choose to attend workplace meetings wherever was most suitable for them: "It is a freedom, sometimes we have had our Zoom meetings on our phones in the woods, and that is a luxury in a way to be able to do that" (5). The participants explained that this increased job satisfaction; they were able to choose a less noisy and stressful workspace and, at the same time, not receive comments and questions from colleagues or management about their physical attendance at work. Further, participants in a risk group could now choose to be at home full time, still do their jobs, and feel included in a way they may not have felt before.

Some participants returned to campus after a couple weeks, exerting influence by using their perceived autonomy concerning remote work and COVID-19 restrictions. They chose to do this because the campus was not formally off-limits and believed the conditions for maintaining social distance at work were good. They said, "We are not locked out of the campus, so we are a group who have alternated between working from home and on campus" (7), felt there was a professional space for using their autonomy, and they also took advantage of how others were doing the same. These TEds mentioned different motives for being at work, such as all their work material was there, they had poor broadband at home, and they wanted to work in a professional setting, but this also included personal reasons, such as the importance of delimiting work and leisure for their well-being.

Coping with the "Good Enough"

The TEds expressed professional agency concerning switching to meeting students online and trying to be responsive to management. They exercised agency to set the bar for themselves in their new circumstances and still maintain learning, teaching, and ethical ideals. Influencing factors were the individual's experience and knowledge of remote teaching, group agreements, and digital support.

According to the participants, the work directives from management at the five universities were that teaching should be "good enough": "Got signals from management to do the best we can now, it is like we have to realize that quality will suffer, our classes will not be what we want, of course, but make the best of it." (1). It was up to individual TEds to set the bar for themselves. They decided when to make an effort and what level of excellence in teaching was expected: what is good enough for me? When trying to exercise agency to cope and feel in control, the participants structured qualitative teaching differently and with different motives. Some participants chose to use synchronous remote instruction, as in, they live-streamed their lectures, an approach that they perceived was, as close as possible to teaching on campus: "I have been able to teach my Zoom classes in the same way as I would have taught my regular classes in the classroom" (11). This was a choice based on few alterations; you could use existing material, what was familiar, and the TEd could rely on their experience and existing knowledge. Other participants decided to use asynchronous remote instruction and try out new things. They prepared new teaching materials,

pre-recorded lectures, and adjusted the instruction, thus making it more suitable for online teaching and allowing exploration.

The participants also had to deal with new ethical and instructional challenges in the remote mode when doing a "good enough" job. To meet these challenges, the community of TEds became valuable to the individual in approaching what was new. For example, there was the ethical aspect of having all teaching online concerning recordings and integrity: "My colleagues and I discuss this a lot, about asking for permission to record a seminar or when I lecture" (12). Here, the community of TEds made a joint decision on what mattered, which was perceived to help the individual TEd. The individual used the support from the community to take stances and respond to new conditions. Another challenge mentioned was the creation of digital exams: "It is a fact that we need to re-think exams, and that is time-consuming, and it is not legally secure; [but] we have to handle these issues anyway" (14). Here, the perception was that it was left up to the group of TEds to deal with this, with little time and less support from management.

In summary, navigating through the ambiguity of contexts involves the TEds asserting their professional autonomy amidst the merging of personal and professional realms, adapting to the demands of remote work while maintaining a sense of control and balance. Despite the challenges, educators exercise agency by creating personalized routines, choosing workspaces, setting standards for teaching quality, and striving to ensure effective learning experiences for students while grappling with new ethical and instructional dilemmas in remote mode. The TEds engaged in collective discussions within their community to address emerging challenges, highlighting the importance of collaboration and shared decision-making in steering the transition to online teaching.

Forming the Professional Self — Agency Related to Professional Identity

This category represents the TEds' expressing (re)negotiations related to a professional "screen" identity when trying to face a new professional working arena, form a professional self, and are manifested in three subcategories: (a) shaping the professional appearance, (b) asserting a professional presence, and (c) retaining professional pride and a professional role.

Shaping the Professional Appearance ("Game Face On")

As the daily work took place via a screen, participants said the amount of thought they put into their appearance depended on whom they were talking to, how they appeared on the screen, and what signals they sent out: who they became through the screen. Negotiations of their professional identity were exercised to continue to be seen as a professional and shape their image. Influencing factors were feelings of control, being viewed as a professional, and the functions of the digital artifacts.

The participants explained how they now thought more carefully about who they became on screen and made choices to control this, exercising agency. They talked about putting on their professional selves and creating a professional surface: "I put on nice clothes and makeup . . . try to make it look as professional as possible" (10). The participants said that they wanted to be able to regulate their image and be professional and private on their terms. Other examples given were how they chose to position themselves on the screen, how much of their face should be displayed, the distance to the screen, et cetera. The participants also said that they chose to use the university's background template to show that they were representatives of the university. In some cases, the digital device caused the background to malfunction, which in turn caused the TEd to feel uneasy. However, for some participants, appearance was not taken into consideration in the same way as long as they could communicate: "I am probably seen a bit like a clown, but I am most concerned that the students will not grasp what is so important for teaching and learning" (8). These TEds used the screen primarily to make their voice heard and get the message/content out.

Asserting a Professional Presence

Being a TEd on-screen affects the spatial framing of the practice. In a lecture hall, you can scan the room and control the field of vision, and the interaction between TEd and student is in focus. Using the screen, the ability for TEds to project a professional presence and choose how close they wanted to be to the students had changed. Negotiations were conducted to foster self-esteem, promote professionalism, and establish a teacher's presence. Influencing factors were students' agency/agency of others, feelings of doubt, and the changed presence of the TEd.

The TEds had to manage their work differently, which now relied on screens, as the balance between close proximity and far distance, as well as the subjects' positions, had changed. The participants pointed out how it is not possible to affect the other person's image or what they

prefer to show/do during lectures or meetings. Here, a participant gives examples of the agency of others:

> Children turn up; animals turn up. I had a student who ate every time we had a seminar, and the last time, he even brushed his teeth at the seminar . . . it is pretty disturbing for me as an instructor, trying to make contact with a screen. (14)

Currently, no digital rules exist for what is customary in front of the computer; the individual TEd now regulates this. The participants exercised agency in various ways, for example, by making choices and taking stances on how to frame the lecture in a way that felt reasonable to them, find ways to prompt students to participate and regulate the learning situation in a new context.

In a classroom/lecture hall, established rules inform about what is acceptable, but on the screen and in the blurred boundaries between formal and informal, the rules need to be set by the TEd. The participants gave as an example how they felt and acted when looking at a black screen — as in, when students select "camera off" mode thus choosing not to show their faces — and described how they thought about tackling it. The students' act of turning of their camera prompted the participants to doubt their ability to teach, and the participants also described a feeling of loneliness when talking to black screens. In addition, the participants explained how not receiving any response or confirmation from the students created an emotional distance.

Retaining Professional Pride and a Professional Role

Coping with new working conditions led TEds to reflect upon and make compromises in how to become the teachers they aspired to be. (Re) negotiations of the professional identity were exercised while trying to feel proud and comfortable in the teacher role. Influencing factors were beliefs about teaching and learning as well as attitudes toward change.

Several participants said that they did what was required but at the expense of their professional pride. Even if the TEds felt that the requirements from management were surmountable, inner demands were placed on them as teachers while still conducting qualitative teaching for the students. One science TEd chose to stage what they usually do (in the real life classroom scenario), thus taking a stand for what they believed was necessary for the students' learning, but in the end, they hesitated and capitulated because it is not feasible digitally. For the TEd, this ended in feelings

of guilt and the need for them to find creative solutions to problems, effort, and extra work. Another participant remarked, "This will be a second-class program; it will not be as good as usual, but under the circumstances, we have no choice" (3). The participants adapted to the changed situation, using self-management to, for example, make choices about prioritizing tasks and managing time and stress: nevertheless, it meant the TEds had qualms about what they were able to offer the students.

The participants also mentioned feeling guilty for not being able to develop what they considered to be the most essential skills and knowledge. They also mentioned how the changed situation affected their views on their professional role and perceived strengths, feeling that the role of the TEd had been "flattened" because they had previously thrived on and used the dynamic of the physical room as they taught. The negotiations that the TEds have had to make are now made at the expense of who they believed themselves to be and wanted to be as a teacher.

In contrast, some chose to see the transition as fruitful for the TEds' sense of professionalism and themselves, displaying a more positive attitude: "We find ourselves in some kind of chaos right now, which I, in a way, I like because I think that something good can come of this that we have somehow become forced into" (7). Their professional identity as teachers remained somewhat intact, and they thought that when coping with something new, new knowledge and skills could develop. Another participant also talked about using the transition to position oneself as a digital teacher in the community: "I try to make myself as indispensable as possible here through the choices I make because I know that few make those choices, but we have to have it, the students have to acquire certain skills" (4). The TEd expresses a combination of professional ambition and responsibility toward the students, where the TEd strives to develop and promote digital teaching methods to ensure the students' success.

In summary, the TEds discussed the conscious effort put into presenting themselves professionally on-screen, exercising agency over their image when forming the professional self. The shift to online teaching challenged traditional spatial dynamics, leading to negotiations regarding teacher–student interactions and maintaining professional esteem. Despite the challenges, the TEds reflected on their teaching roles, balancing inner demands, demands the TEd places on themselves, with external expectations, expectations from the students, the university or the society, while

adapting to digital teaching methods, which had an impact on their professional pride and sense of identity.
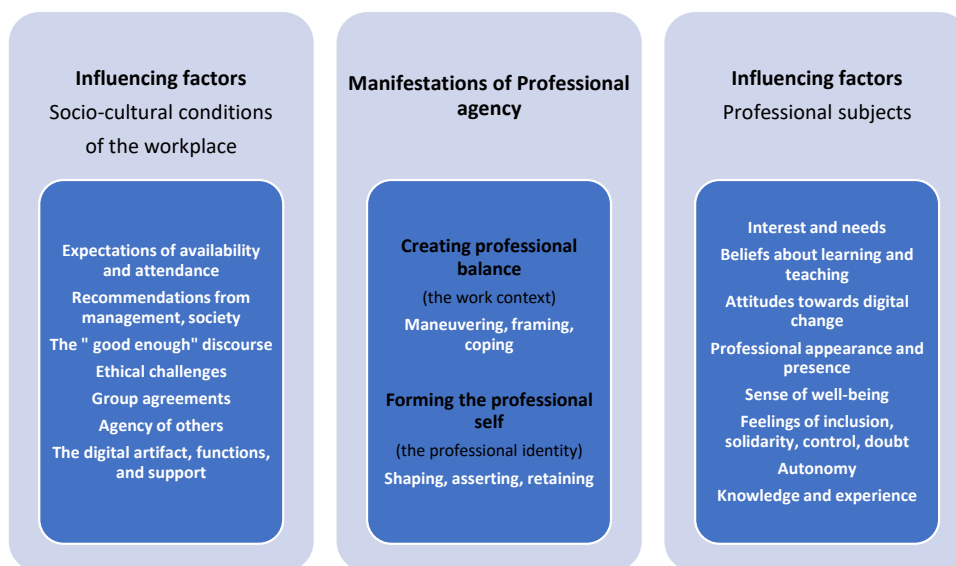
Analysis and Discussion

This study aimed to investigate professional agency manifested in TEds' perceptions of being in an acute transition and the possible implications for their professional development to better prepare for what the future holds. The result is interpreted by using the SCSC approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), which involves how agency and identity are exercised (a) in relation to the work and (b) in relation to their professional identity (see column "Manifestations of professional agency" in Figure 2).

Figure 2 summarizes the manifestations of agency and the salient influencing factors that frame the exercise of agency in the Results section. In the figure, agency and the influencing factors should be understood as mutually constitutive.

Figure 2.

A summary of the manifestations of agency in an acute transition to remote teaching

Note. Manifestations of professional agency in the two categories, the work context and professional identity, are based on Eteläpelto et al. (2013, p. 61).

When being required to handle an acute transformation of work, the analysis of this study shows that, in the work context, the TEd exercises agency for *creating a professional balance* (Figure 2), a balance between, for example, others' expectations, recommendations, and directives, and personal attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. It is about the individual TEd positioning themselves to gain control over the digital medium, working through the medium, and using their autonomy when handling the new circumstances, but foremost, it is about feeling good about oneself. This is in line with studies on the implementation of other educational policies within teacher education; TEds find ways to exercise agency despite being in top-managed and performative work contexts, which can be expressed, for example, as a more innovative kind of teaching, or of resistance, by actively transforming policies into something practically feasible in the teaching situation (Bartlett et al., 2017).

When control and support structures are perceived to be further away or changed, the results show that this enables the individual to exercise agency while creating new "institutional" conditions for their work and well-being. However, at the same time, the TEds were required to be able to define what "good enough" meant for them — both for the professional work to be carried out and for the image of themselves as professionals. Hence, a space for interpretation and action emerged — a professional space that could influence the quality of teaching the student receive, as the TEds felt legitimized to lower expectations and exercise their agency in various ways. It is worth noting that different forms of agency was a response to the TEd's new work and life situation, including resistance (e.g., expanding the professional space), coping (e.g., coping with the good enough), and transformation (e.g., shaping the professional appearance). As Chaaban et al. (2021) also concluded, the participating TEds exercised agency and were active in taking charge of the new, but how they exercised agency differed between individuals, as well as within individuals, depending on the situation, emotional impact, and influencing factors.

Regarding teaching, the TEds' strategies ranged; some chose to do as little as possible to adapt their work differently, using old material, et cetera. Many of these participants have strong beliefs on teaching and learning, which were now difficult to follow (Jonker et al., 2018), which resulted in feelings of doubt and insecurity. Others had a transformative intention and perceived that they could transform the practice in terms of content/didactics through using digital resources by doing something new. The latter educators felt comfortable and in control and took advantage of the situation as a professional development opportunity to become more innovative and position

themselves within the community. Manifestations of agency are also affected by feelings of solidarity and group agreements, such as ethical dilemmas. However, the community of TEds was used to being responsive to new situational challenges. Together, they strove to improve working conditions by exercising a collective agency necessary for sustainable development (Hökkä et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2014).

The TEds exercise agency in forming the professional self (Figure 2), compromising, transforming the professional image, withholding presence and pride, and (re) negotiating their professional identity as an outcome of personal and professional tensions. Using a digital workspace has changed their field of vision, as they can now choose what to show. As Carrillo and Flores (2020) concluded in their study, how the TEd's presence is affected when transitioning to an online workplace prompts questions regarding the TEds' and students' praxis: what power relations are now visible? Who has control over the instruction and teaching? Moreover, what aspects of professional knowledge and professional identity are at play?

The results indicate that the shift from being in a physical space to an image on a screen made many TEds reflect and prioritize creating a professional surface and visual professionalism — the outward appearance of professionalism (including attire and behavior), as part of constructing their professional identity. Unlike Chaaban et al. (2021), negotiations of their professional identity in relation to the professional surface were mentioned, and the relationship between proximity and distance in creating professional encounters was reflected upon. Further, negotiations of the TEds' professional identity related to their professional surface and integrity are yet another facet of professional identity that adds to SCSC's conceptualization of professional agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

Projecting a professional identity is influenced and mediated by professional performance (Hökkä et al., 2017). The results show that the TEds exercised agency to maintain a professional teacher identity, as mainly "the transmitter of knowledge" and "the facilitator of student learning" (Jonker et al., 2018), which can be seen as a natural path given that the task of teaching was the primary challenge. The results also indicate that some TEds perceived themselves as "fellow students" due to being in a learning situation themselves and because the learning space had become more egalitarian. The TEds had to navigate between the inner demands of feeling qualified and skilled

combined with feelings of doubt while respecting their students' agency and digital regulations for work. Future studies would benefit from a focus on the professional surface as part of TEds' professional identity and its role in interacting with students via a screen, in addition to TEds being a role model and a bearer of the knowledge base.

This study contributes to understanding how professional agency is manifested in Teds' perceptions of being in an acute work transition, as well as what factors influence an individual's professional agency. The TEds exercised agency to frame a professional context, space, and identity when coping with an acute transition. In the study, manifestations of agency can be understood as moving between being professional and acting professionally — a framing of the relationship between the individual and the context. The study demonstrates that the changed professional context of an online space created a new professional practice that must consider the professional self. In the future, university educators' and TEds' exercise of agency and associated feelings should be supported by their work organizations, for example, by developing the digital infrastructure as well as supporting professional development. This can contribute to a greater sense of professional self and ownership of their development, adaptation, and flexibility toward what lies ahead. The present study shows sociocultural and subjective factors that influence TEds' agency, which can contribute to adapting future development efforts for all university staff/educators. Finally, the study contributes to understanding university educators' professional agency amidst changing hybrid work arrangements and ongoing digital transformation.

Acknowledgments

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