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## Reclaiming professional agency: Portuguese teachers' experiences amidst managerialist professionalism

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### ABSTRACT

The teaching profession has been increasingly subjected to a managerialist perspective of professionalism. Concurrently, neoliberal strategies redefine the nature of teachers' work, constrain teachers' agency and jeopardise their professional identities. In light of escalating bureaucratic pressures and diminishing professional autonomy, the imperative to explore paths for reinforcing teacher agency becomes paramount. Drawing on an ecological view of agency, the authors conceptualise teacher agency as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon. This paper seeks to identify how teachers enact their agency and to scrutinise the enablers and constraints of teacher agency, focusing on the life stories of 102 Portuguese teachers over the past five decades. Through a paradigmatic analysis the authors delve into the interplay of individual experiences, cultural contexts and structural influences in shaping teacher agency. Their findings underscore the importance of fostering teacher agency at multiple levels to uphold the integrity and efficacy of education systems amidst ongoing reforms.

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Teachers' agency; teaching profession; professionalism; life stories

## Introduction

In recent decades, a managerialist view of professionalism has predominated in the teaching profession. According to Sachs (2016), performance management and performance cultures are firmly rooted in the policies and practices of education systems and schools. In this performative context, with increasing demands for accountability, beliefs are no longer important; rather, it is the outputs that count, with performance indicators being seen as a way for student learning outcomes and teacher performance to be measured (Ball, 2003; Sachs, 2016). In a study developed by Lopes et al. (2023), it is stated that teacher competency frameworks, for instance, induce in themselves ways of being a teacher, which corresponds to the neoliberal governance strategy that redefines teachers' work. Chiang and Trezise (2021) argue that in order

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for the new demands to be accepted by teachers, governments create an institutionalised discourse to ensure teachers' governmentality. For instance, standards-based policies, prescribed curricula or standardised student assessment constantly challenge teachers' agency (Poulton, 2020). While managerialist systems may not necessarily aim to reduce teachers to passive policy implementers, they establish regulatory frameworks that shape professional norms and expectations in ways that may encourage self-regulation and alignment with external directives. However, this process is not purely deterministic; teachers may variously comply with, negotiate, or resist these frameworks, demonstrating agency within constraints. Thus, rather than viewing managerialist systems as straightforward mechanisms of control, it is more accurate to recognise them as part of a broader governance strategy that shapes professional identities through structural pressures and discursive influences (Foucault, 1991).

Top-down strategies are often politically motivated change processes driven by the government and passed down to schools – in contrast with internal, or bottom-up changes (Walland & Darlington, 2021). Top-down strategies, which treat teachers as implementation puppets, frequently fall short of cultivating ownership and dedication from teachers, which consequently restricts teachers' agency and jeopardises their professional identities (Lopes et al., 2023; Poulton, 2020; Wilcox & Lawson, 2018). In this line of thought, it is important to be aware of what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) called hyperactive professionalism when teachers are pushed to find quick-fix solutions that lead, for instance, to instantaneous gains in student achievement results. Torrance and Forde (2017) claim that 'a genuine reprofessionalisation of teaching' needs to promote 'teacher leadership and practitioner enquiry', as 'sets of practices based on the exercise of influence and agency on the part of the teacher' (Torrance & Forde, 2017, p. 123).

Teachers are regarded as the primary influencers in shaping educational policy, implementing these policies within their classrooms, and directly shaping the learning environment for students (Li et al., 2021; Priestley et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the interaction between policy and pedagogy is rather complex. Bernstein's (1990, 2000) notion of pedagogic device, particularly the distinction between the official recontextualising field (ORF) – controlled by governments, policymakers and curriculum developers who determine official knowledge – and the pedagogical recontextualising field (PRF) – shaped by teacher educators, researchers and teachers, who interpret and implement curricula in classrooms – provides a useful lens to understand how policy intentions are translated into classroom practices. It helps us reflect on how policy shapes pedagogy, how teachers navigate constraints, and how agency can emerge even within structured systems control. Within a context where bureaucracy, standardisation and accountability increase the demand for teachers' work while reducing their professional autonomy, it becomes crucial to search for possibilities to '(re)turn teacher agency' (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 2) and counteract excessive top-down.

The last 50 years have witnessed the development of democracy in Portugal. During these 50 years, the country has made significant progress, with education being a central aspect of development. Teachers have been key elements in this process, being real agents of change. However, the Portuguese educational system, as well as many others around the globe, has witnessed significant changes that have an impact on teachers' work and, consequently, the way they enact their agency (Darling-Hammond, 2021). According to

Flores (2020), among the key aspects that characterise the teaching profession in Portugal in the last decades are the deterioration of teachers' working conditions, precarious job situations, the lowering of teachers' social image, salary cuts, teacher surplus and the ageing of the teaching workforce.

The objective of this paper is to analyse and understand how agency can be identified in teachers and what can enable or constrain it, considering the life stories of Portuguese teachers and considering the impact of socio-political changes throughout the last 50 years. Considering the main objective, this paper is underpinned by two research questions: How have Portuguese teachers enacted their agency over the last 50 years? And what factors enable or constrain the development of agency?

## Reflecting on teachers' agency

Globalisation has led countries all over the world to implement educational reforms focused on elevating the quality of education, which has highlighted the role of teachers as frontline workers in achieving this goal, positioning them as agents of change (Cong-Lem, 2024; Fullan, 2015). Teachers play a crucial role in navigating complex human situations and their professional agency is widely recognised as indispensable. So, consequently, teacher agency has emerged as pivotal in comprehending teachers' actions, including their reactions to policy reforms, encompassing their decisions, objectives and beliefs throughout their careers (Rushton et al., 2024). However, it is possible to state that in the last decades, educational goals have shifted away from focusing on preparing active, reflexive and engaged citizens towards objectives of career preparation and economic gain (Giroux, 2017; Westheimer, 2022). This perspective of education as a key driver of national economic competitiveness has resulted in an increasing emphasis on student performance metrics, particularly through international assessments such as PISA, which, when perceived as unsatisfactory, often lead to intensified scrutiny and accountability pressures on teachers – the ones who are usually blamed for low outcomes. So, one can say that social and political aspects significantly impact teachers' work and lives. In this conjecture, with a focus on a performance-oriented culture, it is particularly relevant to examine teacher agency (Cong-Lem, 2021; Priestley et al., 2012).

The concept of agency has been studied from several perspectives. For instance, psychological perspectives tend to understand agency as a characteristic of a person, as an individual characteristic, focusing on cognitive, emotional and motivational factors that drive intentional actions (Bandura, 2001), while sociological perspectives often emphasise the relationship between the person and the environment, focusing on the structure–agency interaction, where individuals shape structures while also being shaped by them (Bourdieu, 1990; Giddens, 1982); perspectives resulting from pragmatism (Dewey, 1938; Mead, 1934), like socio-cultural perspectives, mainly focus on the person's temporary engagement with the environment, interpreting agency as a potential to act through the environment (Fu & Clarke, 2017; G. Biesta et al., 2015; Lopes et al., 2023; Leijen et al., 2020, 2022).

Based on the work developed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Biesta and Tedder (2007) developed an ecological view of agency in which agency depends on the interaction of the actors' capacities and the ecological conditions in which their actions take place. According to these authors, 'actors always act by means of their environment

rather than simply in their environment so that the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors' (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) reconceptualised agency as 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement' (p. 963) since it can be informed through three dimensions: iterational, projective and practical-evaluative. In other words, by teachers' pasts, but also oriented towards their future and their willingness to take action in the present (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestly et al., 2015). The capacity of teachers is not an immutable internal attribute that can be transferred between situations, but rather an ongoing accomplishment when individuals actively interact with their environments (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Teachers' agency 'denotes a "quality" of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves' (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 136).

The concept of teachers' agency is generally defined as an 'emergent phenomenon – something that is achieved by individuals, through the interplay of personal capacities and the resources, affordances and constraints of the environment by means of which individuals act' (Priestley et al., 2016, p. 19). Teachers' agency can be described as commitment, intentionality and influence, as well as resisting or changing existing practices; in other words, it is teachers' ability to shape, judge and control their work based on their situated educational practices, involving knowledge, skill, beliefs and values (Leijen et al., 2022; Lambirth et al., 2019, Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2006). In this sense, agency implies the possibility to act differently, and such competence is shaped and enabled by the environment, which also highlights the importance of critical consciousness in framing agency (Lopes et al., 2023; Fu and Clarke, 2017).

Besides the temporal dimension, space can also play a pivotal role when reflecting on teachers' agency. According to Rushton and Bird (2023), understanding teacher agency through 'a spatial lens means that agency is formed by complex and relational interactions with places and people, over time' (2023, p. 4), which is consistent with the idea of teacher agency as an emergent phenomenon achieved through others, and where there are spaces that create the necessary conditions for that possibility (Rushton & Bird, 2023).

In summary, for this paper we conceptualise teacher agency as i) something that people achieve or do, rather than something people possess; ii) teacher agency is understood as being dependent on conditions and qualities, including cultural, material, relational resources and people's ability to use them; and iii) teacher agency is recognised as temporally and spatially situated (Priestley & Drew, 2019; Priestly et al., 2015; Rushton & Bird, 2023).

### ***Enabling teachers' agency***

According to Leijen et al. (2019), supporting teacher agency requires a multi-dimensional approach that operates at the individual, cultural and structural levels. Rather than viewing teachers as passive recipients of policy, this perspective recognises that agency is shaped by teachers' interactions with their professional environments. As mentioned before, in a scenario of educational reforms aligned with neoliberal and managerialist ideologies unfolding around the globe, the role of teachers is increasingly examined, highlighting the importance of

acknowledging teachers not as simply policy actors, but as agents in adapting or resisting educational policies (Cong-Lem, 2021; Liu et al., 2020). These reforms often prioritise standardisation, accountability and data-driven performance over pedagogical autonomy and relational aspects of teaching, reflecting a broader worldwide trend in which teachers are seen as implementers of policy rather than autonomous professionals, challenging their sense of agency and professional identity (Sachs, 2016). However, the extent to which teachers can exercise agency depends on various factors that either enable or constrain their professional autonomy.

The degree of agency teachers experience in their professional contexts affects their response to change, as well as impacts the extent to which they shape their professional practices (Poulton, 2020). Teacher agency is not a fixed trait but a dynamic and context-dependent process that evolves over time. Tao and Gao (2017) highlight that teacher agency is a dynamic process influenced by teachers' beliefs, their personal goals and their professional knowledge. Also, Benesch (2018) states that teachers' agency emerges in interaction with regulation, and it is a 'discursive process that joins teachers' professional training, their personal beliefs, and institutional policies' (p. 61). In this regard, teachers' agency does not exist isolated, but emerges through engagement with broader institutional and policy structures.

Lopes et al. (2023) argue that teachers' agency occurs interlinked with teachers' opportunities for research, leadership and professional development. In the same line of thought, Cong-Lem (2021) relates the development of teacher agency with the opportunities teachers have for their professional development, reflexive practices and professional collaboration. Research suggests that engaging in research, leadership and collaborative inquiry allows teachers to develop greater professional autonomy and decision-making power (Fu & Clarke, 2017; Leat et al., 2015; Leijen et al., 2019). In this sense, agency is not only about individual capacity, but also about the systemic conditions that support or hinder professional growth.

Building on these perspectives, Cong-Lem (2021) identifies several enabling and constraining factors that influence the enactment of teacher agency. These are clustered into three groups of factors that impact teachers' agency and which interplay dynamically: personal, social/relational and contextual factors. Personal factors relate to personal beliefs, values, background, identities and emotions, teachers' knowledge, skills and prior experiences (Benesch, 2018; Cong-Lem, 2021). Social/relational factors include relationships with colleagues and students and local social discourses (Cong-Lem, 2021). Contextual factors include institutional policies, power relations, socio-linguistic backgrounds and cultural values (Cong-Lem, 2021). Cong-Lem emphasises that these factors do not operate in isolation. Teacher agency emerges from the dynamic interaction between personal capabilities, social interactions and the broader context. For instance, a teacher with strong beliefs and identity may still struggle to enact agency if constrained by rigid school policies or a lack of collaboration among peers.

This complexity is captured in the ecological framework used in the review, highlighting that agency is not merely an individual attribute but a situated, mediated process

influenced by multiple overlapping systems. These three types of factors will frame the data analysis of this study.

## Methodology

In Portugal, where this study is being conducted, the generation of teachers now retiring has lived through one of the most important periods in the development of the Portuguese education system. After the 1974 Revolution, Portugal experienced a significant change: from a dictatorship to a democracy. In the decades that followed, there was an increase in access to education, lower rates of illiteracy and increasing equity, which empowered teachers as key agents of change. However, with the arrival of the new millennium, Portugal increasingly adopted educational reforms based on international and neoliberal trends (Lopes, 2022). These reforms translated in an increased focus on centralised performance metrics, external accountability measures, national curriculum standards and teacher evaluation systems. While apparently aimed at improving efficiency and educational quality, these shifts ultimately weakened professional autonomy, introduced bureaucratic constraints and repositioned teachers as deliverers of policy rather than reflective practitioners. Therefore, it is important to capture the accumulated experiential knowledge of these teachers. The changes experienced by teachers in the last 50 years – for instance, curriculum restructuring, school massification, the professionalisation of teaching, increased centralisation, external evaluation mechanisms, increased bureaucratisation, salary freezes, and the depreciation of teaching in public discourse – can be read in several published studies (Lopes & Pereira, 2012; Lopes et al., 2016), but it is quite rare to collect testimonies of teachers who are retiring. According to Rabin and Smith: ‘It is common for long-time teachers to retire or leave the profession without sharing their stories’ (2012, p. 382). However, life stories that relate to the span of a professional life provide insight into the personal variables of professional development and the social, political, curricular and pedagogical conditions that produce and generate different ‘periods of practice’ (Goodson & Ümarik, 2019, p. 592) during that span.

The main objective of the study is to analyse and understand how agency is achieved by Portuguese teachers and what can enact or constrain it. To accomplish this, we have focused on the life stories of 102 Portuguese teachers from different educational levels, subject areas and regions of origin, whose professional careers began between 1973 and 1983. The professional way of being that underlies this work is based on the profile of a teacher who is committed and open to change, which is directly related to the idea of teacher agency. The data were collected in the scope of the funded project *Fifty Years of Teaching: Factors of Change and Intergenerational Dialogues* (FYT-ID), through semi-directive interviews aimed at creating narratives about the professional lives of the teachers interviewed. A paradigmatic analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995) was carried out, which made it possible to gain insights into the teaching paths in everyday life and their articulation with personal and contextual aspects.

## Participants

The 102 participants in this study were school teachers who began their professional careers between 1973 and 1983 and belonged to all levels of education (Table 1): Pre-school (18%); 1st cycle of basic education (30%); 2nd cycle of basic education (20%); and 3rd cycle of basic education and secondary education (32%). The majority of the participants were women (women: 81%; men: 19%), a general characteristic of the teaching profession, which is mainly composed of women. In addition, the 102 participants included retired teachers (54%) and teachers who were still working (46%) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Participants' characterisation.

Participants	Percentage of teachers
<b>Level of education</b>	
Pre-school	18%
1st cycle of basic school (1st to 4th grade)	30%
2nd cycle of basic school (5th to 6th grade)	20%
3rd cycle of basic school and secondary school (7th to 12th grade)	32%
<b>Sex</b>	
Women	81%
Men	19%
<b>Professional situation</b>	
Working	46%
Retired	54%

To recruit the participants of this study, each member of the FYT-ID project identified a teacher who was considered, by them, a committed teacher and who was then asked to identify other teachers according to the convenience method or by snowballing.

## Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through interviews. The interviews took place in a single session and lasted an average of two hours. Participants were given the freedom to choose between face-to-face and online interviews. The majority of participants chose to do it online, via the Zoom platform: only 10 interviews were face to face. This choice was largely motivated by familiarity with the platform developed during the pandemic and by geographical and time convenience. It should also be said that participants were given the choice of audio/video or audio-only recording, and all of them authorised audio/video recording. The script was the same for each interview and began with the general question: What made you want to become a teacher? In this sense, all interviews were recorded and then transcribed. No constraints relating to the virtual environment were identified; on the contrary, the possibility of participants being in their own homes allowed for a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

When contacted, each teacher was informed of the study's aims and given general information about the duration and format of the interviews and some ethical considerations, particularly regarding their anonymity and confidentiality. During

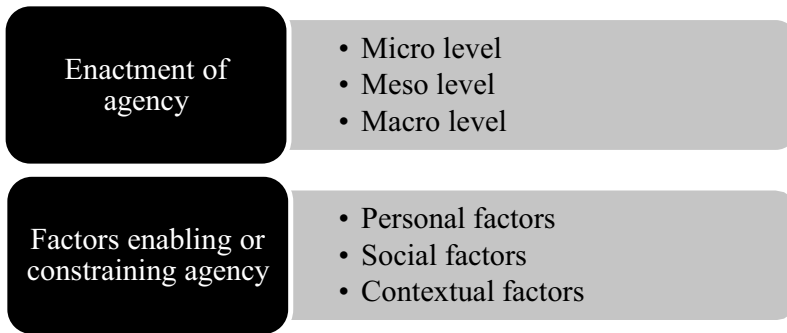
the interview, each participant was given a consent form – with all the necessary information – to sign. Identifying information was not made available to anyone not directly involved in the study, so pseudonyms were used.

Data analysis was conducted using a rigorous and iterative process grounded in qualitative content analysis to identify the most significant themes (Patton, 2015). First, the transcripts were read multiple times by the author team to ensure immersion in the data. During these readings, researchers identified recurrent patterns, statements and expressions relevant to teacher agency. These initial codes were generated inductively and then clustered into preliminary categories through collaborative discussion among the authors. While initial coding was inductive, allowing categories to emerge from the data, the analysis was ultimately theory-informed. Specifically, once preliminary categories were identified, we employed established theoretical lenses – namely, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems (micro, meso, macro levels) and Cong-Lem’s (2021) typology of enabling and constraining factors (personal, social/relational, contextual) – to structure and interpret the findings. These theoretical lenses were applied after emergent categories had been identified to support deeper interpretation and situate findings within existing literature. In this way, the analytical approach can be characterised as inductive in coding and theory-informed in theme development and presentation. This process results in broader analytical themes: i) enactment of agency and ii) factors enabling or constraining teachers’ agency, informed by the theoretical lenses of micro/meso/macro levels and personal/social/contextual factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cong-Lem, 2021). To ensure the reliability of the coding process, selected interview quotes were independently coded by the author team and later compared and refined through consensus meetings. For instance, a quote like ‘You know, I never cared much about following orders, but I always did what I thought the kids should learn’ (Zacarias) was initially coded as ‘autonomy in pedagogical decision-making’ and later grouped under ‘micro-level agency’. Likewise, quotes concerning collaboration with parents or advocacy for school facilities were coded under meso- or macro-level forms of agentic enactment. This multi-layered and reflective approach to coding strengthens the validity of the findings by aligning emergent categories with both empirical data and theoretical constructs.

## Results

The results of this paper are organised into two main themes directly related to the research questions: enactment of agency and factors enabling or constraining teachers’ agency. Regarding the first theme, results will be presented considering three levels in which agency traits were identified: micro, meso and macro levels. The second theme encompasses and explores personal, social and contextual factors that can enable or constrain teachers’ agency (see [Figure 1](#)).

Illustrative quotes are used to provide insight into the voice of teachers.



**Figure 1.** Themes resulting from the data analysis.

### ***Enactment of agency by Portuguese teachers***

Regarding the first theme, the statements are generally associated with teachers' proactivity, an active stance of involvement (either in leadership positions or in projects – as a member or in their creation), as well as decision-making that reveal intentionality in their professional practices and which distinguish them, in some way, from common practices. It is possible to identify the enactment of agency by the interviewed teachers on three different levels in an approximation to Bronfenbrenner's approach (1979). While Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory aimed to convey that human development results from various environmental interactions, we have adapted this model to explore how Portuguese teachers enact agency across layered contexts of professional practice. With our analysis, the micro level corresponds to the immediate classroom and student pedagogical interactions and decisions on a daily basis. The meso level includes broader school community interactions, such as collaboration, leadership and participation in school activities. As for the macro level, we diverge slightly from Bronfenbrenner's original idea, which focused on societal and ideological components. Instead, we understand the macro level as teachers' responses to systemic, policy-oriented or socio-political issues – including their responses to education reforms, public advocacy and involvement with national institutions or professional activism. These acts, although stemming from personal practice, contest and shape the cultural and political ideologies dominating education as a profession. While Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasised the influence of cultural values and societal beliefs on individual development, our findings indicate that teachers are not merely shaped by these forces, but often engage with them actively and reflexively. So, our macro system highlights how teachers situate themselves in relation to societal narratives about education and professional identity.

Regarding the micro level, it was possible to pinpoint innovative methods and pedagogical approaches that teachers have the initiative to apply in their professional practice, mainly aiming to motivate and actively engage students: letting them speak, on their own time, of course, but about the knowledge they had. "They also had a lot of knowledge and I think it was very good to take that knowledge to school (Gabriela, 1<sup>st</sup>

cycle of basic education)” – and contribute to their learning – “You know, I never cared much about following orders, but I always did what I thought the kids should learn (Zacarias, 1st cycle of basic education).” These teachers often stood out from their colleagues for their initiatives and the pedagogical relationship they established with the students:

Back then, I explained and did more than the teachers of that time because I had a completely different pedagogical relationship. I organised field trips to castles and so on. On Saturdays, I taught handball because I was a handball player and I taught English. So, it was a completely different situation, and the school was filled with all the madness that I was bringing, and it was very interesting. (Caetana, 3rd cycle of basic education and secondary)

These methods range from valuing the individual contributions of each student during classes to adopting methods that can contribute to more sustained learning such as systematisation and feedback. The valorisation of working beyond doors, particularly emphasising the importance of Nature, and with the community is also emphasised.

I really liked working outside school; I worked outside a lot: we went, for example, to see the ladies baking bread, we would go to the river to see the frogs, the fish. We would go to see the wheat, the sowing . . . that’s it, lots of experiences with the kids. (Inês, 1st cycle of basic education)

I had a huge connection to the community, so I worked a lot with the community. I worked with the parents, I worked with the whole community [. . .] I did projects in which we had the streets decorated with flowers, and everyone did that; it was also a way of valuing the kindergarten itself in relation to the community. (Luísa, pre-school)

Agency is also translated into the ideal of teachers as professionals who are always evolving and engaged in professional development opportunities:

Professional development takes place in different contexts. It’s a process. It’s not a manual that you apply. You need an attitude. Now I’m going to use action research, reflection on practice and research into that practice [. . .] I think teachers can only evolve if they are builders of their own profession. (Celeste, 1st cycle of basic education)

Over these years, I have realised – and I am realising every day – that I have to change, that I have to improve, that new and challenging things are coming up and that I am experimenting and some things are not working, and I try to improve, and then there is another ‘jigsaw’ that I am experimenting. (Cecília, 2nd cycle of basic education)

Also, reflection plays a significant part in the daily professional activity of these teachers. Problematising the moment when some contents are given, studying, debating with colleagues and dedicating time to preparing lessons according to the needs of the students are traits of the teachers interviewed.

Of course nobody knows everything, but you have to research, you have to read, you have to study. That took up a lot of time. I prepared lessons every day, from the beginning to the last lesson. I never stopped preparing a lesson. (Amélio, 3rd cycle of basic education)

It’s not an easy profession. I think it’s a very tough profession, because we, me at least, are always questioning, we’re always reflecting on what we’re doing, how we’re doing it. [. . .] A reflective practice, that’s fundamental in the development of the profession. (Noel, pre-school)

At the meso level, the way teachers enact their agency is related to the way they are actively involved in different projects at school, not only with their classrooms, but also in a broader sense, involving the whole school and other teachers:

We used to make incredible wall newspapers; we would welcome new students to the club and camp at school, with parents, with the Parents' Association, building wooden boxes. [...] We took public transport. We didn't have any money, so we applied to the Educational Innovation Institute and won. I went back and forth with 30 kids, by bus, train, without mobile phones. It was a marvelous time; everything seemed possible. Everything was possible. (Carmo, 2nd cycle of basic education)

Moreover, these teachers show a disposition to implement initiatives in their professional contexts, many related to equity, inclusion and better conditions for all.

Then I moved to a school with no indoor facilities [for Gymnastics]. At that time, we sent the minister daily pictures of the lack of conditions, of students' bloodied knees. We also made placards, then, finally, we held a demonstration on bicycles with the whole school carrying placards saying: We want a gym, we don't want an aquarium! (Carmo, 2nd cycle of basic education)

Most of these agentic teachers have taken leadership roles during their professional careers.

I was always a member of all the management bodies [...] I was part of the Pedagogical Council, the General School Council. I held all the positions a person can hold at that school. (Maria Luís, 2nd cycle of basic education)

In some cases, being in leadership roles was a way to change more traditional ways of working or to introduce and implement new ways of doing things:

I remember the first meetings, going back, those meetings with the older colleagues, where people would go and take crochet to do at the meeting. It was just to pass the time. [...] When I became President of the School Council [I thought]: we have to change this, we're not going to sit here for two hours doing nothing. And we started talking a lot about projects, developing projects and making the most of that time. (Inês, 1st cycle of basic education)

Considering the macro level – which corresponds to teachers' attitudes and behaviours towards and in favour of the teaching profession – a predisposition of the interviewed teachers to contribute to the valorisation and conditions of the teaching profession is clear and can be illustrated in this quote from Carmina:

Because I feel that my generation, which still lived through the 25th of April [1974], knows what it's like to live in a non-democratic country. I have many memories of that. And I still go to the protests. We fought. I mean, I no longer have anything to gain, but I think I also have to fight for the working conditions of my colleagues (Carmina, 1st cycle of basic education)

The impact of teachers' role is highlighted, and there are several examples of teachers who tried to contribute and influence government agencies and educational policies.

Because I used to believe, and I still believe very strongly, that School has to respond to the students, it has to accompany them, it has to help them, because not all families are enlightened enough to go home and explain the subject to the kids and, therefore, these spaces are important and there are techniques that have to be taught; nobody is born taught

and that's that. I made the materials for both my school and other schools in such a way that they were recognised by the Directorate-General and we had to spread the materials to schools across the country. (Constança, 2nd cycle of basic education)

The analysis also reveals a reflexive and critical attitude towards the role of teachers and education, which often reveals a degree of opposition to measures and/or decisions that teachers do not consider to be appropriate.

When it came to this assessment thing – at the time I was already at the top of my career – I had a huge amount of work to do, a huge amount of work to transform what was a way of penalising teachers, career progression, into a training tool for teachers, for the teachers themselves. Well, that's a huge job. Reversing that situation so that it wasn't just a bureaucratic instrument. (Noel, pre-school)

In this sense, we can interpret the macro level as the arena in which teachers interact with educational policies, state reforms and professional discourses.

Democracy, social justice and inclusion are values that underpin the professional practice of these teachers and the way they perceive the teaching profession. Moreover, these values sustain participants' perception in regard to what should be the contribution of teachers to society.

Our contribution, my social and political contribution to society, to building democracy, involves this way of being a teacher [...] by living democracy with my students in the classroom every day. (Morgana, 1st cycle of basic education)

### ***Factors enabling or constraining teachers' agency***

From the data analysis, it was possible to identify the different levels in which teachers enact their agency and that are directly related to a general commitment towards the profession. The way teachers enact their agency, however, can be enabled or constrained by personal, social and contextual factors.

Regarding what enables agency, it was possible to identify three main enabling factors: personal traits, collaboration and sharing. In fact, personal characteristics of each interviewed teacher significantly impact how they develop their agency. Among these teachers, it was possible to identify a set of characteristics that clearly contribute to enacting their agency, namely enthusiasm (for teaching students and towards the teaching profession), proactivity, engagement, commitment and passion. These personal factors influence and are translated into methods and pedagogical approaches that teachers have the initiative to apply in their professional practice, mainly aiming to motivate students and contribute to their learning, but also in a commitment to the profession, seen as a mission.

Systematising, that is, helping the student to systematise the thinking, helping the student to cultivate an active memory and helping the student to learn in a group, but also to be able to express himself or herself individually to confirm whether or not he/she has really acquired that learning. (Agustina, 3rd cycle of basic education and secondary)

It's a mission, this is a mission! Being a teacher is a mission, it can't be seen any other way. (Hélder, 3rd cycle of basic education and secondary)

Collaborative work (whether with colleagues, families or the community) is also highlighted by teachers as a key aspect of enabling their agency. Collaborative work is seen as something crucial to schools and education in general, referring to the fact that nothing in school can be individual, and considering collaborative work and peer work as an added value to every classroom. Teachers enact their agency collectively since many of the initiatives they propose and develop are in collaboration with colleagues.

That's the most important thing in a school. In school and in society: collaborative work and sharing only enriches us. And that's what we have to pass on, too, to incoming colleagues. This only brings added value to the classroom: sharing, collaborative work, peer work, articulation, only makes educational success reach the classroom (Cecília, 2nd cycle of basic education).

Nothing in school can be individual. This is something that you learn a lot and that you learn with time and experience. (Fernanda, 2nd cycle of basic education)

Also, sharing knowledge and doubts and preparing pedagogical material with other colleagues is mentioned, proving a collaborative climate between these teachers.

So we had this, for example: I have a question, a difficulty came up during class that I couldn't solve . . . so, we would get to the teachers' room and we talk to a colleague: 'A student asked me this, but I couldn't work it out at the time. What do you think?' There you go: preparing lessons together was also something we always did. Preparing exams together, we've always done it. (Violeta, 3rd cycle of basic education and secondary)

Considering constraining factors, it was possible to identify administrative work, teacher evaluations and lack of social valorisation. Within the Portuguese context, the increasing bureaucratic work, teachers' evaluation policies (among other policies) and the lack of social valorisation of teachers and the teaching profession have a negative impact on several aspects. Teachers refer to some challenges regarding more collaborative ways of working since some policies have impacted the relationships among teachers, the lack of time to dedicate to pedagogical work in the classroom, and their engagement with the profession, which, consequently, constrain teachers' agency.

When we have so many things to do and fulfil, it's impossible to get everything done, isn't it? And it's often the work with the pupils that suffers because we lack the availability to think better and to train ourselves better, to make the pupils develop, to make the pupils learn, and that sometimes also makes life as a teacher very stressful. And it's not very attractive, is it? (Irene, 1st cycle of basic education)

I think teachers need to have more peace and quiet in their lives so that they can teach their classes, which is what they really enjoy doing. On the other hand, they should also have a space where they can enjoy working with their peers. I don't think that's been achieved. I think people are too involved in bureaucratic tasks (Amadeu, 3rd cycle of basic education and secondary)

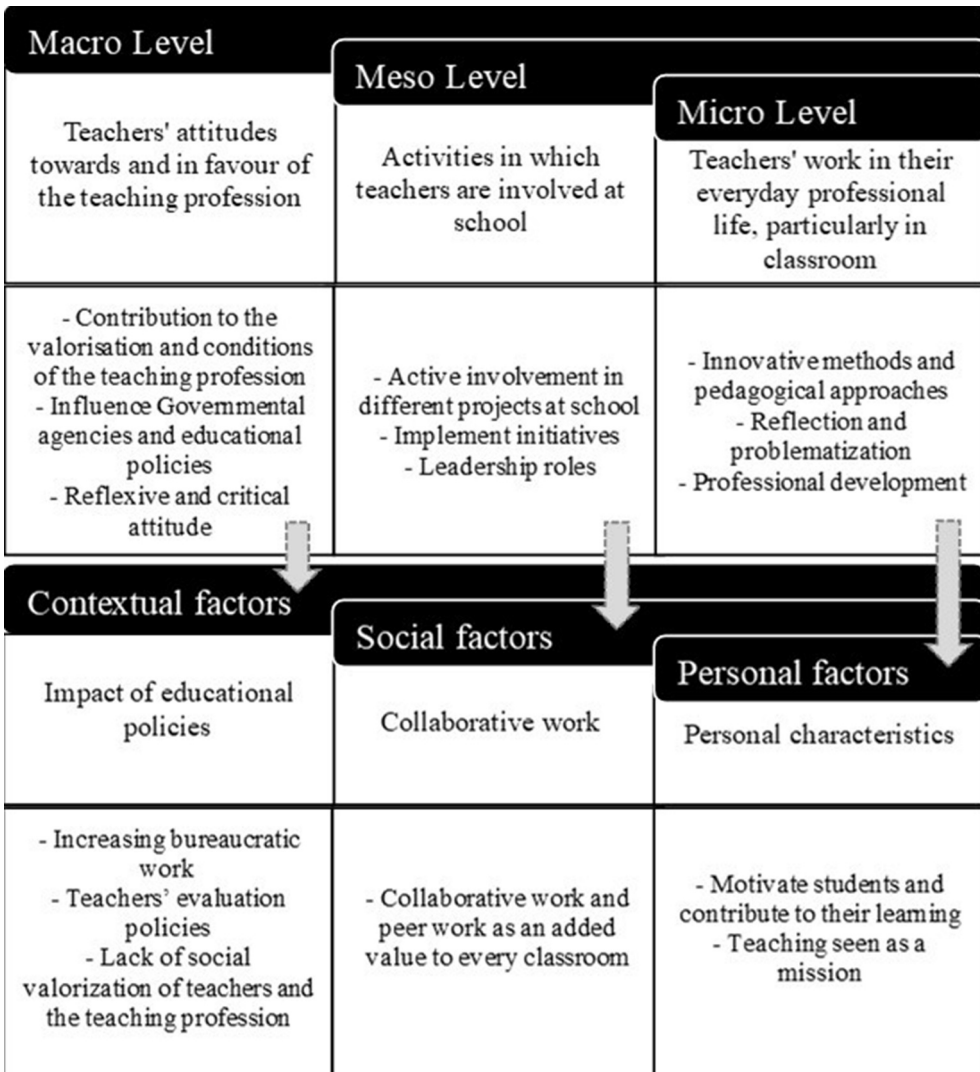
However, although contextual factors may constrain teachers' agency, preventing them from taking a more proactive role, teachers still reveal an agentic attitude and a reflective stance on current topics related to the teaching profession, problematising some of the changes in the education system and, in some cases, trying to do things differently.

I think the evaluation of teachers is terrible. The way it's being done. [...] I'm also an external evaluator and this year I refused to do that. (Nélia, 1st cycle of basic education)

Fortunately, we have pedagogical autonomy in the classroom. We have to respond to external requests, etc., but we always have a say and different ways of responding. I think autonomy is very important. For teachers to build themselves up as professionals, with an identity. (Celeste, 1st cycle of basic education)

**Discussion**

The two dimensions generated by the data analysis provide insights into how teacher agency can be characterised in Portuguese teachers and what factors enable and/or constrain their agency. Regarding the way teachers enact their agency, the authors interpret and analyse the data considering three levels of analysis: the micro, meso and macro levels. Concerning the factors enabling or constraining teachers’ agency the analysis, based on the work of Cong-Lem (2021), focused on personal, social and contextual factors. Figure 2 presents a heuristic model illustrating the enactment of



**Figure 2.** Heuristic model illustrating the enactment of teacher agency.

teacher agency across three interrelated levels (micro, meso and macro), shaped by personal, social and contextual factors. While represented here in distinct layers for analytical clarity, these levels and factors are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For instance, a teacher's personal commitment to students' learning process (micro level) may be shaped by the collaborative culture of their school (meso level) and by broader educational reforms (macro level). In this sense, agency is best understood as emerging through dynamic interactions within and across these dimensions, consistent with an ecological perspective.

The micro level can be perceived as interlinked with the personal factors that contribute to teachers' agency. Data show that teachers' proactivity, commitment and engagement towards the profession translate and are the basis of an agentic attitude that distinguishes them from other colleagues, allowing for pedagogical practices focused on students' learning. This aligns with the proactive stance of those teachers who go beyond conventional teaching methods to create a more engaging learning environment. Teachers like Hélder describe their profession as a mission, reflecting a deep commitment to their roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, reflection is a common element in these levels of analysis. All decisions teachers have to make in their professional daily routine are considered a type of reflection and, in this sense, a way to enact their agency (Leijen et al., 2019). Also, a significant aspect of teachers' agency is their commitment to continuous professional development. Interviewed teachers, such as Cecília and Noel, emphasise the importance of constantly evaluating and improving their teaching methods. This reflective attitude not only enhances their own professional growth and enables their agency, but also positively impacts their students' learning experiences.

At the meso level, teachers exhibit agency through their active involvement in school-wide and community projects. The narratives of teachers like Carmo demonstrate a strong commitment to creating and developing projects that enhance the educational experience for both students and colleagues. These actions reflect a proactive stance towards improving the educational environment, but also promoting social justice within their schools. Social and relational factors, including collaborative work with colleagues, families and the community, are also significant enablers of agency. Collaborative efforts, as described by Cecília and Morgana, enrich the educational experience and provide a support system for implementing innovative practices. All these elements mirror the added value that collaborative work seems to have to these teachers and develop their agency. This involvement in projects that require changes to the curriculum and traditional professional practices characterises the lives and professional development of the interviewed teachers.

The macro level can be interlinked with the contextual factors enabling or constraining teachers' agency, since it mostly relates to outside-in aspects of the teaching profession. Several teachers demonstrate a commitment to advocating for better working conditions and educational policies that benefit the broader teaching community, illustrating a commitment to the profession that transcends personal gain. Moreover, through their agentic attitude, teachers have influenced governmental agencies and educational policies through their involvement in regional and national educational discussions. This level of engagement highlights the potential for teachers to impact systemic change and contribute to the ongoing evolution of the educational landscape. However, it is crucial to reflect on the negative impact

that some policies can have on teachers' agency, by restricting their autonomy and freedom. The narratives of Esmeralda and Irene highlight the challenges posed by administrative burdens and policy constraints, which can detract from the time and energy needed for pedagogical work. This is related to the impact that socio-political aspects have on teachers' agency. From this study, it is possible to understand that recent years translate into a period of teacher disenchantment. If, in the first years of their career, teachers had developed and affirmed their professionalism from within, individually or collectively, professionalism is now characterised by tasks external to teachers (Lopes, 2022), which are experienced by them as real obstacles to their professional development and fulfilment. Despite these constraints, the interviewed teachers show resilience and a commitment to their professional ideals. Their critical stance towards certain educational policies and their efforts to maintain autonomy in the classroom reflects a persistent agency even in the face of systemic challenges.

In this sense, and considering the scope of this study, one can state that a performance-oriented culture where educational policies accentuate testing, accountability and efficiency significantly restricts teacher agency. In this sense, Lopes et al. (2023) highlight that the need for teachers' reprofessionalisation to strengthen teachers' individual and collective agency becomes imperative.

## Conclusion

Teachers' agency emerges as a pivotal determinant within the professional practice of teachers, intertwined with teachers' professional identity and underscored by a discerning and introspective disposition, an investigative posture, an ethos of involvement and collaborative endeavour (Fu & Clarke, 2017; Cong-Lem, 2021). This development is subject to multifaceted influences including personal, social/interpersonal and contextual factors (Cong-Lem, 2021). Given these considerations, this study evidences and reinforces that teachers' agency does not emerge solely from singular factors, but rather manifests through a complex interplay of various conditions (Priestley et al., 2016). It emphasises the challenging conditions that many Portuguese teachers faced during the last 50 years, but also shows their ability to resist and overcome these challenges.

Within the scope of this study, the traits of Portuguese teachers' agency manifest as a profound dedication to the profession, evidenced by teachers' decision-making processes, reflective ethos, proactive initiatives concerning students and institutional dynamics, and their active engagement in pedagogical projects or by adopting leadership roles. It is possible to conclude that personal characteristics exert a noteworthy influence, and teachers exercise their agency through collaborative endeavours, particularly during the first years of their careers, since the current situation has implications for more collaborative ways of working. Furthermore, contextual factors such as bureaucratic obligations and evaluation policies exert a palpably adverse impact on the daily experiences of teachers, affecting their autonomy and their agency.

The attributes associated with teachers' agency delineate the profile under study in the FYT-ID project. Indeed, the project seeks to analyse the professional journey of teachers whose dedication to the teaching profession is framed by a reflective and proactive ethos,

potentially leading to transformative professionalism (Lopes et al., 2023). These transformative teachers collaborate closely with colleagues, students and other stakeholders, and strongly reveal a willingness to be open to change and transformation in themselves (Mockler, 2005), which coincides with the ideal of teachers' agency. Faced with several contextual constraints, it is imperative to, as suggested by Lopes et al. (2023, p. 12), 'reconnect teachers as people (individually and collectively) to their profession and this deep connection needs the possibility to recreate the profession as an exercise of freedom'.

In this sense, it is crucial to reflect on the relevance and potential of the combination of teacher professionalism and teacher agency in order to get to a transformative teacher attitude, which may be the answer against the impact of neoliberal policies affecting the teaching profession (Lopes et al., 2023). Based on the notion that professionalism is not a static or universally defined concept (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996), but rather a dynamic, fluid, evolving construct shaped by individual, social and organisational influences (Evans, 2008, 2011), in the scope of this work we perceived professionalism as the attitudes and behaviours someone has towards their profession, a stance on what it means to be a professional, reflected in one's work-related behaviour and practice (Boyt et al., 2001; Evans, 2008).

Several authors refer to the need for a more interactive and collaborative professionalism in which teachers' agency and the mission to improve the quality of education provided for pupils are of paramount importance (Flores, 2020; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017). In fact, even when facing contextual constraints, teachers were able to find different and alternative strategies due to their reflective and agentic attitude, adapting top-down decisions to their contexts and directly shaping the learning environment for students. Professional agency allows teachers to enhance their own and others' learning and professional development, as well as innovations and pedagogical developments in the professional community which promote effective learning for their students. It has been recognised that effective professional development – defined as the integration of new practices and methodologies into teaching practice (Saunders, 2014) – transcends mere deliberate and structured development opportunities (Sousa et al., 2020). In fact, professional development often unfolds organically within the context of day-to-day social interactions, including participation in communities of practice (Evans, 2010; Wenger, 1998). Effective strategies for professional development need active engagement from teachers who assume dual roles as both learners and mentors. Other research has emphasised the need to create spaces and opportunities for teacher professional development, allowing teachers to deeply reflect on their working conditions, professional needs, the way they experience professionalism, and their sense of agency (Flores, 2020). This paper reinforces this but also advocates the idea that fostering the relationship between teaching and research seems an important way to affirm and develop teachers' professionalism and teachers' agency.

Moreover, it is well recognised that teaching content in initial teacher education programmes plays a crucial role in developing a knowledge base that teachers can turn to when performing their profession (Rasmussen & Bayer, 2014; Sousa et al., 2019, 2020). In this sense, developing teacher education programmes where student teachers are provided with several opportunities to practice professional agency is vital. This implies

a curriculum and pedagogies of teacher education as well as teacher educators who are willing to provide this kind of learning experience for student teachers.

In the Portuguese context, one must note that the country's education system, along with other systems across the globe, is still subject to increasing managerialist biases with contemporaneous shifts towards managerialist professionalism, where 'teaching' and 'a teacher's work' are reduced to quantifiable actions and overbearing institutional rules. Though holding a layer of educational progress, this shift jeopardises the professional attributes that this study highlights as crucial to the meaningful educational transformation: autonomy; collaboration; critical (self)reflection; and a commitment towards social justice and democracy. Thus, this study aims to explain teacher agency in the Portuguese context over the last five decades while simultaneously making the argument for its renewal and preservation. By proposing a redefining framework of teacher professionalism anchored on agency, inquiry and democratic participation, this study compels policymakers to abandon their performativity-driven approaches and embrace the development of professional climates where teachers are not merely overseen, but trusted, supported and treated as co-constructors of educational futures.

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