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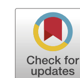
Exploring teachers' professional agency within shifting educational contexts: A comparative study of Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait, and Morocco



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HIGHLIGHTS

- A comparative study of educational disruption revealed teachers' professional agency.
- Professional agency was manifested within three main spaces.
- Several factors hindered teachers' professional agency across the four countries.
- Implications on practice, professional development, and policy are provided.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored teachers' professional agency in response to shifting educational contexts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic across four participating countries. Findings from this qualitative comparative study revealed that the forty-six participants enacted agency in initiating teaching and learning activities for students, engaging in individual and collaborative learning opportunities, and establishing new partnerships with multiple stakeholders. However, teachers' ability to practice professional agency was either supported or hindered due to several factors which varied between the public and private sectors within and across the participating countries. Implications on practice, professional development and policy for a post-pandemic era are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the early months of 2020, many governments around the world deployed aggressive measures in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures were translated into the largest disruption to the educational sector in history, influencing over 90% of the world's student population (UNESCO, 2020). In quick succession, public health interventions were imposed, schools and other learning spaces were closed, and teachers were required to find innovative solutions for continued student learning. Across the world, the return to the classroom for the ensuing academic year happened at a much slower pace and with far more uncertainty in comparison to initial school closures (UNESCO, 2020). While much of the decision-making occurred at the ministerial level in different countries; as government officials proclaimed when schools were to close and when they were allowed to reopen, other decisions were made at the individual school level, with large variations in implementation and performance (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2020).

Within this challenging context, many teachers were on the front lines with their students transforming challenges into opportunities for learning. Certainly not all teachers were equally successful, as the pandemic revealed significant differences,

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inequalities, and inequities, restricting their ability to support student learning and well-being (Hollweck & Doucet, 2020). In response to shifting contexts, several researchers have underscored the importance of enacting professional agency, defined as teachers' active contribution to and significant influence on their work and its conditions (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). Teachers' professional agency is specifically critical in the context of changing educational contexts, as it enables teachers to make independent choices, engage in autonomous actions, and exercise judgement in their own and others' interests (Campbell, 2012). Increasing attention has been given to the concept of professional agency in recent years (Priestley et al., 2015; Pyhältö et al., 2014). Several studies have investigated teachers' actions, choices and stances within shifting educational contexts caused by educational reform (Toom et al., 2015; Vahasantanen, 2015), and more recently caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Campbell, 2020). This unprecedented disruption to education generated new challenges, as well as new opportunities for teachers to practice their professional agency, thus creating a particularly viable context worthy of careful investigation.

In line with Eteläpelto et al. (2013), the study adopted a subject-centered socio-cultural approach in the exploration of teachers' professional agency within the context of intense disruption to education. More specifically, the exploration of teachers' professional agency used a qualitative comparative approach engaging forty-six primary school teachers from four MENA countries; namely Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait, and Morocco. There was much to be gained from comparing similar contexts, as the process provided a way of underscoring shared actions and responses within shifting educational contexts, but also revealed the subtleties of localized differences. Through unraveling some of the subtle differences between these contexts, a more nuanced understanding of the personal, relational, and contextual factors supporting or constraining teachers' enactment of professional agency was revealed. As responses to the educational disruption varied both within and across countries, the current study sheds light on the similarities and differences in teachers' experiences, responses, and behaviors; as well as the factors that influenced their enactment of professional agency as they maneuvered multiple challenges throughout the pandemic. The current study was guided by the following questions:

1. How is the professional agency of teachers from different MENA countries manifested in the context of educational disruption?
2. What are the factors supporting or constraining teachers' professional agency in the context of educational disruption across MENA countries?

1.1. Teachers' professional agency

Professional agency has recently become a widely discussed concept in extant literature, given multiple calls for school reform and development, including allowing teachers more autonomy, opportunities to participate in decision making, and individual accountability (Pyhältö et al., 2014; Toom et al., 2015). Though the concept of agency takes different connotations depending on the discipline within which it is examined, most researchers agree that professional agency integrates elements of self-regulation, purposeful actions and choices, and self-reflections for continued individual and collective improvement (Bandura, 2006). According to Goller and Paloniemi (2017), "agency is usually associated with individuals who, in a given situation, make decisions, take *initiatives*, act *proactively* rather than reactively, *deliberately strive* and *function creatively* and *innovatively*" (p. 1). In their conceptualization of professional agency, Ukkonen-Mikkola and Varpanen (2020) further differentiated agency from non-agentive action, and postulated the distinctive characteristics of agency as (1) the capacity to act, (2) intentionality or a sense of purpose, (3) the exertion of a causal power in the (social) environment, and (4) the sense of being the initiator of one's actions (p. 2). Thus, action is considered agentic only when it is intentional from the perspective of the actor, rather than a mere responsive reaction to emerging events (see Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

While acknowledging this level of individual capacities and actions, Archer (2000) further stressed the situated nature of agency as individuals interact simultaneously with their social and material conditions and circumstances. Thus, Archer argued for the inseparability of the social and the individual in any discussion of agency, as well as the defining role of context in supporting or hindering agency. More recently, Eteläpelto et al. (2013) also emphasized this mutually constitutive interaction between individual capacities and the resources and constraints of the social context. Particularly, they proposed their conceptualization of professional agency as a subject-centered socio-cultural approach which gives equal emphasis on the subjective and individual developmental perspective on one hand, and the socio-cultural and contextual factors on the other. Accordingly, this perspective emphasizes not only the way agency is manifested through individuals' autonomous actions, purposeful choices, and influences on themselves and others, but also "how it is resourced, constrained, and bounded by contextual factors, including power relations and discourses, and further by the material conditions and cultures of social interaction in work communities" (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 61).

Similarly, Ukkonen-Mikkola and Varpanen's (2020) conceptualization of professional agency is particularly concerned with these "*contexts of actions*." However, they go further with explicating the situated nature of agency as occurring in contexts "where the actor achieves agency in response to problems posed by changing historical situations" (p. 2). Accordingly, individuals can achieve agency by participating actively, purposefully, and meaningfully in professional practices, which "derive their signifying property from being problematic" (p. 3). Specifically for teachers, professional agency is ultimately concerned with their capacities and actions towards solving educational problems as they arise within social, historical and material contexts (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). A particular emphasis is thus placed on teachers' capacities and actions as part of their professional practices, rather than their capacities and actions as general human features (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Varpanen, 2020).

1.2. Conceptual framework: personal, relational and contextual spaces

This concept of teacher professional agency can be further understood as being influenced by multiple factors at the personal, relational, and contextual levels (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Jääskelä et al., 2017; Pyhältö et al., 2014). At the personal level, the concept takes into consideration an individual's prior experiences, motivations, interests, self-efficacy beliefs, and professional identity (Billet, 2006). Specifically for teachers, it also translates into making pedagogical and instructional decisions based on their beliefs, knowledge and skills (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). In line with this dimension of agency, teachers have been found to draw on their agency, specifically during times of educational change and within shifting policy contexts, to reinterpret and redesign curriculum, reconcile tensions between policy mandates and limited resources, and purposefully transform their pedagogical practices (Wang et al., 2017). Recently, the challenges inflicted by the shift to

online learning and the uncertainties accompanying the largest disruption to education created new educational problems and placed further pressure on teachers to rapidly respond and refocus their thinking and efforts around issues of justice, equity, and well-being, as many teachers become key decision-makers within their communities (Campbell, 2020). While such agentive actions are commendable, several researchers caution that teacher agency does not always work in tandem with change, as agentic teachers may equally accept or resist policy mandates or other forms of change, specifically when they are inconsistent with their pedagogical beliefs and values (Pyhältö et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2017).

At the relational level, collaboration, peer support, collective participation, and communication are examined. Billet (2006) stressed the way agency "operates relationally within and through social structures," such that "any action that individual agency initiates … always occurs from a social basis, albeit through an interdependency that is relational" (p. 63). Accordingly, Edwards (2005) explicated this notion of relational agency as involving the capacity to offer support and ask support from others; and more specifically, to work with others in order to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems. Edwards thus argued that relational agency leads to an enhanced form of professional agency. In this sense, Pyhältö et al. (2014) contended that professional agency is embedded in professional interactions between teachers, students and their parents, and other members of the school community. Consequently, as agentive actors within shifting educational contexts, teachers can support the development of professional communities by engaging in collective problem solving, generating new ideas and forms of implementation, and monitoring the impact of their collaborative efforts (Pyhältö et al., 2014). Thus, teachers' professional agency is assumed to occur within the social practices of the school community, and may necessarily be supported within these working environments.

At the contextual level, it facilitates the understanding of policy-making, support structures and cultures, and material resources, as well as other factors which may inhibit the practice of professional agency. Thus, the demands, opportunities, and constraints of the socio-cultural context play a regulatory role for teachers' professional agency (Pyhältö et al., 2014). In sum, while agency has been viewed in mostly positive terms, supporting teachers' creativity, motivation, well-being, autonomy, and commitment (e.g. Eteläpelto et al., 2013), yet, a complete understanding of agency should also take into consideration certain instances and contexts when teachers may lack the ability to practice professional agency (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011). In this sense, the literature is replete with contextual constraints that impinge on teachers' professional agency in times of change. These include professional standards, curriculum reform, formal and informal power relations, managerial rules and regulations, and hierarchal structures (Simpson, Sang, Wood, Wang, & Ye, 2018). Accordingly, the extent to which teachers enact professional agency may necessarily be contingent upon contextual constraints and opportunities (Priestley et al., 2015).

As a comparative study, the investigation of these factors within personal, relational, and contextual spaces made it possible to show the nuances among the varying contexts, particularly revealing the similarities and differences in the way teachers' professional agency was supported and hindered within each space. A preliminary description of these four contexts is presented in the following section, thus situating the understanding of the study findings within these varying contexts.

1.3. Shifting contexts in four countries

Four MENA countries were chosen for this study. The choice of Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait and Morocco made it possible to reveal similar actions and responses within shifting educational contexts, but also show the subtleties of localized differences. In this sense, the four countries provide variations in their populations' Socio Economic Status (SES), with Qatar and Kuwait enjoying higher SES among their populations in comparison to Lebanon and Morocco. Additionally, the four countries provided a representation of the different Arab countries, including Gulf States, Middle East, and North Africa. Specific considerations within each of these countries is presented next.

1.4. Lebanon

February 28 marked the day all schools were closed in Lebanon. All classroom-based learning activities were suspended and replaced with various forms of distance learning. These variations were mainly contingent upon access to technological devices, Internet connection, and stable electricity, with large variations among public and private schooling in the country. While some private schools, specifically those serving high SES student populations, shifted to synchronous online learning using different video-conferencing facilities and learning management systems, others resorted to asynchronous online learning in the form of PowerPoint presentations, worksheets, and web resources shared via available learning platforms and social media applications. In public schools, the ministry of education encouraged teacher autonomy in adapting the curriculum and in the use of any available means for continued learning, technological or otherwise. It also provided public schools with accounts on Microsoft Teams, yet these were not activated due to lack of technical infrastructure, teacher training, and support structures. Similar to private schools serving low SES student populations, public schools faced multiple challenges as a result of the political, economic, and social instability affecting the country concurrently with the pandemic crisis. Noteworthy, the disruption to the 2019/2020 academic year was not only caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but began much earlier due to the social uprising in October of that same year. All schools were closed and learning seized almost completely for over two months, except for a few private schools who were more equipped and ready to support student learning during the first disruption to education nationwide.

1.5. Qatar

On March 12, schools in Qatar were closed, and all students were learning remotely from their homes. Qatar has a relatively advanced digital infrastructure and the extent of Internet availability at all schools and households is high. Despite the available infrastructure, the use of technology for teaching and learning was not widely adopted in Qatari education. Upon school closures, the ministry of education in the country took charge of distance learning on behalf of public schools by preparing video-recorded lessons for all subjects in K12 grade levels. Public school teachers did not have the autonomy to prepare their own lessons, and were obliged to follow the lesson distribution mandated by the ministry. The ministry further launched a learning platform that disseminated digital and interactive resources, equipped many households with technological devices, and provided professional learning opportunities for all public school teachers. While the ministry played a managerial role in public schools, its role in private schools was regulatory in nature, such that each school made its own decisions in relation to continued learning opportunities for their teachers and students. In this respect, teachers had varying levels of autonomy depending on the school context, yet generally enjoyed increased levels of autonomy during the initial shift to online learning. Accordingly, variations were found among private schools

whose responses differed considerably, mainly depending on the availability of resources and teacher preparedness for online learning. Further variations were dependent upon the ways these schools conducted teaching and learning activities prior to the pandemic. Those schools which had previously adopted an inquiry-based curriculum sought ways to transform their teaching and learning activities in line with prior practices. The following academic year 2020/2021 began as planned in September with a blended mode of learning, such that students attended 1–2 days of schooling using a rotation method and online broadcasting of classroom lessons.

1.6. Kuwait

Following this common pattern of school closures, Kuwaiti schools closed on February 26; just two days after confirming the first COVID-19 case, in order to control community transmission of the disease. Responses to the crisis varied considerably between public and private schools due to ministerial directives (Alhouti, 2020). While individual access to the Internet and technology is generally high in Kuwait, it is relatively low in public schools which lack technology infrastructure inside their classrooms. At the beginning of school closures, the ministry of education initiated a series of meetings aimed at issuing relevant responses to the pandemic. However, the decision was made to discontinue learning for students in all schools, both private and public. In June 2020, the minister announced the conclusion of the 2019/2020 academic year without any attempt to provide learning opportunities online or via other approaches. This complete disruption to learning opportunities continued for almost 8 months before the ministry issued directives for the new academic year, which began in October 2020. Only then did public schools relaunch teaching and learning activities using a blended approach, consisting of a synchronous mode in grades 4–11 and an asynchronous mode in grades 1–3, and lasting 2 h of daily instruction. Without prior experience, public schools began their own learning process at a time when private schools in the country had accumulated some experience with pandemic pedagogies. In contrast to public schools, private schools were exempted from mandatory closures in April 2020 and were only shortly delayed due to ministerial directives. In contrast to this lack of teacher autonomy in public schools, private schools enjoyed complete autonomy and resorted to various forms of synchronous and/or asynchronous modes, based on their own specific considerations. Thus, private schools were able to provide learning opportunities to their students, despite being unprepared for this novel situation.

1.7. Morocco

Schools in Morocco were closed on March 16, and the response from schools to this crisis was quite similar across the private and public sectors with mounting challenges crippling ministerial initiatives. For instance, the ministry of education launched a variety of distance learning resources, including the TilmideTICE platform which provided content across all subjects and grade levels. The ministry also provided access to Microsoft Teams to enable teacher-student interactions. Despite such efforts, inequitable access to the Internet and digital devices, specifically in remote and rural areas, led to missed educational opportunities for millions of students across the country. To reach these students, the ministry began video-recording lessons and broadcasting them on national TV channels, yet these broadcasted lessons could not make up for a lack of direct communication and interaction with students. The efforts put forward by the ministry were further hindered by the critical unpreparedness of teachers for distance education, and for which the ministry paid little attention. As a result, many teachers resorted to social media applications, which were more familiar and accessible to students. Thus, ministerial directives were mere recommendations and schools differed in their implementation of such decrees, as both public and private teachers enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy in deciding on ways to move forward with student learning. Accordingly, teacher autonomy was more contingent on the school context and school leadership, rather than on mandated ministerial directives. For the following academic year 2020/2021, the majority of schools in the country resumed different forms of in-class learning on September 7th, 2020. While most private schools adopted a blended approach to learning, public schools resorted to dividing students into two groups, with each group rotating three days a week each. A blended approach could not be implemented mainly due to a lack of technological infrastructure and equipment.

1.8. Research method

1.8.1. Research design

The study used a qualitative comparative approach to explore and compare the way teacher professional agency was manifested across the four country's shifting contexts. Specifically, a cross-case comparison was employed in order to develop thick descriptions of each case and subsequently compare them in order to identify cross-case patterns and themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Using this cross-case comparison, a deep investigation of a single phenomenon (i.e. how teacher professional agency is manifested, and factors influencing its enactment) across four countries was made possible, while also carefully comparing the similarities and differences within each case. This cross-case comparison was thus significant in revealing the subtilties and complexities inherent in participants' capacities and actions as they responsed to a common global disruption, as well as highlight the factors influencing such capacities and actions within personal, relational, and contextual spaces.

1.8.2. Participants

The study used a stratified purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2002) as participants were selected from both public and private primary schools across the four countries selected for participation. The school context and grade level were deemed to be defining factors influencing teachers' agentic actions, responses, and experiences during initial school closures and thereafter. Therefore, both private and public schools were included in the selection criteria to account for context, and only primary teachers were recruited to account for the variations in K12 online learning experiences. Using this selection criteria, an invitation was sent to six to eight primary schools requesting voluntary participation in each country. The target across the four countries was to recruit three public schools and three private schools, and the first schools to respond to the invitation were recruited. The recruitment process continued until the aforementioned target was reached across the four countries. Accordingly, forty-six participants were recruited with a total number in Lebanon (N = 12), Qatar (N = 12), Kuwait (N = 10), and Morocco (N = 12). Demographic data of the participants is displayed in Table 1. The majority of participants were experienced teachers, with only one novice teacher from Morocco. Additionally, the educational background of the majority of teachers was a Bachelor degree in either education (N = 11) or a particular subject matter (N = 30), and only five participants held a graduate degree in education (MA: N = 4; PhD: N = 1). Noteworthy, an education degree is not a requirement for teaching across the four countries, as participants mostly held Bachelor degrees in various specializations, mostly compatible with the subjects they

Table 1
Distribution of participants across the four countries.

Country	School Type	Gender	Years of Experience	Age	Highest Degrees
Lebanon	Private 3	Female 12	8–33	31–50	BA 11
	Public 3	Male 0			MA 1
Qatar	Private 3	Female 10	5–36	33–58	BA 11
	Public 3	Male 2			MA 1
Kuwait	Private 2	Female 9	7–16	31–40	BA 7
	Public 3	Male 1			MA 2
					PhD 1
Morocco	Private 3	Female 7	2–33	24–58	BA 12
	Public 3	Male 5			MA 0

were teaching. Further, the majority of participants were females due to the fact that in the four countries primary school teaching is a female dominated profession.

1.8.3. Data collection and analysis

A semi-structured interview protocol constituted the main data source, as it allowed participants to express their perceptions of professional agency freely and without restrictions. As a qualitative study, participants' subjective interpretations of their responses and experiences were sought for using a number of guiding questions. These questions were used to initiate the discussion on ways they enacted professional agency within their shifting educational contexts, and inquire into the factors which may have supported or inhibited their practice of agency. The questions were generated by Authors 1 and 2, while several rounds of discussions were conducted among the researchers in order to reach consensus on the interview procedure; including contacting participants, monitoring responses, and asking probing questions.

Prior to recruiting participants, ethical approval was obtained from four researchers' educational institutions, i.e., those who conducted the interviews (Authors 1, 3, 4, and 5). Eventually, all participants were initially contacted via email or phone in order to inform them about the purpose of the study, obtain their consent, and then schedule an online interview. At the time of data collection, i.e., between October and December 2020, schools in all four countries were operating on minimal attendance, as COVID-19 restrictions had begun to ease following complete school closures between late February and June 2020.

During the interviews, participants responded to questions prompting them to discuss the following: (1) initial actions and decisions when schools closed, (2) professional learning opportunities pursued, (3) teaching strategies and assessment techniques used, (4) role and support from education ministries and school leadership, and (5) actions taken to overcome challenges. The interviews took place online via MS Teams or Zoom, were conducted in Arabic or English depending on individual preferences, and lasted 40–50 min. All interview data were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The data were analyzed in a cross-case data-driven manner using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). A bottom-up inductive method was deemed most suitable for deriving codes and categories directly from the textual analysis, with the aim of providing a rich description of the phenomena under study from the participants' perspectives (Patton, 2002). A constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used in understanding the data within each country as a separate case, and subsequently in finding themes across the four cases. Thus, the process of coding, categorizing, and identifying themes in the collective data included the following steps (Strauss & Corbin, 1998):

At the initial stages of analysis, the authors decided on the same way for analyzing the data to ensure systematicity and consistency of the analysis. Accordingly, the four authors (Authors 1, 3, 4, and 5), who had collected the data from their respective countries used the same method of analysis guided by the research questions. At this point and to enhance the trustworthiness of the process, each researcher became responsible for working individually on his/her county data, while the second author participated in the analysis of the four contexts. Thus, each researcher read and reread the transcripts collected from his/her respective country, while noting impressions and searching for interpretive meanings. For each participant, the coding of the data followed an inductive manner by taking note of the events which the participants described as being important or for which they elaborated. Each researcher then compared and contrasted the initial codes in a within-case analysis, thus grouping the coded data into categories. The next stage of analysis included discussing and comparing the emerging categories in a cross-case analysis. The authors discussed the categories they had identified, collectively interpreted them, and examined them carefully on a number of occasions in order to identify patterns and derive the overarching themes which would reveal the similarities, yet retain the individual characteristics specific to each country. Throughout this analytical process, care was taken not to exclude certain data or collapse important findings for the sake of showing similarities, and multiple revisions were made before the final themes were agreed upon. A final stage in this process was to use the identified themes to calculate frequencies from each country and across the four countries.

Additionally, a deductive analytical process was conducted towards the end of the analysis by referring to the literature on professional agency and examining the emerging themes in reference to the conceptual framework of personal, relational, and contextual factors. Aimed at enhancing the credibility of the findings, this framework was used to classify the emerging themes according to whether they were considered supporting or hindering factors, and in organizing them systematically in the findings section. Finally, specific illustrations were identified from the data, and which provide illustrative evidence for the identified themes.

1.8.4. Findings

In response to research question 1, findings revealed that professional agency was manifested within three main ways, which entailed participants' capacities and actions to solve emerging educational problems namely by: (i) *initiating teaching and learning activities for students*, (ii) *engaging in individual and collaborative learning opportunities*, and (iii) *establishing new partnerships with multiple stakeholders* (see Table 2). In response to research question 2, several factors were identified as either supporting or hindering teachers' professional agency to varying degrees across the four countries. These factors were organized according to whether they belonged to personal, relational, or contextual spaces (see Table 3).

Table 2
Enacting professional agency in response to disruptive education.

	Teachers enacted agency within professional practices by:
Theme 1: initiating teaching and learning activities for students	- being concerned with student engagement, motivation, well-being, and participation (both sectors; four countries) - being resourceful in using available social media platforms (mostly public sector; Lebanon and Morocco) - interacting actively with students with the shift to full-scale online learning (private sector; Lebanon, Qatar and Kuwait) - complimenting video-recorded lessons delivered by the ministry of education with multiple resources (public sector, Qatar) - learning from initial experiences and making improvements (private sector; Kuwait)
Theme 2: engaging in individual and collaborative learning opportunities	- self-pacing their learning and practicing new technological tools through trial and error (both sectors; four countries) - experimenting with new technological tools and uses (both sectors; four countries) - being prompted by a moral duty towards students (both sectors; four countries) - overcoming restraints in limited training opportunities (public sector; Lebanon, Morocco and Kuwait) - taking advantage of complete school closures to develop digital skills (public sector; Kuwait) - engaging in collaborative learning opportunities (both sectors; four countries) - extending collaborations beyond school premises (private schools; Lebanon, Qatar and Kuwait)
Theme 3: establishing new partnerships with multiple stakeholders	- engaging in constructive communication with all members of the community, specifically parents (both sectors; four countries; except Kuwait public sector) - considering parents as the gatekeepers of continued student learning (both sectors; four countries) - initiating home calls to check up on students and encouraging them to complete their work (both sectors; four countries; except Kuwait public sector) - being successful in raising awareness among parents about the importance of continued student learning (both sectors; four countries; except Kuwait public sector)

Table 3
Factors supporting or hindering teachers' professional agency within the different spaces.

	Teachers' professional agency supported/hindered by:
The personal space	- a lack of personal technological skills and prior experience in using technology (mostly public sector; four countries) - an increased workload; managing multiple tasks, engaging in personal learning, and preparing interactive online lessons (both sectors; four countries)
The relational space	- problems in getting parents to become true partners in continued student learning (both sectors; four countries) - problems in getting students to participate and regulate their learning in new ways (both sectors; four countries)
The contextual space	- an evident lack of technological devices, Internet connectivity, and stable electricity (mostly public sector; Lebanon and Morocco) - varying levels of quality teacher training opportunities (both sectors; four countries) - support from school leadership (private schools; Lebanon, Qatar and Kuwait) - binding ministerial directives (mostly public sector; four countries)

1.9. Enacting professional agency in response to disruptive education

The way professional agency was manifested across the four countries revealed more similarities than differences. The first way teachers enacted professional agency and solved emerging educational problems as a result of total school closures was through *initiating teaching and learning activities for students*. Across all four contexts, the majority of participating teachers (N = 35/46) found different ways for continued learning opportunities; their main concern being student engagement, motivation, and participation. In Lebanon, all private school teachers used available platforms, which they had resorted to during the first disruption to education caused by the October social uprising. These included web-based learning management systems, blogs, and school-owned applications. Teaching and learning continued shortly after the ministry of education announced school closures. However, as “these were only basic tools,” one teacher explained, “the teachers weren't able to interact with their students.” This caused discontentment with an asynchronous learning mode, until they were able to switch to full-scale online learning, as another teacher explained:

> Now it's like a real school, except it's online; the students are learning as though they were in class … it's not just about the content, but about the skills that they need to master, and I'm constantly looking for new ways to engage them online, like I want to make up for what they missed out on last year.

All public school teachers in Lebanon did not have the resources available in many private schools, so the majority of teachers (N = 4/6) became resourceful themselves and resorted to social media applications which were available to most parents and students, and which according to one teacher, “weren't as effective as in-class teaching, but allowed us to stay in touch with the students, and it was better than not teaching them at all.” A similar mode of teaching was adopted by all Moroccan teachers, in both public and private schools, who also used available means to connect with their students, and share lesson explanations, worksheets, and links to instructional videos. In both contexts, these learning opportunities remained consistent throughout much of the school closures, as participants could not find further solutions for limited digital resources.

Also in Qatar, most teachers (N = 9/12) took several initiatives to personalize student learning and feedback, enhance their lessons with audiovisual materials, and integrate games and activities. In public schools, all participating teachers did not suffice with the video-recorded lessons delivered by the ministry of education, and resorted to complimenting these lessons based on their students' needs. Despite larger variations among private schools, the majority of teachers (N = 4/6) also used whatever technological means available for continued learning opportunities, some by creating voiceover PowerPoints and interactive worksheets, and others by developing inquiry learning modules based on existing curriculum.

The Kuwaiti context differed considerably from the others, as all public school teachers were restricted from offering any form of learning to students during initial school closures, causing teachers

to be "deeply saddened … as [they] had tried to do everything possible, like contact parents and student, and post short videos on Instagram … but shortly after, the ministry prohibited this too," as one public school teacher in Kuwait explained. Accordingly, they lamented these missed learning opportunities, noting that "had the ministry given us the authority to act, we would have exerted every effort, and students wouldn't have such huge learning gaps," as another teacher declared. All the Kuwaiti private school teachers, in contrast, continued to offer teaching and learning activities, which for the most part, shared many similarities to the Lebanese and Qatari private schools. Several teachers in Kuwait discussed ways in which they ensured student participation and engagement in a cooperative learning environment, emphasized students' well-being as a priority, and learned from their initial experiences and made improvements.

All the participants in Kuwaiti private schools also discussed ways in which they employed multiple teaching strategies which, according to one teacher, "focused on students' mental health; giving them opportunities to discuss their feelings and express their opinions." Additionally, their provision of learning opportunities developed and improved after initial school closures. As they accumulated further experience, these teachers experimented with multiple interactive web-based tools and decided on those which were most suitable. One private school teacher commented:

> The first response was to keep the learning going with any means possible, and mostly through asynchronous methods, but now, it is more academic and systematic; students are engaged synchronously through Zoom, they are in class with me, and I am able to send them all kinds of activities through Seesaw, and monitor their learning.

A second theme revealing similarities in teachers' enactment of professional agency across all four contexts was through *engaging in individual and collaborative learning opportunities*. All teachers unanimously described ways in which they took advantage of the ability to self-pace their learning and practice using technological tools through trial and error. As the transition to online learning came unexpectedly, all teachers described ways in which they experimented with new technological tools and uses, as one teacher in Lebanon noted that "many learning opportunities became available through online workshops and courses, watching YouTube videos, following social media, and reading articles." The novelty of the experience, accompanied by "a moral duty towards students," as one teacher in Qatar described it, prompted them to resort to these resources for acquiring "the knowledge and skills necessary for effective online learning." According to another teacher in Morocco, the problem of "limited training opportunities obliged them to depend on self-learning; they needed to be very prepared despite the difficult circumstances." Consequently, teachers "spent many hours searching for ways in which schools all over the world were teaching online, and learning from this international experience," according to one teacher in Kuwait. They also expended effort in learning how to use multiple technological devices; "a decision," according to one teacher in Lebanon, "they had to take, because learning should never stop no matter what the circumstances are." When learning did stop for the Kuwaiti public schools, all teachers "took advantages of this time to develop their skills and be prepared for when the schools were allowed to reopen," as one teacher elaborated.

These agentic actions and choices crossed over to teachers' engagement in collaborative learning opportunities. Many teachers across the four contexts (N = 32/46) illustrated their engagement in sharing technological tools, tutoring other teachers, co-planning lessons, and discussing ways for improvement, as one teacher in Qatar explained:

> I found learning with other teachers the most useful because I could ask any question and get immediate feedback and support. Other teachers also understood what it was like to teach in this situation, because we were all facing the same challenges.

Another private school teacher in Kuwait emphasized pedagogical collaboration, in addition to sharing technological tools, as the following comment revealed:

> Shared planning is the key for successful teamwork; we met regularly as a team and decided how we would teach the lessons for that week, we all shared ideas and decided together, then we divided the tasks amongst us and started working.

These peer collaborations were not restricted within the school contexts, and in some cases (N = 12/46), went beyond school premises, with the intension of "finding out what other schools were doing and learning from their experiences," as explained by a private school teacher from Qatar. This sharing of experiences and challenges with online learning strengthened their existing relationships, and "made it easier to teach online, while also reducing the stress and anxiety associated with the pandemic situation," as one Lebanese private school teacher described.

Lastly, a third emerging theme showing more similarities than differences among the four contexts was in *establishing new partnerships with multiple stakeholders*. In this sense, there was a shared understanding among the majority of teachers (N = 38/46) for the need to engage in constructive communication with all members of the community, specifically parents. Across all contexts, these teachers considered parents as the gatekeepers of continued student learning and they reported "spending time explaining lessons to parents and answering their questions, so they will be able to help their children," as one Lebanese public school teacher explained. They further reinforced the notion that as students were still in the primary grades, the role of parents as key players in their children's education became indispensable to their own practices. This meant many teachers (N = 22/46) constantly initiated home calls to "check up on students, and see if they needed any help, as well as encourage them to submit their work on time, and do their work independently," as one private school teacher from Morocco illustrated. Despite facing problems with parents who did not respond equally to these initiatives, and facing further dilemmas with many students engaging in intermittent learning, these teachers considered communicating with parents individually and regularly as a viable solution. As one private school teacher from Kuwait noted "we tried convincing parents about the importance of students' continued learning, especially in the primary grades, because discontinued learning will lead to terrible consequences in the long run." Using these communications strategies, several teachers (N = 18/46) described their success in "getting many more parents to respond to our requests, and raising awareness among parents about the importance of the work we were doing," as one public school teacher from Qatar reported.

1.10. Factors influencing professional agency within personal, relational, and contextual spaces

While the participating teachers were able to enact professional agency to a certain extent as described in the previous section, the fact remains that the problems and challenges they faced within

personal, relational, and contextual spaces weighed down their capacities and agentic actions, while supporting factors allowed teachers more influence, autonomy, and engagement. These factors are described in this section to reveal ways in which each country context supported or restricted teachers' professional agency.

Within the personal space, several teachers (N = 18/46) particularly in public schools in Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait, and Morocco discussed *a lack of personal technological skills and prior experience* in using technology for distance learning. At the beginning of school closures, these teachers "became overwhelmed with the magnitude of new skills they had to learn," as one public school teacher from Qatar put it. Accordingly, they were hindered by their own knowledge and skills to practice agency, and required more time for individual and peer learning to make a difference in their teaching practices. In Lebanon and Morocco, these limited skills, accompanied by an inability to interact synchronously with students, resulted in transferring traditional methods of teaching into an online mode. All the teachers from these two public school sectors sent video-recoded lessons and worksheets which students completed alone, as one Moroccan public school teacher proclaimed:

> I depended on direct teaching methods; I explained the lesson, asked students to answer questions, and gave them extra practice exercises, then I corrected them. It was hard to make them learn using collaborative methods.

Also on a personal level, many teachers (N = 27/46) across the four countries became overwhelmed with an *increased workload*; "working hours extended 24 h rather than the usual 8 h of a normal school day," as one private school teacher from Qatar described. These teachers described managing multiple tasks simultaneously, including problems with their own personal learning and their students' learning. They further contended that this increase in workload required decisions to be taken without careful planning or reflections. For the these teachers, "there was no time to think, just act," as one public school teacher from Lebanon put it. Many teachers from Lebanon (N = 7/12) found it more time consuming and effortful to prepare lessons and assignments for online learning, especially when they wanted these lessons to be "interactive, engaging, and beneficial at the same time," as described by one Lebanese private school teacher. In Kuwait, once schools reopened, teachers in public schools were also "required to attend a double shift during the day, including a morning shift at school, and an afternoon shift online with the students," as one teacher illustrated.

In relational terms, and across the four countries, many teachers (N = 30/46) expressed the problems they faced in *getting parents to become true partners in continued student learning*. According to these participants, "many parents didn't know how to help their children, thinking that doing the assignments for them was helping," as one Lebanese private school teacher said. Thus, these teachers faced challenges in the form of extending their support to parents who struggled to help their children, and dealing with other parents who completed assigned work for their children. Other teachers (N = 10/12), mostly in Lebanese and Moroccan public schools, faced problems with parents who did not share the same commitment to online learning, and gave up on the idea of supporting their children's continued learning altogether, as one Lebanese public school teacher elaborated:

> Parents didn't think online learning was useful anyway, and they had their own financial problems and limited resources, it was just too much for them to handle the additional burden of teaching several children at the same time.

Another relational challenge reported across the four countries was *getting students to participate and regulate their learning in new ways*. While all teachers enacted professional agency in creating learning material and finding different ways to share them, many teachers (N = 28/46) also noted that students did not respond positively or enthusiastically. According to one Moroccan public school teacher, "students didn't take online learning seriously at the beginning, and very low numbers of students participated or submitted tasks on time." For another teacher from a Qatari public school:

> Students weren't ready for the transition online; they didn't know how to log in or submit assignments, and they didn't have the skills for being productive online. It took more time than expected for them to adjust.

Adding to this problem, some teachers (N = 12/46) reported the difficulties their students faced in concentrating and understanding. For instance, they described how some students struggled in a home environment unconducive to learning with "many siblings at home and too much noise," while other students "became careless and didn't put any effort to learn" as two teachers from Qatari public schools explained. Accordingly, several teachers (N = 20/46) discussed students' dispositions towards online learning and categorized students into three groups, those who "procrastinated and didn't submit their work on time," others who "only completed the assigned homework, but didn't take part in any discussions," and those who "were completely absent and didn't participate at all," as explained by three public and private school teachers in Qatar. These three student categories were also reported by Lebanese public and private school teachers. Especially with continued school closures, several teachers from Lebanon (N = 7/12) became concerned about students' motivation to learn online, noting "some students had low motivation levels, and found difficulties in understanding material," as one Lebanese public school teacher explained.

Other teachers (N = 20/46) further alluded to the difficulties in assessing student understanding, as "they still haven't found a solution for online assessments. They could never be sure who was completing the assignments behind the screen," as one private school teacher in Morocco explained. This made it difficult for them to "identify student understanding, their weaknesses, and plan accordingly," as one private school teacher in Qatar elaborated. When the decision was made to reopen schools for blended learning, all teachers unanimously welcomed the idea as "they could now ensure students' participation, and giving them feedback … knowing where they struggled and where they needed help," as a public school teacher from Qatar declared.

The factors influencing teachers' ability to practice professional agency varied considerably within the contextual spaces in each country, though some similarities were also found across countries. Specifically for Lebanon and Morocco, an *evident lack of technological devices, Internet connectivity, and stable electricity* were described as major factors hindering teachers from taking action towards student learning. In these two countries, disparities between students from high and low SES deepened the digital divide even inside the same classroom. Specifically, teachers from these two contexts described how many students were excluded from the opportunity to learn simply because of a lack in technical provisions. They further elaborated that the situation was even

tougher on parents who had several children who needed to use technological devices and the Internet at the same time. Accordingly, their professional agency was completely hindered as one Moroccan public school teacher explained as follows:

> Our students are very poor, and some don't have a phone, others don't have Internet, only very few students interacted with the material. We tried to collaborate and help, but the problem was beyond us. Everybody was struggling with this new situation.

A second contextual factor pertained to the *quality of teacher training opportunities* offered either by the schools or by the ministries of education. In Qatari and Kuwaiti private schools, there was a certain degree of satisfaction by the training opportunities offered within the school. Many teachers (N = 7/10) believed their school administrations to offer much needed training support, as one teacher from Kuwait commented:

> The training offered by the school was huge, the support was limitless. The school trained us on all the learning platforms we were required to use. They also trained us on how to teach using these platforms, how to plan lessons, and how to curate content, even how to manage our classroom and assess students. The school continued to offer this training till today.

By contrast, in Qatari and Kuwaiti public schools, the majority of teachers (N = 11/12) were skeptical about the training they received from their ministries of education, claiming that “they were general and insufficient, because they only covered the basic skills, and there was no time for practice,” as one teacher from Qatar explained. Kuwaiti public school teachers were equally dissatisfied with training opportunities which “focused on technical skills, and excluded the pedagogical aspects, such as online teaching strategies and classroom management,” as a Kuwaiti teacher contended. While such training may have been regarded as low quality, in the Lebanese and Moroccan public schools, all teachers reported a total lack of training opportunities, whether directly from their schools or from their respective ministries of education.

A third factor influencing teachers’ professional agency, specifically in Lebanese, Qatari and Kuwaiti private schools, was *support from school leadership*. Several teachers (N = 10/16) discussed ways in which they were encouraged to play an active role in decision making by their school principals. This meant some teachers “were appointed as leaders in their departments for training other teachers in technology,” while others “shared their experiences and challenges with students, parents, technology, and workload, and suggested solutions that would be suitable for everyone,” as discussed by two teachers in Qatar. In Lebanese private schools, leadership support was commended in giving teachers more agency and participation in decision-making, as commented below:

> We had complete freedom and autonomy to work together and take decisions in regards to teaching and learning … because the school trusted us and they gave us the freedom to act, this made our experience most successful.

Similarly, a private school teacher from Kuwait explained the collaborative decision-making process which her school initiated during school closures. She explained this process as follows:

> The school principal presented her vision and ideas for ways to move forward, but she always asked the teachers if they had a different vision or other ideas. So if the principal and the entire team together thought my idea was better, we would change and decide on the idea I had suggested.

A final factor in this section was mostly influential in public schools across the four contexts and pertained to *ministerial directives*. An extreme example of this influence could be seen in the Kuwaiti context, as all teachers explained the way the ministry prohibited any form of continued learning until the beginning of the new academic year. Though less restrictive, ministerial directives in Lebanese, Qatari, and Moroccan private schools were also reported as equally binding; “teachers had to wait for the ministry before they could do anything, and mostly the ministry issued too many confusing and contradictory statements,” as one teacher from Qatar explained. One teacher described the way professional agency was restricted in Kuwait in this comment:

> There were many initiatives by teachers who announced they were going to continue teaching online. The ministry surprised them when it issued a strict directive which pronounced harsh consequences on teachers who did. It was the most depressing time for teachers who couldn't do anything for their students; knowing that many students' well-being suffered as a consequence.

All teachers from Kuwaiti public schools further believed that ministerial directives continued to restrict teachers' professional agency even after schools reopened. They reported strict guidelines for the duration of synchronous and asynchronous lessons, including instructions for curriculum coverage, assessment procedures, and teacher-student interactions. One teacher's frustration over these regulations could be heard in this comment:

> The way they divided the lesson didn't take into consideration students' ability to understand scientific concepts. With only half the time allocated for each lesson, there isn't enough time to teach the entire curriculum, without any necessary adjustments, what is happening is disastrous!

1.11. Discussion and practical implications

This study aimed to compare the ways teachers in four countries, Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait and Morocco, enacted professional agency in their diverse and shifting educational contexts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While many differences could be detected within and across the participating countries, nonetheless, the study also highlighted the similarities in teachers' responses to educational disruption and approaches to solving educational problems in their unique contexts. Accordingly, the study revealed that professional agency was manifested within three main spaces, namely (i) *initiating teaching and learning activities for students*, (ii) *engaging in individual and collaborative learning opportunities*, and (iii) *establishing new partnerships with multiple stakeholders*. Additionally, this study aimed to reveal the factors which supported or hindered their agency within these contexts. Previous studies have confirmed that teachers' professional agency is influenced by personal, relational and contextual factors (Campbell-Wilcox, 2018; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Jääskelä et al., 2017). Similarly, several factors were identified as either supporting or hindering teachers’ professional agency to varying degrees across the four countries.

Teachers' capacities and agentic actions were, for the most part, based on moral grounds. Many of the activities for which participating teachers took part were self-initiated, self-regulated, and oriented towards their students' wholistic well-being. Unlike educational change prompted by reform initiatives (Pyhältö et al., 2014), the situation during the transition to online learning left little choice for individual teachers and teacher communities but to respond purposefully and seek solutions for the emerging educational problems during this time (Campbell, 2020). Notwithstanding the importance of contextual factors, teachers' engagement in active and collaborative learning opportunities constituted a main catalyst for their construction and implementation of new pedagogical practices (Pyhältö et al., 2014). Teachers' capacities and agentic actions, thus, became central to continued student learning in ways never experienced before the pandemic. While restrictive personal factors, including an increased workload and a lack of prior experience with technology, may have been problematic in previous attempts to instigate the use of educational technology in K-12 classrooms (Tondeur et al., 2016; Yurtseven Avci et al., 2020), their influence on moving forward with the change to online learning were only minimal. In accord with Hargreaves and Fullan's (2020) observations, autonomy and collaboration were equally commended by participating teachers, as they initiated personal learning opportunities through the interplay of these situative forms of online professional development opportunities.

Further, in order to sustain the centrality of their new roles, teachers practiced professional agency by way of establishing new partnerships. As teachers acknowledged the new role of parents as key actors in the different contexts, they also became cognizant that expending effort and time on learning and preparing new pedagogical practices would not suffice without buy-in from parents. Accordingly, teachers engaged in constructive communication processes, through which they were able to raise parents' awareness of the importance of online learning. Despite such efforts, teachers were not always successful in getting parents to become true partners in continued student learning; constituting a relational factor which hindered teachers' professional agency. They further explained the variations among parents' commitments, educational backgrounds, and circumstances as defining factors influencing whether students engaged completely, partially, or not at all in continued learning opportunities. Hargreaves and &Fullan, 2020 described similar circumstances and relationships with parents during the pandemic, and called for more open professionalism that is actively inclusive of parents, as influential stakeholders. Accordingly, they encouraged schools to support parents in developing the skills they needed to support their children's learning in productive ways. More specifically, these newly developed relationships should become institutionalized and systematic; i.e., as part of regular school procedures and focused on students' learning and well-being.

As indicated in prior research (Campbell-Wilcox, 2018; Vahasantanen, 2015), teachers' active agency in educational change occurs within the socio-cultural contexts and practices of the school community, and thus must be facilitated in these working environments. That said, teachers' professional agency in this study was supported when socio-cultural contexts were (1) well-resourced with technical requirements, (2) provided situative and continuous professional development opportunities, (3) entailed supportive school leadership, and (4) mitigated ministerial directives. By contrast, teachers experienced a lack of or weak professional agency when there existed a deficiency in these contextual factors.

For one, in the Lebanese and Moroccan contexts especially, teachers' professional agency was hindered due to issues of equity, inclusion and connectivity which surfaced in most public schools, specifically those serving students from lower SES. While suffering from this digital divide before the pandemic, the extent and influence of such disparities between and among countries were exacerbated during the forced school closures (UNESCO, 2020). With their professional agency hindered, many teachers were unable to support their students in these contexts, who were consequently deprived of continued learning opportunities at a scale unimagined in the past. Confronting issues of social inequalities has never been more necessary (Hollweck & Doucet, 2020), and it is no longer possible to ignore multiple calls for education policies that tackle these issues seriously, despite the little chance of that happening. In this sense, Sahlberg (2020) argued that the pandemic was a good reminder that in transforming schools, "we should learn to rely less on policy-driven reforms and more on successful ideas that have worked in various cultural settings and powerful networks that are spreading them without the mandate of the authorities" (p. 2). This does not eliminate the role of policy in fixing technical inequalities, but alludes to the importance of arriving at a deeper understanding of issues of equity among policy-makers.

Second, current findings revealed that teachers' initiation of authentic professional learning activities, which entailed individual and collaborative activities among teachers in a school can be attained and should be further supported in the future (Margolis & Strom, 2020). According to current findings, participating teachers considered the professional development activities sufficient when they took their own existing knowledge and skills into account, offered opportunities for practice, and were connected to specific pedagogical applications. Otherwise, they considered these activities generic, technical and insufficient to achieve intended outcomes. While most teachers relied on their own capacities in initiating individual and collaborative learning, as discussed above, the fact remains that more systematic solutions can also be offered by school leadership and ministries of education in order to cultivate a professional workforce; one which can innovate and learn collaboratively whenever the need arises (Campbell, 2020). There is, thus a need to sustain teachers' individual and collective agentic actions which resulted in improved professional learning and collaboration in their responses to the pandemic (Campbell, 2020). Arguably, opportunities for enhancing teachers' individual and collective agency, such as those offered through theory-driven interventions (see Pyhältö et al., 2014), may hold some promise in facilitating teachers' sense of professional agency in shifting educational contexts. However, it must also be noted that instituting educational change in complex systems has recently become further complicated, and long-term solutions for teacher professional development are needed (Hollweck & Doucet, 2020; Yurtseven Avci et al., 2020), specifically those which take into account the lessons learned from reflecting on current developments in teacher learning. In this sense, the future of teachers' professional development, specifically in supporting sustainable education in disruptive contexts, should take a professional capital approach (see Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Through this approach to professional development, teachers are encouraged to work collectively on initiating learning opportunities that are systematically organized to target human capital (their technological knowledge and skills, and moral orientation to education), decisional capital (their professional and collective agency, and ability to make judgements), and social capital (their engagement in collaborative networks and relationships with colleagues, parents and others in the larger school community) (Hollweck & Doucet, 2020).

Also, the support of school leadership was commended as a facilitating factor of teachers' professional agency within the contextual space. Specifically, several teachers in Lebanese, Qatari

and Kuwaiti private schools welcomed the opportunity to engage in delegated teacher leadership roles, as they enacted professional agency through participating in decision-making and voicing their professional judgements. The importance of leadership support has been well-documented in extant literature (Lawson et al., 2017; Supovitz & Spillane, 2015), as researchers assert that the enactment of professional agency prospers within contexts where teachers are freed from strict social guidelines and administrative requirements, and they are able to make important decisions concerning their work (Campbell-Wilcox, 2018; Vahasantanen, 2015). One lesson learned from this experience is that school leaders can promote teachers' agency without minimizing their own managerial initiatives, similar to the ways some participating teachers working in private schools reported about their school principals. In striking this balance between teachers' professional agency and school principal's leadership and managerial roles, Vahasantanen (2015) proposed dialogical work conferences as a way to strengthen collaborative and participatory development among all actors in the school organization. Specifically within the current contexts of educational disruption, joint discussions may lead to shared understandings and collective responsibility for the multiple and fast-paced decisions which were made during the abrupt transition to online learning. Similar discussions will be needed in reflecting on and planning for post-pandemic pedagogies; deciding upon which practices should be sustained and which should be revised, improved or rejected. These discussions are considered another key source of social capital fostering professional collaboration among members of the school community (Hollweck & Doucet, 2020).

Lastly, contextual factors which restricted teachers' professional agency constituted binding ministerial directive. In the most extreme case of restricted professional agency, ministerial directives in the Kuwaiti context revealed teachers' inability to exert any effort to influence decision-making, which led to discontinued student learning for an extended duration of time. In other words, participants engaged in non-agentive actions (Ukkonen-Mikkola & Varpanen, 2020), as they lacked the autonomy to solve the problem of discontinued student learning. Feelings of anxiety and frustration were noted by participating teachers from this context as they were aware of the short-term consequences on students' well-being, and the long-term effects on student learning. In other public school contexts, teachers also complained about the lack of involvement with decision-making and top-down regulations which impeded their professionalism and agency, and consequently their decisional capital (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). These findings share similarities with other large-scale changes implemented in public schools through top-down models (Du & Chaaban, 2020; Romanowski & Du, 2020). Accordingly, and as documented in multiple studies worldwide (Campbell-Wilcox, 2018; Vahasantanen, 2015), teachers come to see themselves as the recipients of change, rather than as active change agents. In order to increase teachers' commitment, readiness, and contribution to change, they must be given the opportunity to participate more actively in decision-making, they must be trusted to make choices and participate in problem-solving practices based on professional judgement, and they must be treated as autonomous professional agents (Hollweck & Doucet, 2020; Pyhältö et al., 2014; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Varpanen, 2020).

While many Arab education systems have long been centralized, the time has come to consider teachers as autonomous and agentic professionals who can employ innovative educational practices under stressful circumstances and according to their own judgments. The variations in responses between public and private schools, across the four countries, provided evidence for the way teachers took actions and initiatives which influenced learning for themselves, their students, and their colleagues. However, when ministerial directives were restrictive of their agency, teachers' efforts were suspended and opportunities for continued learning were missed. If teachers are expected to play key roles in future large-scale school development, then the time is right to begin contemplating suitable degrees of decentralized systems; from delegation to devolution (see Romanowski & Du, 2020), which can hold more promise in the diverse Arab contexts. As opposed to borrowed educational reforms or decentralized systems imposed in a top-down approach, scholars, policymakers, school leaders and teachers must work together in developing reform proposals that are sensitive to the characteristics of local cultures and contexts (Romanowski & Du, 2020).

2. Limitations and conclusion

Overall, the study illustrated ways in which teachers in four Arab countries enacted professional agency. However, the small sample size, characteristic of qualitative research designs, has limited the generalizability of the findings, and caution should be taken when considering the relevance of these finding to different contexts. It is also important to recognize the variations in personal, relational, and contextual factors which may occur across the countries, let alone among schools within the same country context, and which may influence teachers' enactment of professional agency. Within the constraints of a research article, it was not possible to explore all the complex and challenging factors influencing teachers' professional agency, specifically as these contexts continue to shift and change. Continued research is needed, either as follow-up of the findings in this study engaging a representative sample of teachers, or as follow-up of the shifting educational contexts as new pedagogies evolve.

Despite these limitations, this study was successful in highlighting teachers' capacities and agentic actions as they responded to disruptive education in four Arab contexts, and revealed salient issues and developments influencing their professional agency across these contexts. The implications of the study for practice, professional development, and policy further emphasized the need for teachers to become key players working alongside multiple stakeholders in rethinking the future of schooling in light of teacher professional agency and the factors influencing its enactment. Exploring teachers' current experiences during the pandemic has revealed the fluctuating strength of teachers' professional agency within different contexts and situations, and in some cases, the total absence of agency. Thus, one important lesson learned from the pandemic is the necessity of affording teachers greater agency in the development of practice and policy (Campbell, 2020), leading to higher quality decision-making and greater engagement in professional learning.

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