Teacher agency: what is it and why does it matter?

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Abstract

The concept of teacher agency has emerged in recent literature as an alternative means of understanding how teachers might enact practice and engage with policy (e.g. Lasky, 2005; Leander & Osbourne, 2008; Ketelaar et al., 2012; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2013). But what is agency? Agency remains an inexact and poorly conceptualised construct in much of the literature, where it is often not clear whether the term refers to an individual capacity of teachers to act agentically or to an emergent 'ecological' phenomenon dependent upon the quality of individuals' engagement with their environments (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In this chapter, we outline the latter conception of agency, developing a conceptual model for teacher agency that emphasizes the temporal and relational dimension of the achievement of agency. Why does this matter? Recent curriculum policy in many countries heralds a [re]turn to the centrality of the teacher in school-based curriculum development. In many cases, this renewed emphasis on teachers is explicitly tied to change agendas, with teachers described as agents of change. And yet such change agentry (Fullan, 2003) and teacher agency more broadly are often circumscribed by features of the contexts within which teachers work – for example accountability mechanisms and other forms of output regulation of teachers' work – leading to engagement with policy that is often instrumental and blighted by unintended consequences. In the chapter, we illustrate how a detailed understanding of teacher agency and the conditions under which it is achieved offer considerable potential in enabling teachers to engage with curricular policy in more meaningful ways.

Introduction

Powerful discourses recently driving global education policy have emphasised the important role of teachers as the most significant within-school influence on school improvement (OECD, 2005; McKinsey & Co., 2007). Such discourses have been accompanied by at least two key trends within education policies in many countries. First, there is an emerging tendency in curriculum policy to construct teachers explicitly as agents of change (e.g. Goodson, 2003; Priestley, 2011a; Nieveen, 2011). Thus, the last ten years have witnessed the development of new forms of national curriculum in a range of countries, for example Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (see: Sinnema & Aitken, 2013; Priestley & Sinnema, 2014). Intrinsic to these developments is a renewed vision of teachers as active developers of curriculum, a significant shift given several decades of policies that have actively deprofessionalised teachers through highly prescriptive curricula (Priestley & Biesta, 2013). Second, parallel education policies have strongly emphasised the need to improve the quality of teachers through programmes of continuous professional formation, through for instance the development of teacher professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2005; Daly et al., 2010), the institution of new teacher standards and calls for teaching to become a master's level profession. In Scotland, such discourses are strongly reflected in the report *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Donaldson, 2010).

The emerging trends outlined above are problematic for a number of reasons. At a rhetorical level at least, they suggest a [re]turn to bottom-up approaches that put the teacher at the centre of the

educational process, following decades of prescriptive, top-down teacher-proof curricula. However, it is debateable whether the rhetoric is matched by actual moves towards greater teacher autonomy and influence. While tight curricular prescription of content – input, 'front door' regulation of teachers' work – appears to have become less fashionable in many countries in recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the frequency and extent of output, 'backdoor' regulation – for example through school inspections and the evaluative use of attainment data (Kuiper, Nieveen & Berkvens, 2013). This has arguably done more to erode teacher autonomy than was the case under former, ostensibly more prescriptive approaches (Biesta, 2004). This 'giving with one hand and taking away with the other' (Leat, 2013) has been associated with the development of performative cultures in school and instrumental decision-making by teachers (Sahlberg, 2010; Keddie, Mills & Pendergast, 2011; Wilkins, 2011). Put simply, policy demands that teachers exercise agency in their working practices, then simultaneously denies them the means to do so, effectively disabling them; such policy overtly focuses on the individual dimensions of what is means to be an effective teacher, while ignoring or subverting the cultural and structural conditions which play an important role in enabling this to happen. This raises important questions about the relative balance between input and output regulation (ibid.; Leat, Livingston & Priestley, 2013). We would argue that the either/or-isms and pendulum swings witnessed in recent years between each extreme of this continuum are problematic, and that while tight prescription is counter-productive, policy ceding complete autonomy to schools is similarly unhelpful. Instead, what is needed is a sensible framing of curricular purposes and processes within policy (Biesta, 2009), or in other words a framework of specification that enables rather than constrains the development of constructive practices by teachers (Kuiper, Nieveen & Berkvens, 2013).

It is in this context that the concept of teacher agency is helpful, and indeed it has emerged in recent literature as an alternative means of understanding how teachers might enact practice and engage with policy (e.g. Lasky, 2005; Leander & Osbourne, 2008; Ketelaar et al., 2012; Pyhältö, Soini, & Pietarinen, 2012; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2013; Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini, 2014). Nevertheless, the concept of teacher agency itself is not unproblematic: agency remains an inexact and poorly conceptualised construct in much of the literature, where it is often not clear whether the term refers to an individual capacity of teachers to act agentically or to an emergent 'ecological' phenomenon dependent upon the quality of individuals' engagement with their environments (Biesta & Tedder, 2007); and teacher agency often remains linked to often narrow agendas of school improvement, where agency is construed more narrowly as 'change agentry' (Fullan, 2003), teachers positioned as implementers of someone else's policy, and schools represented as being in deficit and in need of reform. In this chapter, we offer an alternative view of teacher agency, developing an ecological conceptualisation of agency that emphasises the importance of both <u>agentic capacity</u> and <u>agentic spaces</u> in shaping agency, and moreover views the <u>achievement of agency</u> as a temporal process (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This is an important conceptual distinction, often overlooked in writing about agency, which is crucial to our analysis of teacher agency. In the sections which follow, we first provide an overview of this theorisation of agency, before returning to the question of why this increasingly matters in the current context of education.

What is teacher agency?

Agency
Our interest here lies in understanding the phenomenon of agency itself, rather than in explaining its role in shaping and determining social action. Developing a strong conceptualisation of the notion of agency, allows us to ask how agency is 'achieved' in concrete settings and under particular 'ecological' conditions and circumstances (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Our perspective on agency therefore differs from the sociological concept of agency as a variable in social action (for example in the longstanding structure/agency debate). Rather than seeing agency as residing in individuals as a

property or capacity, the ecological view of agency sees agency as an emergent phenomenon of the ecological conditions through which it is enacted.

> [T]his concept of agency highlights that actors always act <u>by means</u> of their environment rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the <u>interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations.</u> (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137; emph. added).

Agency, in other words, is not something that people can have; it is something that people do or, more precisely, something they achieve (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). It denotes a 'quality' of the engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves. Viewing agency in such terms helps us to understand how humans are able to be reflexive and creative, acting counter to societal constraints, but also how individuals are enabled and constrained by their social and material environments.

Agency, in this view, is both temporal and relational. We draw here on Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who have theorised agency with the dual aim of robustly conceptualising agency and overcoming the theoretical one-sidedness of existing theories of agency which, in their view, tend to focus either on routine, or on purpose, or on judgement. They make a case for a theory of agency which encompasses the dynamic interplay between these three dimensions and which takes into consideration 'how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action' (ibid., p.963). For this reason they suggest that the achievement of agency should be understood as a configuration of influences from the past, orientations towards the future and engagement with the present. They refer to these three dimensions as the <u>iterational</u>, the <u>projective</u> and the <u>practical-evaluative</u> dimension respectively. In concrete actions all three dimensions play a role, but the degree to which they contribute varies. This is why Emirbayer and Mische speak of a '<u>chordal triad</u> of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones' (ibid., p.972; emphasis in original). Thus, they define agency as '<u>the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations</u>' (ibid., p.970; emph. in original). Agency thus appears as a 'temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and 'acted out' in the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment)' (ibid., p.963).

Teacher agency

While agency *per se* has been extensively theorised, teacher agency – in other words, agency that is theorised specifically in respect of the activities of teachers in schools – has not received the attention it deserves. There has been little explicit research or theory development (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007) about this 'vague' concept (Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini, 2012) and existing change models tend to both underplay and misconstrue the role of teacher agency in educational innovation (Leander & Osborne, 2008). In this section of the chapter, we briefly set out our ecological model for understanding teacher agency, drawing explicitly on the temporal/relational conception of agency outlined by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). The diagram below represents the key dimensions of the model, illustrating the ways in which we analytically separate out key elements of each dimension. With regard to the iterational dimension we distinguish between the influence of the more general life histories of teachers and their more specific professional histories (which include both their own education as a teacher and the accumulated experience of being a teacher). With regard to the projective dimension we distinguish between short term and long(er)

term orientations of action. And with regard to the practical-evaluative dimension we make a distinction between cultural, structural and material aspects.
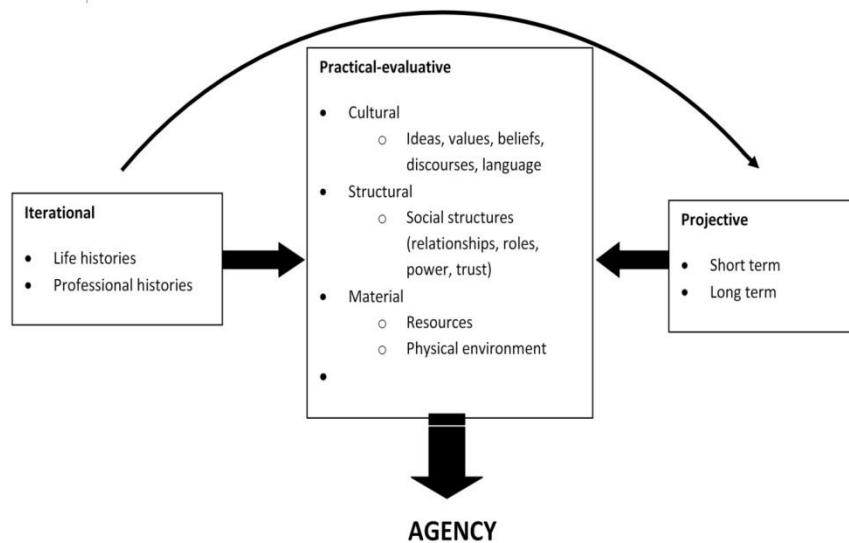
(First published in Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2013)

The model highlights that the achievement of agency is always informed by past experience – and in the particular case of teacher agency this concerns both professional and personal experience. The model also emphasises that the achievement of agency is always orientated towards the future in some combination of short[er] term and long[er] term objectives and values. And it illustrates that agency is always enacted in a concrete situation, therefore both being constrained and supported by cultural, structural and material resources available to actors. The following sections outline these ideas in more detail.

The iterational dimension of agency

Emirbayer's and Mische's ideas are helpful because they first of all show that agency doesn't come from nowhere but builds upon past achievements, understandings and patterns of action. This is expressed in the iterational element of agency which has to do with 'the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time' (ibid., p.971; emph. in original). A key word here is 'selective'. Emirbayer and Mische note that while some writers suggest that 'the agentic reactivation of schemes inculcated through past experience tends to correspond to (and thus reproduce) societal patterns' (ibid., p.981), this level of routinisation does not have to be the case. Actors do not always act from habit, following routinised patterns of behaviour, but are able to recognise, appropriate and refashion past patterns of behaviours and experience as they seek to manoeuvre among repertoires in dealing with present dilemmas and engage in expectation maintenance in their orientations to the future. A key implication here, is that actors able to draw upon a rich repertoire of experience might be expected to be able to develop more expansive orientations to the future and draw upon a greater range of responses to the dilemmas and problems of the present context, than might be the case with their more experientially impoverished compatriots.

In respect of teachers, we would point to a number of iterational aspects which contribute to teacher agency. These include personal capacity (skills and knowledge), beliefs (professional and personal) and values. What these have in common is their rooting in past experiences. Clearly, for the teachers of tomorrow, it is important to attend now, in present contexts, to the nature of what will become those past experiences. This is where the importance of teacher education lies, not only

in providing teachers with such resources, but also making them reflectively available, so that rather than a set of practical skills or competences they can become resources for judgement and action (see also Biesta, in press). Such education (both initial education and continuing professional development) should thus focus on what we term resource building and reflective engagement – and if the focus is to be on developing agents of change and professional developers of the curriculum, then programmes of professional development should focus on interrupting habitual and socially reinforced ways of thinking about schooling and to encourage a reflective mind set. Arguably, this should include a thorough engagement with question of educational purpose and with the principles of curriculum development and enactment.

Nevertheless, professional education forms only a small part of the formation of teachers' professional experience. Day to day experience in schools – dialogue with colleagues, exposure to school culture, and other professional engagement would seem to be significant too. Restrictive contexts which deprofessionalise teachers must surely have long term consequences on future teacher development. It might also be argued that teachers working in less innovative schools are less likely to experience a wider repertoire of responses to problematic situations than colleagues in schools where innovation is encouraged and supported – although it is important to bear in mind the distinction between innovation for innovation's sake and an orientation towards improvement, which sometimes also can mean resisting demands for change. Moreover, professional experience is perhaps less significant than personal experience in shaping teacher agency. Teachers' own schooling must be significant in the development of the capacity to question and innovate. Professional experience outwith education is another significant and interesting pointer to the sorts of agency achieved by teachers. For instance, recent research (Priestley et al., 2012) suggests that teachers with significant experience of working in other professions might have a wider repertoire for manoeuvre when faced with the challenges and ambiguities of the teacher's day to day work. It is interesting to reflect upon the sorts of experiences that might contribute to the future development of the sorts of qualities and capacities required by teachers if they are to become the sorts of active, professional agents of change envisaged in some policies. In turn there are significance implications here for those charged with configuring educational contexts.

The projective dimension of agency

Emirbayer and Mische's approach also acknowledges, that agency is in some way 'motivated,' that is, that it is linked to the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past. This is encapsulated in the projective element of agency which encompasses 'the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future' (ibid., p.971., emph. in original). Such a process of continual imaginative reconstruction of the future involves 'draw[ing] upon past experiences in order to clarify motives, goals and intentions, to locate possible future constraints, and to identify morally and practically appropriate courses of action' (p. 989). An implication here is that people who are able to form expansive projections about their future trajectories might be expected to achieve greater levels of agency that those whose aspirations are more limited, at least to the extent that they have access to a wider repertoire of alternative futures. Whether such a repertoire is translated into action does, of course, not only depend on the repertoire itself but also on the contextual conditions under which teachers act (see below).

The projective dimension of teacher agency concerns teachers' aspirations in respect of their work – both long term and short term. Such aspirations may be entirely positive, relating to the development and welfare of students (Lasky, 2005), and lead to agency that is protective of students' interests (Osborn et al., 1997). Such agency may support policy intentions, or it may run counter to them (ibid.; Ladwig, 2010). In both cases, it can be driven by sincerely held, often long term aspirations rooted strongly in teachers' values and beliefs (Belo et al., 2014). Or aspirations

may be more narrowly instrumental, for example maintaining a 'normal desirable state' in the classroom (Brown & McIntyre, 1992) or 'playing the game' (Gleeson & Gunter, 2001). This game can take the form of fabrication of the school's image – careful impression management and discourses of excellence (Keddie, Mills & Pendergast, 2011) and the concealing of 'dirty laundry' (Cowie, Taylor & Croxford, 2007), as well as more serious corruption and cheating (Ball, 2003; Sahlberg, 2010). The forms of agency evident in these latter cases are clearly quite different to those in the former example, motivated by quite different aspirations, and often the result of systems of accountability and performativity that create perverse drivers and incentives.

Whatever the form these aspirations take, and whatever the motivation for them, we suggest that they are invariably largely rooted in teachers' prior experiences. Thus we must not under-estimate the importance of strongly held beliefs about subject identity, for example, or teachers' motivations to do their best for their students, as these are important in shaping the form aspirations will take. Teachers' prior professional experiences will help form such aspirations. Thus, for example, a previous experience of a negative school inspection may make teachers risk averse in their work, and hence aspirations are narrowed and agency circumscribed. It is our view that the types of teacher agency emerging in schools today has been significantly shaped by the past two decades of managerialism in education. Data emerging from our recent research in Scotland (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, in press) suggest a link between past contexts and experiences and teachers' ability to frame expansive aspirations in their professional work. Our findings here are consistent with Salomon's (1992) argument that such approaches represent a derogation of teacher responsibility. He posited three types of teacher responsibility:

* A proper carrying out of role as teacher (necessary whether a teacher is transmitting content or orchestrating activity).
* Responsibility for learning processes and outcomes.
* Serious consideration of method and content in the light of normative and moral criteria – i.e. consideration of long term educational purposes and values. This responsibility is about 'giving serious consideration to the desirable and less desirable long-term effects of the constantly improvised learning environment' (p.46).

Data from our own research suggest that the teachers in our project were highly efficient in getting the job done, despite inevitable difficulties encountered in terms of social, cultural and material constraints on their work. These teachers had a large repertoire of technical responses to enable their lessons to run smoothly. They were effective in achieving certain short-term goals, for example introducing new forms of pedagogy that were deemed suitable for Curriculum for Excellence. However, the data suggest a fairly narrow engagement with consideration of the longer term 'effects' of education – 'desirable residues to be manifested later on' (ibid., p.44).

The practical-evaluative dimension of agency
Although agency is involved with the past and the future, it can only ever be 'acted out' in the present, which is precisely what is expressed in the practical-evaluative dimension, which entails 'the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations' (ibid., p.971, emph. in original). Judgements are both practical – shaped by the affordances and constraints of the context – and evaluative – for example judgements of risk in any give situation or judgement in relation to views about what is educationally desirable. Emirbayer's and Mische's analysis emphasises the importance of context and structure in that agency is seen as the 'temporally constructed engagement with different structural environments' (ibid., p.970). The combination of context and time highlights that it is not only important to understand agency in terms of the individual's lifecourse. It is at the very same time important to understand transformations of contexts-for-action over time. According to Emirbayer and Mische, such contexts

are primarily to be understood as social contexts in that agency is 'always a dialogical process by and through which actors immersed in temporal passage engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action' (ibid., p.974). However, we would argue that such contexts are also material, in that agency is partly shaped by the availability of physical resources and the nature of physical constraints.

Teaching has been characterised as a profession which is rife with ambiguity (e.g. Helsby, 1999), laden with emotional politics (Hargreaves, 1998), context dependent and contestable in terms of its aims. Teachers make daily decisions that are difficult, involving compromise and at times conflict with their aspirations, feeling coerced by what they might see as arbitrary and unnecessary intrusions into their work. Moreover they do so often on the basis of insufficient time to reflect and to engage in professional dialogue with colleagues. Thus, the practical-evaluative dimension forms a major influence on agency, powerfully shaping (and often distorting) decision making and action, both offering possibilities for agency (for example by making resources available) and inhibiting it (for example by creating perceptions of unacceptable risk). For the purposes of this chapter, we briefly offer the following two exemplar themes to illustrate the sorts of factors that act as part of the practical-evaluative dimension of teacher agency.

The first concerns conflicting pressures in teachers' work. In Scotland, for example, Reeves (2008) has documented tensions between a new curriculum that opens up possibilities for teacher agency, and quality improvement initiative (based around inspections, self-evaluation and attainment) that have been shown to corrode it (Helsby, 1999; Biesta, 2004; Perryman, 2012). Such tensions between input and output regulation can create impossible dilemmas for teachers, and as noted previously in the chapter can lead to instrumental decision-making. The second theme relates to relationships in schools. In Scotland, for example, many secondary schools are organised hierarchically, with strong vertical structures, but more limited horizontal relationships. Research (e.g. Coburn & Russell, 2008) suggests that schools which develop effective structures to encourage such relationships cope more effectively with new policy, enabling teachers to engage dialogically with, and make sense of new policy. Coburn and Russell point to two aspects of such relationships: 1] tie strength (engendering trust); and 2] tie span – relationships that extend beyond the school breaking cycles of inward looking practice, and allowing access to external, expert knowledge. Our research in Scotland (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, in press) strongly supports these conclusions, suggesting that, other factors being equal, teachers in schools affording strong relational resources achieve higher degrees of agency than their counterparts in schools where such resources are more limited.

Why does teacher agency matter?

Teacher agency can be therefore characterised as an emergent phenomenon, something that occurs or is achieved within continually shifting contexts over time, and with orientations towards past, future and present which differ within each and every instance of agency achieved. But why does this matter? Why is it important to understand how teacher agency occurs in educational settings? We offer, in this concluding section, a number of reasons why we believe that it is vital to understand teacher agency in the way outlined above, and the conditions which both make it possible and shape its manifestations.

A key implication is that, if agency is achieved rather than being solely about the capacity of actors, then the importance of context should be taken more seriously by public policymakers and leaders in public organisations, as such contexts may serve to disable individuals with otherwise high agentic capacity. A key point here is that, while teachers may come to a situation equipped with substantial capacity (e.g. skills and knowledge) and strong educational aspirations, innovation may simply prove to be too difficult, or too risky to enact. This also shows why the language of 'capacity building' is misleading as it seems to suggest that they key to teachers' agency lies with their capacity, rather

than with the interplay of what teachers 'bring' to the situation and what the situation 'brings' to the teacher, that is, inhibits or promotes. A further corollary of this lies in the conclusion that, if agency today is influenced by experiences from the past, then we can conclude that today's contexts will impact upon the future agency of teachers. Such conclusions have clear implications for those designing public policy today, particularly when the goal is to raise teacher capacity, for example their ability to develop a new national curriculum. As we noted earlier, public policy in respect of teacher development tends to focus on raising the capacity of teachers as individual actors; our view is that it needs to attend more explicitly to the cultural and structural domains which frame teachers' work.

A second implication lies in an observation by Emirbayer and Mische that what might pass for agency is not necessarily so. For example, agency may be involved in the reproduction of social patterns through active resistance to change, when to the casual observer what seems to be occurring is habitual behaviour by the actors concerned, or a lack of agency in the face of insurmountable problems. Priestley (2011b) documents the case of a teacher in just such a situation – someone swimming against the tide in a difficult environment, who nevertheless managed to hold true to deeply held principles. By contrast, 'actors who feel creative and deliberative while in the flow of unproblematic trajectories' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p.1008) may not be achieving high levels of agency, as they simply go with the flow.

This is an important implication when one considers the difference between autonomy and agency. As we noted in the opening part of the chapter, many critics of current policy advocate autonomy as a means of freeing up schools and enabling change. However, autonomy (understood here as a comparative absence of regulation) does not necessarily equate to agency. Teachers granted autonomy may simply fail to achieve agency as they, for example, habitually reproduce past patterns of behaviour, or as they lack cognitive and relational resources. Conversely, agency may be shaped and enhanced by policy that specifies goals and processes, enhancing the capability of teachers to manoeuvre between repertoires, make decisions and frame future actions.

An example of this is provided by recent development work conducted in Scotland within a University/Local Authority partnership (Drew & Priestley, 2014). Here teachers worked with university researchers over the course of a full school year to develop the curriculum, drawing upon a various cognitive resources. These included the goals of Curriculum for Excellence – the capabilities and attributes specified under the headings of the Four Capacities (Scottish Executive, 2004) – laid down in the policy framework, as well as a clearly defined process for school-based curriculum development through collaborative professional enquiry facilitated by university-based researchers (Priestley & Minty, 2012; Reeves & Drew, 2013). At the early stages of the project many participating teachers reported low confidence, confusion about curricular aims, tensions between conflicting messages in their work and a general sense of disempowerment. It is significant that involvement in the project led, in the majority of cases, to the subsequent achievement of agency by these teachers, suggesting how curricular specification might play a powerful role in enabling teacher agency. It is important to note here that these teachers were not simply implementing policy – this was not a case of teachers being manipulated into becoming agents of change. Nor were they being offered carte blanche to do whatever they wished. Instead, the affordances offered by the specification of goals and processes enabled them to become genuinely agentic as they actively developed and adapted the curriculum to meet both curricular goals and local needs.

In summary, therefore, the ecological approach to teacher agency offers considerable potential in enabling those who frame policies to more fully understand the implications of those policies for those who enact practice. It allows us to rigorously consider how the ecologies of teaching affect teacher decision-making and teacher actions. And it potentially enables teachers to become more reflexive about their professional working practices, as they take on responsibility for the long term

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development of the students they work with. In achieving these goals, the concept of teacher agency in general, and the ecological approach in particular, potentially offers a means for arresting and even reversing twenty five years of misguided regulation of the work of teachers.

Acknowledgment

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