# Explaining the “Key Topic”

# **Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice, 21(6), 624–640.**

…notions of agency and the self have always seemed inherently intertwined, agency has been far more difficult to define, although it has been viewed, understandably, as one of the many facets of the self. Thus, the idea of agency or our understanding of the nature of humans’ capacity for agency has been, to a large extent, determined by historically influential models that explain the nature of the self. (Author, p. 1)

But first, what is agency? By offering different definitions, the papers demonstrate just what a difficult question this is. My favourite explanation of agency is a relatively old one. It was offered by Charles Taylor in a 1997 essay, where he connected agency with both responsibility and self-evaluation, themes which resonate across the current collection of papers. (Edwards, 2015, p.779)

To be agentic we need to be able to make responsible strong judgements about the worth of our intentions when we take actions. Also we need to be able to evaluate for ourselves whether we have met the goals we have set ourselves. Taylor’s is not a narrow individualistic definition. Responsibility and connection to the wider good have long been concerns of his when discussing agency (1989, 1991) and are relevant to the public service that marks teaching. (Edwards, 2015, p.780)

There is an emerging tendency in curriculum policy in the UK and elsewhere to acknowledge the importance of teachers’ agency – that is, their active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions – for the overall quality of education (see, e.g. Goodson, 2003; Nieveen, 2011; Priestley, 2011). (p.624)

# Lesson from the research

Teacher agency plays a key role in teacher learning as manifested in collective efforts to confront, resist and work out pedagogical conflicts (Sannino, 2010).(p.347)

In relation to identity, teacher agency has been considered a crucial component of intentional individuals, underlying teachers' construction of themselves as professionals (Beijaard et al., 2004; Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). In other words, teacher agency is a core aspect of identity formation and development. Recent research, however, contends that teachers practise agency in line with who they say they are (Sloan, 2006). Teacher agency has been examined through teacher positioning (Kayi- Aydar, 2015; V€ah€asantanen & Etel€apelto, 2009), teachers' role (Campbell, 2012) and teachers' self-authored ‘I’ (Sloan, 2006), indicating that teachers' identity must be considered in terms of their agentic choices and actions. These studies indicate teacher identity mediates and shapes the practice of teacher agency particularly manifested in their classroom practices in the context of changing student populations (Kayi-Aydar, 2015) and shifting educational policies (Toom et al., 2015). (Tao & Gao, 2017, p.347)

# How does your research come out of this?

I would therefore like to make the case for slightly more attention, when studying teachers’ professional agency, to the dialectic and the demands experienced by teachers. (Edwards, 2015, p.781)