# **Vitanova, G., Miller, E., Gao, X., & Deters, P. (2015). Introduction to theorizing and analyzing agency in second language learning: Interdisciplinary approaches. In P. Deters, X. Gao, E. Miller, & G. Vitanova (Eds.), Theorizing and Analyzing Agency in Second Language Learning: Interdisciplinary Approaches (pp. 1–13). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.**

…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. (p. 1)

The self was seen not only as possessing an essential and unchanging core but also as independent and rational. Choice and action, which have come to be closely associated with agency, form an important component of this rational, individualistic self. For centuries, or at least ever since Aristotle, agency has also been associated with consciousness. (…) Deliberate, conscious choices and actions that are, at the same time, intrinsically moral underlie most Western perspectives on agency. Korgsaard’s excerpt also reflects that, for a long time, and in different disciplines, the relationship between agency and identity has been perceived as deeply entangled. Human actions and experience have occupied a central role as well. (…) Psychologists see the relationship between subjects, actions and experience as organic. Not all acts exemplify human agency, however. Agency requires not merely the ability to produce a change in the world, but also that acts should be knowingly, consciously undertaken by subjects. Thus, reflexivity has emerged as another significant component of agency (Kogler, 2012). (p. 2)

In contrast, in a movement that opposed modernism and came to be known as postmodernism, the self is viewed as decentralized and unstable. Perhaps most importantly in terms of agency, the self appears stripped of its personal autonomy. For instance, feminist poststructuralism (Weedon, 1997), which prefers the term subjectivity to identity and accentuates the discursive, languaged nature of selves, has been employed in applied linguistics exactly because of its focus on how discourses offer various positions for subjects. While there are different postmodern approaches, what characterizes them most broadly is an understanding of the self as constituted through language (Foucault, 1972; Lacan, 1977). (p. 2)

…postmodernists have emphasized the power structures that underlie human relationships. Yet these approaches are not entirely without their critics. A major point of criticism has been that they espouse a relativistic perspective. Another point of criticism that is more directly related to agency is that, while postmodern approaches take into account the larger, social and institutional structures, the role of the individual remains unclear and somewhat bleak. (p. 3)

Sociocultural perspectives have been proposed as an alternative to other approaches to the self exactly because of their focus on the complex interactions between individuals and communities, on the one hand, and human cognition and experience on the other. Instead of conceiving selves and agency as individual or autonomous phenomena, sociocultural approaches view them as the result of inter-subjective processes. Largely inspired by Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (1978) and Bakhtin’s dialogism (1981, 1984), such perspectives have foregrounded the mediated essence of agency. (p. 3)

Very much like cognition, which is understood to be socially mediated, agency too is regarded as developing in relation to social groups, not as a property of individuals. Language itself, as one of the key mediational means along with the processes of language learning, is regarded as intrinsically social as well. In cultural anthropology, Holland et al. (1998) have employed Vygotsky’s and Bakhtin’s ideas and applied them to explaining the development of identities and agency. These scholars reject traditional Western conceptions of essential individuals by suggesting, instead, that humans act as socially constructed selves, who ‘are subject to positioning by whatever powerful discourses they happen to encounter’ (Holland et al., 1998: 27). Holland et al. underscore that our identities are sociohistorical constructions and that the symbols of mediation that humans use are produced in active collaboration with other actors. (p. 3)

People’s capacity to act purposefully and reflectively as they engage in relationships with other human beings in turn prompts human beings to e-invent their own positions or re-imagine how they can act. Such a perspective seems to constitute the core of what most contemporary scholars believe about agency. In an often-cited article, linguistic anthropologist Ahearn (2001: 112) offers a provisional definition of agency that is not dissimilar from the definition above: ‘Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act’. (…) Instead of one form of agency, Ahearn proposes that perhaps different types should be considered and explored, for instance, oppositional agency, complicit agency or agency and intention, while keeping in mind that these different types of agency may actually overlap during any given action. (p. 4)

…scholars who have articulated the relevance of Activity Theory for understanding second language learning have stressed the relational aspect of agency for second language learners. Lantolf and Pavlenko (2001: 148), for example, contend that ‘agency is never a property of the individual but a relationship that is constantly constructed and renegotiated with those around the individual and with society at large’. (p. 5)

Although addressed by second language scholars only in the past decade and half, learner agency is increasingly regarded as a fundamental construct in language-learning processes and for language-learner identities (van Lier, 2008). This growing emphasis on learner agency reflects the broader shift in second language research to exploring learners as complex individuals whose language use, meaning-making and actions are mediated by their social and cultural worlds. In summarizing existing research, van Lier (2008) claims that there are three central characteristics when it comes to agency in language classrooms: the learner’s ability to self-regulate, the socially mediated nature of sociocultural context and an awareness of one’s responsibility for one’s own acts. Although van Lier does not specify it directly, ethics or moral responsibility is an important part of both the modern approaches to agency and Bakhtin’s (1984) dialogical framework of the self. Importantly, agency does not always imply active participation by learners in the classroom. Canagarajah (1999) has demonstrated how students can resist discourses in a Sri Lanka classroom and they, thus, employ agency by not participating actively in the classroom as a form of resistance. As attention to agency has grown and developed in second language scholarship, the approaches adopted and the definitions offered point to diversity rather than uniform understandings of learner agency. (p. 5)

…we regard interdisciplinarity as necessary for developing better understandings of agency in second language learning research, and we regard the lack of a single definition for agency as inevitable. Joseph (2006: 240), in fact, argues that ‘no single model is adequate’ for understanding agency in the larger context of applied linguistics research and contends that what researchers really need to focus on is ‘who has and lacks it in what contexts, and to devise ways of restoring it to those genuinely most deprived of it’ (Joseph, 2006: 239). (p. 6)

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

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)

This is a significant shift given several decades of policies that worked to de-professionalise teachers by taking agency away from them and replacing it with prescriptive curricula and oppressive regimes of testing and inspection (see Biesta, 2010). (p.624)

The [re]turn to teacher agency not only gives explicit permission to teachers to exert high[er] degrees of professional agency within the contexts in which they work, but actually sees agency as an important dimension of teachers’ professionalism. (p.624-625)

The project focused on the ways in which and the extent to which experienced teachers achieve agency in their day-to-day working contexts against the background of the introduction of the new curriculum, and on the factors that promote or inhibit such agency. (p.625)

Teacher agency, that is, agency that is theorised specifically in respect of the activities of teachers in schools, has been subject to little explicit research or theory development (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). While there is some literature that locates the concept in relation to wider theoretical discussions of agency (e.g. Pignatelli, 1993; Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2012), existing change models tend to both underplay and misconstrue the role of teacher agency in educational change (Leander & Osborne, 2008), albeit that a more interesting body of work is beginning to emerge (e.g. Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, in press). (p.625)

Our interest, however, is in the phenomenon of agency itself and in how agency is achieved in concrete settings and in and through particular ecological conditions and circumstances (see Biesta & Tedder, 2006). This ecological understanding of agency is not sociological but has its roots in action–theoretical approaches, particularly those stemming from pragmatist philosophy (Dewey, Mead), where agency is concerned with the way in which actors ‘critically shape their responses to problematic situations’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11). Here, rather than seeing agency residing in individuals, agency is understood as an emergent phenomenon of actor-situation transaction. (p.626)

Agency, in other words, is not something that people can have – as a property, capacity or competence – but is something that people do. More specifically, agency denotes a quality of the engagement of actors with temporal–relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves. (p.626)

They make a case for a conception 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’ (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 963). They suggest that 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 iterational, the projective and the practical– evaluative dimension, respectively. In concrete actions all three dimensions play a role, but the degree to which they contribute in concrete achievements of agency varies. This is why Emirbayer and Mische speak of a ‘chordal triad of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones’ (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 972; emphasis in original). Agency is then defined as:

*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. (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 970; emphasis in original) (p.626)*

The iterational dimension of agency 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’ (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 971; emphasis in original). The projective dimension 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’ (Emirbayer & Mische 1998; emphasis in original). The practical–evaluative dimension 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’ (Emirbayer & Mische 1998; emphasis in original). Emirbayer 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’ (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 970; emphasis added). 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’ (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 974). (p.626-627)

This model highlights that the achievement of agency is always informed by past experience, including personal and professional biographies; that it is orientated towards the future, both with regard to more short-term and more long-term perspectives; and that it is enacted in the here-and-now, where such enactment is influenced by what we refer to as cultural, material and structural resources. (p.627) 

These include the following questions: Where do teachers’ beliefs come from (the iterational dimension)? How do beliefs ‘motivate’ action (the projective dimension)? How do beliefs influence what is actually done, that is, how do they function as resources for engagement in the concrete situations in and through which teachers act? (p.627-628)

This paper draws upon ethnographic research undertaken within a single education authority in Scotland, in one primary school and two secondary schools, focusing on two experienced classroom teachers in each setting. We also interviewed senior managers in each school. In this paper, we have primarily drawn upon the stories of the six classroom teachers to illustrate the themes relating to teacher beliefs that emerge from the data. (p.628)

The above analysis raises some uncomfortable issues about the ways in which teachers engage with new curricular policy, and about their agency. Teacher agency is highly dependent upon the personal qualities that teachers bring to their work. Such capacity, which forms the major part of the iterational dimension of their agency, includes professional knowledge and skills, and in many senses, there is little doubt that the experienced teachers in our project are highly advanced in these respects. However, the iterational dimension also includes the beliefs and values that teachers bring to their work. Our data suggest that there are problematic issues in relation to these, and in relation to the cultures of schooling within which these teachers work. Part of the problem seems to lie in the often confused discourses encountered in schools, and in teachers’ often superficial understandings of such discourses. (p.636)

Arguably, much of the blame for this situation lies in externally imposed systems which alter the dynamics of schooling, leading to incremental change without the development of a clear philosophy of education to underpin the changes in question, and a professional collegiality that enables its development. It is notable that even in the school where we have previously reported a clear sense of purpose and purposeful relational structures to enabling collegial working (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2012), we found little evidence of long-term thinking about the purposes of education. This perhaps says more about the cultures of schooling than the structures, reinforcing Fullan’s (1993) dictum that change requires reculturing as well as restructuring. (p.636)

What our particular approach to the issue of teacher agency helps to make visible is what role teachers’ beliefs play, as we have been able to highlight in more detail beliefs from past experience – which impact on the iterational dimension of agency; beliefs orientated towards the future – which impact on the projective dimension; and beliefs that play a role in the here-and-now – which concern the practical-evaluative dimension of agency. (p.637)

…the absence of a robust professional discourse about teaching and education more generally. We assume that the absence of such a discourse ties teachers to the particular beliefs that circulate in their practice and prevents them from locating such beliefs within such wider discourses. As a result the existing beliefs cannot be experienced as choices but appear as inevitable. Access to wider discourses about teaching and education would provide teachers with a perspective on the beliefs they and their colleagues hold, and would provide a horizon against which such beliefs can be evaluated. This is one important reason why we think that access to robust professional discourses about teaching does matter for teacher agency, and thus should be an important dimension of teacher education and further professional development (see also Biesta, 2015). (p.638)

In our research, we have instead seen the prevalence of beliefs that are strongly orientated towards the here-and-now and that are also strongly influenced by current and recent policy rather than by more encompassing orientations about the wider purpose and meaning of schooling. The relative absence of a robust professional discourse that teachers can bring to the situations in which they work, and a relatively weak set of orientations towards the future, thus seems to limit the possibilities teachers have to utilise their beliefs in achieving agency within contexts that are to a significant degree – albeit not entirely – constructed by systems of accountability, which seem to prioritise and value certain modes of action over others. (p.638)

Why a robust professional discourse about teaching and the wider purposes of education is absent in the cases we have discussed in this paper is an important question for further research. (p.638)

# **Edwards, A. (2015). Recognising and realising teachers’ professional agency. Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice, 21 (6), 779-784. doi: 10.1080/13540602.2015.1044333**

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.

[W]e think of the agent as not only responsible for what he does, for the degree to which he acts in line with his evaluations, but also as responsible in some sense for these evaluations. (Taylor, 1977, p. 118). (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. (p.780)

Defining agency, its origins and how it is operationalised and evidenced, is not easy and these papers reflect just how difficult the English language makes these tasks. Pantić, in her review of the literature on agency and social justice, interestingly demonstrates how different approaches to agency use language in beguilingly similar ways, masking some quite marked conceptual differences. There are also differences within the present collection. The approach taken by Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen and Hökkä echoes Taylor to some extent, suggesting that professional agency involves practitioners in taking a stance and being able to influence their work and professional identity, and they discuss it as a phenomenon that can be ‘practised’. For Soini, Pietarinen, Toom and Pyhältö it is a ‘capability’ which is continuously constructed, something teachers can recognise and is evidenced in an ability to self-regulate. For Biesta, Priestley and Robinson it is ‘an emergent phenomenon’ of an ‘actor-situation transaction’. In this definition, agency is ‘achieved’, but not reified. I am most comfortable with the definition of agency as an emergent phenomenon, but the methodological challenges it presents cannot be overestimated. (p.780)

There is, nonetheless, broad agreement across the contributions that, when studying agency, attention should be paid to some form of interplay between person and practice or culture. For some this is addressed by references to Giddens and structuration (Giddens, 1993), while others point to an interplay or dynamic interaction. (p.780)

But a study of agency does benefit from tracing what actors actually respond to why. As some of the papers have shown, actors will recognise, interpret and respond to different phenomena in practices. (p.781)

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. Hedegaard (2012), writing about child development, has indicated that if we are to take Vygotsky’s dialectical notion of development seriously, we should attend as much to the demands in the practices as the needs of the actor in the practices. In the context of teacher development, an analytic shift to capture what the demands actually are for teachers can only be enlightening. The papers went some way towards this shift in emphasis. As most authors noted, national policies are mediated differently by different schools and what for some teachers are impossible demands, are for others simply opportunities to respond, learn and move forward. But policy demands, however mediated, are not the only elements in the dialectic of person and practice in teaching. Several contributions, for example, usefully observed how pupil behaviour created demands which inhibited teacher agency, a point that is often missed when attention is fixed on policies and their impact. Teachers’ responses to demands from students were to engage the children, make lessons fun and so on. Biesta et al. were therefore correct in their observation that teachers’ goals often lacked vision, were short-term and not connected to broader notions of the purpose of education. But we have to keep asking why. Paying attention to the demands that teachers recognise and respond to in the dialectic of person and practice may produce further useful insights. (p.781)

My comments so far suggest that studying agency involves following the actor, focusing on their actions in activities in practices and trying to access their judgements, intentions and evaluations as they interpret and act. This is no small task and as social researchers what we can accomplish when studying agency is limited. With the methods available we can, at best, access the actor as ‘person’ as they interpret, negotiate, resist and so on, we cannot access the ‘self’, the wellspring of desires and intentions that is so often connected with notions of agency. It is worth making this distinction to avoid deluding ourselves that when studying professional agency we are able to access a core aspect of an individual. (p.781)

# **Tao, J., & Gao, X. (2017). Teacher agency and identity commitment in curricular reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *63*, 346-355.**

Teacher agency has become an important construct in the literature on educational change, because it affects the implementation of educational policies at the institutional and national levels. Previous studies assumed that “agency and change [were] synonymous and positive” (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012, p. 191), projecting teachers into the role of technicians actualising directives for educational innovation. Such notions have been challenged in recent studies which draw more attention to how individual teachers practise agency in response to educational change (Robinson, 2012; V€ah€asantanen & Etel€apelto, 2009; Ketelaar, Beijaard, Boshuizen, & Den Brok, 2012). These studies reveal that teachers' agency manifests a range of orientations towards reform, including resistance, ambivalence and approval (Sannino, 2010; V€ah€asantanen & Etel€apelto, 2009). Therefore teachers are not “pawns in the reform process” but “active agents, whether they act passively or actively” (Lasky, 2005, pp. 900-901). (p.346)

When teachers have a sense of being able to practise agency, they are more likely to consider and make what they do as “a meaningful profession rather than just a job” (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015, p. 149), which in turn strengthens their commitment to being a particular kind of teacher and contributes to their professional development. For these reasons, more research is needed to accord primacy to teachers as agentic professionals who develop professionally towards self-realisation while coping with external demands…(p.346)

To this end, the current project reports on the professional experiences of eight English language teachers who underwent career transformation in a context of curricular reform, shifting from general English to ESP (English for specific purposes), in a Chinese university. (p.347)

Three main conceptualisations of agency can be found in the current literature: agency as variable, agency as capacity, and agency as phenomenon/doing (Priestley et al., 2015). The notion of agency as an innate variable, as opposed to being structurally determined, negates social contributions to the development of agency. Other researchers take a more complex view of agency, seeing it as a capacity or phenomenon. From the former perspective, agency is “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act purposefully and reflectively on [one's] world” (Rogers &Wetzel, 2013, p. 63). Such a conceptualisation emphasises that agency is subject to contextual mediation and draws attention to the interaction between the personal and the social, but has been criticised for failing to provide “ways to identify agentic actions” (Hitlin & Elder, 2007, p. 173). For this reason, our inquiry makes use of the conceptualisation of agency as phenomenon/doing, as something “achieved and not as merely…a capacity or possession of the individual” (Priestley et al., 2012, p. 197). (p.347)

Recent studies primarily characterise teacher agency through teachers' response to educational change, developing a complex picture (Robinson, 2012; Sannino, 2010). Teacher agency may have different manifestations, and evolve through different stages from compliance to resistance and then to negotiation (Robinson, 2012). Teacher agency also varies between individuals, as teachers enter the profession with different backgrounds and have relative professional autonomy to teach (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). The exercise of teacher agency is thus a dynamic process inflected by teachers' beliefs (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015), personal goals (Ketelaar et al., 2012), and knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy (Sloan, 2006). Though these studies contribute to our understanding of teacher agency, it is increasingly important for researchers to see the value of teacher agency “not only for facilitating student learning but also for continuing professional development” (Toom, Pyh€alt€o, & Rust, 2015, p. 615). In other words, more research is needed to link teacher agency and professional development during educational changes (V€ah€asantanen, 2015). (p.347)

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). (p.347)

Teacher identity can be defined as various commitments, or as a resolve “to be the kind of teacher they [want] to be” (Buchanan, 2015, p. 15, italics original). Teachers' professional commitments, though oriented towards the future, develop out of prior experience as well as contextual conditions (ibid.), and are an important component of teacher identity that influences teacher agency (Etel€apelto et al., 2013). (p.347)

Examining the enactment of agency necessitates “an understanding of the ecological conditions under and through which agency is achieved” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 146), including historical, socio-economic, institutional and disciplinary conditions (Ecclestone, 2007). (p.348)

The participants reported that they enacted agency in three primary aspects of professional development: learning, teaching and research. The experiential accounts showed that most of teachers displayed relatively strong agency in learning investment and teaching engagement but varied agency in research practices, as manifested in their agentic actions. The accounts also demonstrate that their agentic choices, or what to engage in the three areas of professional development, are mediated by their various identity commitments. (p.349)

The overall findings corroborate the conceptualisation of teacher agency as “individually varied … and both socially and individually resourced” (V€ah€asantanen, 2015, p. 1). (p.353)

Responding to similar contextual opportunities and constraints, the participants made different choices and took different actions which were mediated by their individual identity commitment. By situating teacher agency in professional trajectories, the sociocultural developmental approach used in this study helps us understand the varied manifestations of teacher agency among participants “for their own purposes … by their own design, appropriate for their contexts” (Johnson, 2006, p. 250) (see Fig. 1). (p.353)

Based on the findings here, we propose taking an agency-oriented approach to teacher education (Lai et al., 2016). Teacher educators should guide student teachers to become more aware of their personal resources and learn to capitalize on them to seize available contextual opportunities. Being able to mobilise personal and social resources to practise teacher agency can prepare student teachers for “externally sanctioned as well as internally initiated and controlled” (Johnson, 2006, p. 25) development opportunities in shifting educational contexts. (p.354)

# **van Lier, Leo. 2008. Agency in the classroom. In J. Lantolf and M. Poehner (Eds.), Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages (pp.163–86). London, UK: Equinox.**

The main principle involved is that learning depends on the activity and the initiative of the learner, more so than on any “inputs” that are transmitted to the learner by a teacher or a textbook. This does not, of course, diminish the need for texts and teachers, since they fulfil a crucial mediating function, but it places the emphasis on action, interaction and affordances, rather than on texts themselves. (p.163)

Agency can be defined in a “bare bones” way as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001:112)… Duranti (2004: 453) provides a working definition of agency that includes three basic properties: 1) control over one’s own behaviour; 2) producing actions that affect other entities as well as self; 3) producing actions that are the object of evaluation. Although this definition is more detailed than Ahearn's, it does not elucidate the notion of sociocultural mediation. (p.163)

… agency is not simply an individual character trait or activity, but a contextually enacted way of being in the world. It follows that agency is always a social event that does not take place in a void or in an empty wilderness. (p.163)

Lantolf and Thome (2006: 143) argue that agency 'is about more than voluntary control! over behavior.' They explain that agency also 'entails the ability to assign relevance and significance to things and events.' From a sociocultural perspective, agency is shaped by our historical and cultural trajectories, hence Ahearn's notion that agency is socioculturally mediated. Lantolf and Thorne also point out that agency can be exercised by individuals as well as by communities (ibid). In a classroom, for example, learners can act individually as well as in groups, or indeed as a whole class (as when a whole class negotiates workload or deadline issues with the teacher). Thus, students can speak from an 'I' as well as from a `we' perspective. (p.163)

On the basis of the classroom extracts looked at above, we can say that agency is situated in a particular context and that it is something that learners do, rather than something that learners possess, i.e., it is behavior rather than property. This is in line with sociocultural perspectives such as those of Lantolf and Thorne (2006) and Wertsch et *al.* (1993), as noted above. Ahearn's (2001: 111) definition of agency as 'the socioculturally mediated ability to act' also goes in this direction, if *ability is* not equated with competence (as an individual possession), but rather is seen as action *potential,* mediated by social, interactional, cultural, institutional and other contextual factors. (p.166)

Agency can be related to issues such as volition, intentionality, initiative, intrinsic motivation and autonomy, all of which have been extensively studied in educational research (a good overview, using autonomy as the umbrella term, is Benson 2001). (p.166-167)

There is always a strong tendency to look at complex constructs in terms of dichotomies, or binary oppositions. The most obvious one that comes to mind in this case is active-passive. Learners can be active or passive, the former being conducive and the latter being detrimental to learning. The problem that this binary view raises is that there may be many ways and degrees of being active or passive. (p.167)

I suggest that on the basis of this analysis we can propose three core features of agency which are broadly compatible with the definitions of Ahearn (2001); Duranti (2000; Lantolf and Thome (2006) and Wertsch et aL (1993):

1) Agency involves initiative or self-regulation by the learner (or group)

2) Agency is interdependent, that is, it mediates and is mediated by the sociocultural context

3) Agency includes an awareness of the responsibility for one's own actions vis-à-vis the environment, including affected others. (p.167)

# **Kayi-Aydar, H. (2015). Teacher agency, positioning, and English language learners: Voices of pre-service classroom teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *45*, 94-103.**

As Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, and Johnson (2005) argue, the teacher is not “a neutral player in the classroom, but on the contrary, her positionality in relation to her students, and to the broader context in which the teacher was situated” (p. 22) is vital. They further argue that to understand teaching and learning “we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them” (p. 22). However, the identities of teachers of ELLs have not been adequately addressed. Little is known regarding their identity negotiations in relation to their educational contexts and ELLs, and how such negotiations influence their agency, interactions, and practices. (p.94)

…drawing on Positioning Theory (e.g., Davies & Harr\_e, 1999) investigated how pre-service K-5 classroom teachers positioned themselves and ELLs in their narratives, and how such positionings interacted with their agency. The aim is to show how teacher identity and agency are constructed and understood through teachers' self- and otherpositionings in orally elicited narratives and written diaries. Accordingly, the research question addressed is: How do teachers of ELLs position themselves and (re)negotiate identities in relation to their social context in their accounts of experiences and how do such positionings interact with their agency? (p.95)

little has been said regarding how teachers negotiate identities in relation to their students (Reeves, 2009). S/reide (2006) argues that teacher identity is narratively constructed and she rejects creating typologies of teachers or defining what identity teachers as a group or individuals should possess. Then, understanding how teachers construct identities for themselves through positioning becomes necessary. This understanding is important because, as Yoon (2008) claims, “whatever the positions teachers take, that positioning guides them in their interactive approaches with students in classroom settings” (p. 499).

Indeed, Reeves's study (2009) demonstrated how the participant-teacher, Neil, positioned himself “as a good and effective teacher to prepare ELL and all students for society, and that meant viewing and treating ELLs like all other students” (p. 38). This reflexive positioning resulted in Neil's refusal to make linguistic accommodations for ELLs. In a similar study, Yoon (2008) described how three teachers assigned various positions to themselves and ELLs in their classrooms and how these positioning closely influenced teachers' classroom practices. Overall, the limited literature on positionings of teachers of ELLs shows that teachers' self positionings closely interact with how they position their students and how such positioning moves influence their teaching practices. (p.95)

Rogers and Wetzel (2013) define agency as “the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world” (p. 63). In this study, drawing on Positioning Theory, I view agency as “strongly connected to the contextual conditions within which it is achieved and not as merely a capacity or possession of the individual” (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012, p. 197). Just like identity, agency is shaped by social interactions and achieved in particular situations (Priestley et al., 2012). Lasky (2005) claims that agency is “mediated by the interaction between the individual (attributes and inclinations) and the tools and structures of a social setting” (p. 900). According to this view of agency, “ human beings are neither independent and autonomous agents nor are they shaped and controlled entirely by external influences” (Ray, 2009, p. 116). It is therefore possible to see the same individual exercising more agency in one context and less in another.(p.95)

Harre and Slocum (2003) argue that there are three categories of actions: Those one has done, is doing, or will do; those which one is permitted, allowed or encouraged to do; and those which one is physically and temperamentally capable of doing. (p. 125) (pp.95-96)

The data for this study consist of interviews and journal entries. Because my goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of positioning, identity, and agency, a case study design seemed to be the most appropriate (Creswell, 2012). I did not invite more individuals to participate in my study as Creswell suggests that the small number of case studies, ideally fewer than 4 or 5, provides “ample opportunity to identify themes of the cases as well as conduct cross-case theme analysis” (p. 157). This study uses a single-case design with multiple participants. Because my participants shared many common characteristics and conditions (Merriam, 2009), a single case study design over multiple or collective cases seemed to be more appropriate. Having multiple participants enabled me to “strengthen the precision, validity, stability, and trustworthiness of the findings” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 33). (p.96)

The positioning analysis reveals that the participants recursively position themselves in relation to ELLs and mentor teachers. The positionings and identity (re)negotiations I describe below seem to shape these teachers' agency and self-reported teaching practices. (p.97)

In this paper, I aimed to explore how three pre-service teachers, April, Elizabeth, and Janet, positioned themselves in relation to their social context and how narrative positioning interacted with agency. In my analysis of teachers' narratives, I found positioning theory, among other approaches to discourse, particularly helpful as it enabled me to see and understand the teachers' ongoingly produced selves through their positionings in terms of the categories and storylines. (p.100)

The findings further suggest that agency, identity, and positioning are intertwined in complex ways, influencing each other. Duff (2012) argues that a sense of agency enables people to imagine, take up, and perform new roles or identities and to take concrete actions in pursuit of their goals. Agency can also enable people to actively resist certain behaviors, practices, or positionings, sometimes leading to oppositional stances and behaviors leading to other identities. (p. 15) (p.101)

It's important to note here that the teachers' identities and agency were affected by the micro-politics of the internship settings. For example, although Janet wanted to project an identity as a caring teacher who wanted to help ELLs who were struggling in reading, she was not able to perform her desired identity and take action as the school principal ignored her request to help. The principal's lack of responsiveness limited Janet's agency. Similarly, both April and Elizabeth had ideas that they wanted to share with the mentor teachers, but they hesitated to do so due to the perceived power relations. The interplay between the self and institutional context seemed to “create a process of making and remaking of identity” (Liu & Xiu, 2013, p. 595) as well as to create a gap between desired and performed identities. This observation will hopefully enable teacher educators, mentor teachers, and school principals to redefine or expand the purpose of internship experience for pre-service teachers. (p.101)

This study adds to the current literature on teacher identity and agency by demonstrating how pre-service teachers recursively constructed conflicting identities for themselves. It shows how teacher agency is afforded or constrained relative to a position. Particularly in their journals, these teachers described moments or incidents where they felt powerless in their interactions with ELLs. While positioning themselves as obligated to act in fulfilling their teacher responsibilities toward all students including ELLs, they were not certain as to how they should follow through on those obligations. They positioned themselves as effective, caring, and responsible teachers, but they also assigned non-powerful positions to themselves when they questioned their capacity to act and teach ELLs. (p.101)

It is important for teacher educators to be aware of how and when teacher candidates ascribe themselves powerless or non-agentic positions. In their identity negotiation, when non-powerful positions become more dominant, teachers may simply avoid teaching ELLs. Rex and Schiller argue that “for learning to go forward, the mutual recognition of worth and identity must be present” (p. 21). Therefore, teacher educators should help teachers feel empowered by recognizing and highlighting their strengths as teachers of ELLs. Recognizing their strengths will help pre-service teachers enhance “a sense of power in their right and ability to be agentive rather than passively resistant” (Rex & Schiller, p.121). This is only possible when teacher educators take the time to listen to their students and create opportunities for dialogue and critical reflection. (p.101)

Exploring how teacher identity and agency are constructed and understood through positioning, the findings of this study indicate that teacher identity and agency are multifaceted and context-dependent. Understanding how teachers position themselves in relation to others and social context can help discover and discuss the challenges teachers meet in teaching ELLs and constructing identities in relation to this particular student population. (p.102)

# **Feryok, A. (2012). Activity theory and language teacher agency. *The Modern Language Journal*, *96*(1), 95-107.**

To illustrate the range between the individual and the social in teacher development, the role played by the “stories” teachers tell about their contextualized personal experience has long been advocated (e.g., Freeman, 1996), while the role played by social structures, particularly of the constraints imposed by state institutions, has also long been recognized (Crookes, 1997). (p.95)

How do teachers learn to act on their own goals, whether or not they align with those of society? To wonder about this is to wonder about how a language teacher develops a sense of agency. (p.96)

This study examines agency in language teacher development by focusing on a single case study of an Armenian EFL teacher. It does so within the broadly sociocultural perspective of activity theory, which considers the roles of both the individual and the social in activity. This approach is, therefore, particularly relevant for language teaching and for language teacher development, much of which occurs within an activity system regulated by the state, where the goals of language teachers may be reinforced or constrained by the motives of the state school system. (p.96)

As articulated by Leontiev (1981), activity theory distinguishes between social motives at the level of activity, individual goals at the level of actions, and concrete operations used to achieve goals. As with Vygotsky’s idea that functions appear twice, first interpersonally and then intrapersonally, so with activity, which appears first materially and then mentally, as an image (Galperin, 1992; Leontiev, 1978). As Leontiev (1978) explained, because of the unique set of particular circumstances that differ for each individual, there will always be a discrepancy or gap between personal meaning and social reality. Thus, an individual may not be fully aware of material activity, only of their personalized understanding of it, and may attribute their own actions (that is, their role in activity) to that personalized understanding. Through development personal meaning can be transformed, thereby lessening the gap with social reality. (p.96)

Recent work highlights how motives, systems, and time contextualize actions: “Activity theory conceptualizes actions in the broader perspectives of their systematic and motivational context and, thus, aims at going beyond a given situation” (Sannino, Daniels, & Guti´errez, 2009). It acknowledges the historical past and the present and is aimed toward the future (Sannino et al., 2009). (p.97)

Agency is a complex notion, with different approaches to agency founded on different assumptions. One view of agency focuses on the individual exercise of power; it includes the interrelated notions of someone (or something, i.e., an institution) having control over behavior, being able to produce an effect with consequences, and being subject to evaluation (Duranti, 2004/2006). Although it is clear in this view that others can impinge on acts of agency, it focuses on the agent and the control, power, and value of her acts. Another view of agency focuses on how it is constituted by relationships and holds that it is mediated (Ahearn, 2001). This view situates agency within its social context, including past history, current situation, and future prospects; it recognizes agency in responses to the affordances and constraints of a particular context (van Lier, 2002); it understands agency as including intentionality and the attribution of meaningfulness (Lantolf&Thorne, 2006). This viewmakes agency “a contextually enacted way of being in the world” (van Lier, 2008), involving both what is done and how it is understood to be significant (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). This acknowledgment of context places agency displayed through action at the individual level within an activity system at the social level. (p.97)

Within activity theory, individual agency has been conceptualized as being on a continuum with society, with both viewed as co-evolving processes that originate in and serve everyday practices (Stetsenko, 2005; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). (p.97)

Individuals can transform social reality in the production of new activities in everyday social practices and in that sense they “lead” emerging forms of activity through individual agency (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). (p.97)

This article seeks to answer the following question: How does a language teacher develop a sense of agency? The article will focus on personal experiences beyond the professional development classroom. The answer will be organized as a single case study of an Armenian English language teacher who developed her sense of agency in the changing activity of language teaching in Soviet and independent Armenia by considering her understanding of her experiences as a student, teacher, and teacher trainer. (p.98)

This analysis is a descriptive case study (Duff, 2008) aimed at exploring the complexity and dynamism of an individual’s actions within their context (D. M. Johnson, 1992). For this study, I began by drawing on the original account (Feryok, 2005, briefly described earlier) of data analyzed through grounded theory and constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), focusing on the sections concerning the participant’s actions as a teacher. (p.98)

The actions of Nune’s English teacher, apparently at the boundaries of socially established activity, not only acted as a model and support for Nune as a student, but more importantly formed the basis for an image of teacher action within the Armenian educational activity system that has oriented Nune to her own field of possible action (Galperin, 1992) as a teacher and teacher trainer. It is the social and material origin of her developing sense of agency as a language teacher, and it is based on personal experiences that occurred outside of the professional development classroom. (p.100)

Nune also noted advantages and disadvantages to having a state-mandated syllabus during Soviet times. It established goals and was thus helpful for teacher planning, but “the limitation of the syllabus is its not taking into account individual differences, subjective views, emotions, personality factors, learning styles” (3–4). However, when questioned further, Nune noted, “If you want to have some extra activities you can do it during your forty or forty-five minutes, but no, well, not just limitation of the syllabus, no variation of the syllabus” (p. 8). (p.100)

The English language teaching methodology textbook that Nune had used during her pedagogical training was quite clear on this point:

*The syllabus, therefore, is a state document which lays down the aims of teaching, the extent of the knowledge, habits and skills pupils acquire, the sequence of topics which constitute the academic content of the subject. The syllabus is an essential document for every teacher, and he is responsible for the fulfillment of its requirements. The teacher cannot make alterations to the syllabus. The syllabus is uniform for all teachers working in schools of the given type. (Rogova, 1975, p. 53) (p.101)*

In exploring the development of agency in an individual teacher, this paper is obviously limited. What, then, is its value? Although development across a group may share largely common patterns, in an individual the small scale allows a more finely grained view of the nonlinear and dynamic nature of development. This variability of individual development marks the parameters within which generality can be claimed. We need to know how individuals develop in specific contexts in order to know what is possible for development in general. (p.105)

One point is that individual professional development can have an impact on a local activity system. This phenomenon has been shown by tracing the development of individual agency in one teacher, Nune, as her actions expanded the field of possible action. This expanded field of action reflects not only her individual agency but also her contribution to social activity. (p.105)

The second point is that individual development as a professional occurs through lived experience over a lifetime and does not begin or end with enrollment in a formal professional development program or even with professional activities, as K. E. Johnson (2009) pointed out and as Tsui (2007) showed. Early experiences mediate later development because they are the basis for orienting to individual action. (pp.105-106)

Teachers are beset with constraints on their actions from the many stakeholders involved in education, yet they can act as agents. To develop a sense of personal agency that can meet multiple demands in a rapidly changing world—a world in which the international as well as the national increasingly affect the local—is challenging indeed. This study shows how one teacher negotiated these changing demands during personal crises within the context of a major international event, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and a major national period, the troubled early years of Armenian independence. In doing so, it describes how these personal experiences and national and international events influenced the development of teacher agency and the power of an individual to influence her local teaching context. (p.106)

# **Buchanan, R. (2015). Teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability. *Teachers and Teaching*, *21*(6), 700-719.**

Teachers in the USA currently operate in a contentious professional landscape. Over the last decade, accountability policies that emphasize measurable performance and individual responsibility for student success have introduced new professional norms that have changed education in the USA. The new norms, deriving from policy initiatives and social discourse in the US since the 1990s, have more tightly coupled teaching practices to standardized assessment of students (Meyer & Rowan, 2006), and in turn these 20 years of standardization, tight coupling, and ubiquitous testing practices have begun reshaping the nature of many teachers’ professional identities. This particular policy era can be characterized by an emphasis on instrumentalist notions of what it means to be a teacher – and the accountability policies that dominate it can be viewed as both cause and effect of ways that teachers understand themselves. (p.700)

Mockler (2011) writes that any teacher’s professional identity is ‘formed and re-formed constantly over the course of a career and mediated by a complex interplay of personal, professional and political dimensions of teachers’ lives’ (p. 518). Teachers therefore confront the policies and professional discourses they encounter not as tabulae rasae, but rather actively use their own preexisting identities to interpret, learn from, evaluate, and appropriate the new conditions of their work in schools and classrooms. In this process, their identities are reformed and remade – and professional agency is carved out. (p.701)

The qualitative investigation into nine elementary teachers working in three different school contexts in California found that participants drew most heavily from their prior work experience as they (re-)constructed professional identities within the new context of accountability. The teachers in this study relied on their professional identities to evaluate their current situation, but those professional identities were strongly shaped by where they taught previously. This means that the contours of those prior work locations (having their own characteristics but also being defined by the policy context of the recent past) were strong influences on how the nine went about the task of (re-)constructing their professional selves in their current workplaces (amid broader policy contexts). This process occurred around a particular mix of identity, agency, determinism, and intentionality. (p.701)

The process of developing a teacher identity begins long before a new teacher enters a preparation program or a classroom. Though not specifically analyzed through an identity lens, Lortie’s (1975) classic work on the teaching profession demonstrated how teachers construct a self, in part, out of their own educational experiences. The ‘apprenticeship of observation’ has a profound influence on one’s understanding of the work and role of a teacher as well as on their own teaching practice. Pre-service teachers bring their 12+ years of apprenticing into their teacher preparation programs with them, where the process of identity formation continues. (p.702)

Often, the process of teacher preparation brings about conflict in the identity formation of neophyte teachers. The theories and practices proposed by progressive, constructivist-oriented programs may come into conflict with the practices that teacher candidates have observed during their time as students. Olsen (2008a) writes about the identity formation of Liz, a new teacher who struggled with the contradictions between her own idealization of her father, who was a high-school English teacher that she respected and hoped to emulate and the pedagogical practices that her teacher preparation program was encouraging. Her father used and promoted traditional, didactic methods of teaching while the program was trying to develop inquiry approaches to teaching among their teacher candidates. Liz had to navigate these tensions as she created an understanding of herself as a teacher. (p.703)

Rodgers and Scott (2008) outline four assumptions that most approaches to investigating teacher identity share. The first is that identity is influenced by and formed within multiple social, cultural, political, and historical contexts. The second is that identity is formed through relationships and involved emotions. The third is that identity is constantly shifting, and therefore unstable; and the fourth is that identity involves the reconstruction of stories told over time. This study focuses on the first assumption – how multiple social, cultural, political, and historical forces interact with a teacher’s personal and professional history to shape their identity within a local school context. (p.704)

Any individual constructs him or herself out of the available resources, which are located inside the figured worlds – or complex contexts – in which they live, and the result is a dynamic, complex identity with a particular agency. (p.704)

Individuals automatically draw upon their own culturally and historically situated understandings and experiences to construct themselves using the tools available to them. The work of teaching in current contexts offers certain cultural tools for teachers to use in constructing their identity. These tools come from their teacher preparation programs, their own schooling experiences, their current school culture, their personal experiences, or the way that contemporary policies and discourses frame teachers and teaching (Alsup, 2005; Beijaard et al., 2000; Britzman, 1991; Olsen, 2008a, 2008b). Teachers engage in this self-creation process within the context of their local school. Identities are constantly remade as teachers use their cultural tools to make sense of and interact with their local working context. The following analysis offers investigation into several themes that characterize this complex, mostly automatic, ongoing process of teacher identity development. Identity is conceived of as both a process and a product. An identity is understood as how the teacher constructs/understands her professional self, with particular attention to her pedagogical commitments. Identity, is not however, a concrete, stable thing. As it is born of past experiences, and shaped by current circumstances, identity is constantly in motion, developing as teachers engage in their daily practices and reflect on their work. (p.704)

An individual’s professional agency is reciprocally related to his or her professional identity. As teachers construct an understanding of who they are within their school and professional context, they take actions that they believe align with that construction. Those actions (and how the actions are perceived by others) then feed back into the ongoing identity construction process. Ahearn (2001) defines agency as the ‘socioculturally mediated capacity to act’ (p. 112). Individuals are ‘neither free agents nor completely socially determined products’ (p. 120). There is choice, but the options available to choose from are shaped by larger force relations. (p.704)

The culture of a school, the way it defined successful teaching and learning, and the ideological and pedagogical positions it made available for teachers mediated how teachers experienced and reacted to accountability policies. And at the same time, the teachers’ own professional identities mediated how the school conditions, policies, and discourse of reform were understood and taken up. The interaction between teacher identity and school culture both enabled and constrained teachers’ agency. This makes school sites an important location for both investigating and developing teacher agency. (p.714)

One of the key implications for research regards the relationship between teacher identity and teacher agency. Teacher agency can be understood in a way as identities in motion. For the participants in this study, it was the capacity to carry out their commitments – to be the kind of teacher they wanted to be – that formed the backbone of how their identities responded to the increased emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing in their schools. However, agency isn’t simply the performance of identity. Actions teachers take feed back into their identity; if those actions are constrained by accountability policies, this has the potential to shift identities. This is complex, sensitive work, and should be more explicitly acknowledged by policy-makers and more frequently studied by researchers. (p.714)

Building on previous work on teacher identity and agency (Britzman, 1991; Bushnell, 2003; Pease-Alvarez, Samway, & Cifka-Herrera, 2010; Sloan, 2006), these findings demonstrate how teacher identity and agency are shaped by accountability demands, structures, and discourses in complex ways. (p.714)

Teacher participants in this study weren’t critically reflecting on their own identity development, and how it was shaped by larger political forces as well as local school contexts. If teachers were encouraged in their professional preparation or ongoing development to critically interrogate authoritative discourses (Britzman, 1991) and understand their own professional identity development through a process of critical self-reflection, identity could become a conscious tool that teachers could employ to strategically push back rather than an unconscious or automatic one. (p.714)

Stone-Johnson (2014) argues that newer teachers don’t experience standardization and accountability as necessarily antithetical to professionalism, the way their more experienced colleagues do. If accountability discourses and policies are conceptualized as a recursive process of complex structuration, it becomes clear that this process alters the way teachers understand themselves and their success. Teachers who have developed an identity that conflicts with the accountability discourse respond to this tighter coupling by resisting or leaving. Resistance was most successful in schools where teachers shared a set of commitments and practices that aligned to a vision of quality teaching and learning. Pushing back on accountability policies may require collaborative and collegial professionals, which doesn’t match the dominant frame of teaching as an individualistic, isolated endeavor. If teachers don’t feel like they have the opportunity to engage with authentic human experience that develops their students as emotional, social, intellectual, and moral people, they may not stay in the classroom, and students will only learn the material that helps them succeed on the standardized tests. This practice of moving agency away from the people closest to students (who know them best) and putting it in the hands of policy-makers may not be what’s best for the development of the profession or for the students. (p.715)

Hargreaves wondered in 2000 whether teaching was on the edge of a post-professional age in which teachers would be positioned as technicians with little value or autonomy. It seems that this has indeed become true over the last 14 years. Many teachers feel a greater sense of constraint; some are beginning to wholeheartedly embrace the limited scope of teaching and learning promoted by the proliferation of high-stakes standardized testing, while others are pushing back or leaving the profession altogether. (p.715)

# **Rogers, R., & Wetzel, M. M. (2013). Studying agency in literacy teacher education: A layered approach to positive discourse analysis. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *10*(1), 62-92.**

Teachers’ performances have never been more highly scrutinized than in the current era of high stakes testing and accountability. In many school districts, teachers find themselves caught between the practices they believe are best for students and teaching to the test. There are some examples of teachers advocating for their practices (e.g., Souto-Manning, 2010) as well as creating a space where standards, testing and best practices reside together (e.g., Avila & Moore, 2012; Haynes, 2008). (p.63)

In this article, we showcase one such example, in which Leslie designed a workshop for educators at an Educating for Change Curriculum Fair.We refer to such instances where teachers demonstrate the will and ability to affect instructional conditions as agency. Agency is the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world (Davies, 1990; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001; Johnston, 2004). (p.63)

Yet we do not know much about the discursive contours of teacher agency, the contexts in which agency emerges, and the conditions necessary for supporting and extending teachers’ agency. (p.63)

To understand the layers of agentic meaning, we posed the following questions: What might we say about the discursive composition of agency as it is signaled through this presentation? What storylines does this preservice teacher construct about herself, her student and the field of literacy education? How might examples of agency that occur in educational contexts become part of the larger scale process of change? (p.63)

That is, we do not see the friendly venue as mitigating the agency she took in designing the workshop. Rather, this context allows her to rehearse her role as a culturally relevant educator, making it more likely she will call upon these discursive tools and strategies in another context. (p.89)

# **Pappa, S., Moate, J., Ruohotie-Lyhty, M., & Eteläpelto, A. (2017). Teacher agency within the Finnish CLIL context: tensions and resources. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*,0(0), 1-21.** **doi: 10.1080/13670050.2017.1286292**

Taking a qualitative approach, the research reported here seeks to better understand how teacher agency is experienced by CLIL teachers working in Finnish primary schools (grades 1–6, ages 7–13). Teacher agency is examined in the light of perceived tensions and resources, taking into consideration how individual and contextual factors interact in Finnish CLIL education. (p.2)

Agency is a concept that has recently received a significant amount of attention in educational research and it is often understood as the mediated capacity to act within hegemonic discourses and sociocultural frameworks (Ahearn 2001; Eteläpelto et al. 2013). Therefore, teacher agency is the way in which teacher intention and understanding is enacted within a particular environment, whether physical, emotional, social, pedagogical or professional. This concept is useful because it draws attention to the sensitive space between an individual’s hopes and plans, and their realized or realizable potential. (p.2)

Agency is a situated activity, something the individual does within contexts-for-action characterized by particular interactive ecological circumstances influenced by time, relations, and a potential for transformation and achievement (Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015). (p.2)

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of what constitutes teacher agency within the particular context of CLIL, teacher agency is proposed as a dynamic concept involving an interrelation between pedagogical, relational and professional agency. Pedagogical agency is enacted within the classroom domain; that is, material selection and usage, selection and execution of instructional strategies, classroom management, performance of the teacher role and decision-making for pupil learning, engagement and better academic performance. It is important that teachers are able to influence and negotiate ‘core pedagogical and instructional practices, including applying new ideas at work, making decisions on one’s ways of teaching, and developing one’s work’, an ability that is meaningful only when teachers ‘feel in control of the choices they make within their work’ (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015, 663). (p.2)

Whereas pedagogical agency highlights the relationship between teachers and pupils, relational agency reflects collegial relationships in light of sharing experiences and knowledge with colleagues. This type of agency involves reciprocal, mutual relationships in strengthening expertise, but also advocates a focus on the nature of the relationships that mediate between individual interpretations and the social at work for the sake of distributing expertise and enhancing collective competence (Edwards 2007). (p.3)

Sociocultural agency, however, goes beyond the immediate school environment to the wider sociocultural environment, including stakeholders like parents, policy-makers and other authorities. These three different components align with a sociocultural account of agency as ‘an essentially mediated phenomenon’ (Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate 2015, 59), with teachers acting in a reactive or proactive manner, willingly or grudgingly, to educational policies, aims, expectations and demands. (p.3)

This study aims at examining factors that negatively or positively influence teacher agency in Finnish primary school CLIL education. The combined components of pedagogical, relational and sociocultural agency serve as a dynamic conceptualization of teacher agency, which provides the background to the following research questions:

(1) What tensions do CLIL teachers in Finland recognize in exercising agency in their work?

(2) What enables and resources CLIL teachers in Finland to deal with tensions at work? (p.4)

What tensions do CLIL teachers in Finland recognize in exercising agency in their work? – three themes were identified, drawing on language, the classroom, and resources. In answer to the second research question – What enables and resources CLIL teachers in Finland to deal with tensions at work? – four themes were identified. Autonomy, openness to change and teacher versatility primarily concerned the teacher herself, while collegial community regarded the immediate collegial environment.(p.10)

Secondly, the findings raise the issue of pedagogical agency in CLIL, since language use, autonomy, openness to change and teacher versatility were related to exercising agency at the classroom level. These themes resonate with a view of agency as involving conscious action and choice-making, according to what is educationally beneficial and in conjunction with the physical and interpersonal resources of the working environment (Eteläpelto et al. 2013; Moate and Ruohotie-Lyhty 2014; Toom, Pyhältö, and Rust 2015). (p.10)

While pedagogical agency appears to rest on CLIL teachers’ judgment and action, it is in fact also linked to the sociocultural environment, which delineates the area of possible agency by means of relationships, policies and material resources.(p.11)

At the level of the CLIL classroom, joint action can strengthen individual agency through material and conceptual resources that make sense-making and object-oriented activities clearer (Edwards 2007). Facilitating and making time for teacher interactions would be fruitful for pedagogical practices and involvement in the work community, which supportive school leadership can greatly advance (Thoonen et al. 2011). (p.11)

By supporting that agency, we can enhance teachers’ diverse learning, the pursuit of their professional orientations, their well-being and commitment (Hӧkkä and Vähäsantanen 2014). (p.11)

# **Toom, A., Pyhältö, K., & Rust, F. O. C. (2015). Teachers’ professional agency in contradictory times. *Teachers and Teaching*, *21*(6), 615-623.**

Teacher agency is suggested to be a key capability not only for facilitating student learning but also for continuing professional development, collaborative teacher learning and school development. In the recent literature, different conceptualisations and characteristics of teachers’ agency have been introduced. However, the empirical research on teachers’ professional agency is still scarce (e.g. Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Toom, Karvonen, & Husu, submitted). (p.615)

Still, we know little about the characteristics of teacher agency in different phases of the teaching career, the impact of teacher education on teacher agency, and the influences of multiple educational policy contexts shaping and reshaping the professional agency of teachers. (p.615)

The idea of a teacher as an active agent at the school level has long been central in educational research as well as practices and policies. The notion of teacher agency has emerged in research to describe teachers’ active efforts to make choices and intentional action in a way that makes a significant difference. Teachers are required to engage in innovative learning, adapt themselves to diverse requirements in their working environment, interpret and negotiate with both their colleagues and with parents the multiple possibilities implied by policies, make independent choices and find a balance between their personal preferences and shared collegial understandings. Through these efforts, teachers aim at building a relevant, inspiring and constructive environment for their pupils and themselves and their colleagues in changing professional contexts. (p.615)

Teachers’ active professional agency is, however more than just coping with challenging professional situations. Agentic teachers perceive themselves as pedagogical experts who have the capability of intentional and responsible management of new learning at both individual and community levels (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, in press). This entails intentionally interacting with others as a resource for learning and acting as a support for them (Edwards, 2005; Pyhältö & Keskinen, 2012). Teachers’ professional agency refers also to teacher’s ability to act in new and creative ways, and even to resist external norms and regulations when they are understood to contrast or conflict with professionally justifiable action (Dovemark, 2010; Florio-Ruane, 2002; Lasky, 2005; Milne, Scantlebury, & Otieno, 2006). (p.615)

Teachers’ professional agency is not a fixed disposition of an individual teacher, rather, it is constructed situationally in relation to the current context and past personal experiences (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Greeno, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Environments that promote active participation and belonging also promote the construction of professional agency (Cohen & Hill, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 1999). (p.616)

Although teacher agency is defined as willingness and capacity to act according to professional values, beliefs, goals and knowledge in the different contexts and situations that teachers face in their work both in classrooms and outside of them (Lasky, 2005; Paris & Lung, 2008; Sloan, 2006; Turnbull, 2005), agency is not simply a personal attribute to be applied in professional work. Professional agency is significantly constructed (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Robinson, 2012) in the middle of dilemmas and uncertainties of professional pedagogical activities (Floden & Clark, 1988; Helsing, 2007; Labaree, 2000; Munthe, 2001). (p.616)

Both personal and contextual or structural factors shape, facilitate, support or restrict teachers’ action and agency in the different professional contexts of classroom, school or community. These factors may be either internalised norms and values, conventions and practices of a community in question, or they may be institutional norms or educational policy practices influencing teachers’ action and agency (Dovemark, 2010). (p.616)

The structural factors encountered at the micro, mezzo and macro levels of educational systems thus influence teachers’ professional work and shape their professional agency. (pp.616-617)

Despite extensive interest in the topic, the concept of agency is still vague and only few empirical studies have examined teacher or student teacher agency. Even less is known empirically about professional agency during teacher education and even thereafter (Lunenberg, Ponte, & Van de Ven, 2007; Toom et al., 2010; Zeichner & Conklin, 2005). We know even less about the interrelation between the teacher agency and its effectiveness in the classroom, although this is used as an argument when addressing questions related to teacher agency. (p.617)

The relation between teachers’ sense of self and their sense of professional agency emerges more or less explicitly in all the studies of this special issue. The essential role of teachers’ previous personal and professional experiences is emphasised and elaborated from multiple perspectives. The beliefs and values that teachers hold related to teaching and learning influence significantly the achievement of professional agency (Biesta et al.; Pantić; Stillman & Anderson, all this issue). Professional agency is connected to the professional identity through ideals and goals as well as commitments and ethical standards related to work of teaching and pupils’ well-being (Eteläpelto et al., this issue; Pantić). The tight interdependence and interplay between the personal qualities – teachers’ sense of self – and professional agency (Buchanan, this issue; Pantić; Stillman & Anderson) emerges significantly in the papers. (p.619)

…the construction of professional agency is clearly understood as a complex, continuous and future-oriented negotiation process (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) between identity and contexts where teachers work (Buchanan). (p.619)

This does not however, imply mere teacher behaviour can be used as criterion for professional agency. Rather, the teacher behaviours combined with internal processes such as attitudes, emotions and cognitive processing constitute the complexity of professional agency (Soini et al., this issue). Accordingly, agency entails ability to describe what one is doing, and to elaborate the multiple reasons behind the actions (Pantić; Soini et al.). Sense of agency is reflected in the internal locus of control, taking responsibility of the situation as well as making suggestions, pedagogical choices and conscious decisions on the basis of their own professional goals and reflection (Buchanan; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; van der Heijden et al., this issue). These pedagogical choices and decisions are primarily made in order to promote student learning and collegial developments at the moment and in the near future (Buchanan; van der Heijden et al.), and not only by accommodation but especially by appropriation (Pantić; Stillman & Anderson).(p.619)

With regard to the relational characteristics of teachers’ professional agency, all the papers in this special issue take a stand on the contextual factors at micro, mezzo and macro levels that influence or regulate the emergence and enactment of professional agency (Pantić; van der Heijden et al.). The authors of this special issue have identified and consider both explicit and implicit structures and processes that shape teachers’ professional capabilities and resources of action. (pp. 619-620) Professional discourses and resources frame teachers’ practices and can either facilitate or hinder their professional agency (Biesta et al.; Stillman & Anderson). (p.620)

Anne Edwards ties up the various aspects of teachers’ professional agency and considers its aspects on a more general level. She especially focuses on considering the dialectic of person and practice related to teachers’ professional agency, and thus provides a way of thinking about the core of professional agency between the individual teachers and the multiple demanding contexts where teachers work. In her reflection, she offers perspectives for further thoughts, explorations and research on to teacher agency – and equally importantly – emphasises that the commitments and expectations required from teachers should also be promoted by schools, professional organisations and the communities with which teachers interact. (p.620)

# **Mercer, S. (2011). Understanding learner agency as a complex dynamic system. *System*, *39*(4), 427-436.**

Agency is one of the most fundamental characteristics of general human behaviour and has been defined as being an individual’s will and capacity to act (Gao, 2010). How agency is defined and what significance it is assigned have been the subject of numerous theoretical and philosophical debates. In SLA, as outlined above, renewed interest about agency has emerged from recent theoretical debates about the role of structure/society and the individual. Often two main perspectives have been polarised with one view, cognitive theorists, giving primacy to the individual’s cognition and the other view assigning primacy to social contexts. However, recently another perspective has gained ground which takes a more balanced view and assigns equal importance to both the individual and the context. Realist perspectives conceive of both structure (social relations and macro features of society) and agency (humans as agents in the human world) as interacting in a relationship of reciprocal causality which generates emergent irreducible phenomena (Sealey and Carter, 2004). As Carter and Sealey (2000: 11) explain:

*“Too great an emphasis on structures denies actors any power and fails to account for human beings making a difference. Too great an emphasis on agency overlooks the (we would claim) very real constraints acting on us in time and space. And reducing each to merely a manifestation of the other (.) necessarily results in a theory which is unable to capture the complex relations between them”.*

The importance of such a view is that it sees humans as agents able to influence their contexts, rather than just react to them, in a relationship of ongoing reciprocal causality in which the emphasis is on the complex dynamic interaction between the two elements. (p.428)

Within psychology, Bandura (2008) has also argued that humans are not just reactive to their surroundings and environment but are also creative and proactive. Bandura (1989: 1175) explains that “the capacity to exercise control over one’s thought processes, motivation, and action is a distinctly human characteristic”. In his social cognitive theory, he proposes a triadic model of human behaviour:

*“.persons are neither autonomous agents nor simply mechanical conveyors of animating environmental influences. Rather, they make causal contribution to their own motivation and action within a system of triadic reciprocal causation. In this model of reciprocal causation, action, cognitive, affective, and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants”.*

Thus, in this model, human functioning is seen as emerging from the complex interplay between three constituent factors (1) intrapersonal (biological, cognitive, affective and motivational), (2) behavioural and (3) environmental factors (Bandura, 2008). (p.428)

Thus, realist approaches, theoretical work by Bandura and various studies in SLA suggest that learner agency is a complex phenomenon that is closely interrelated with other learner and contextual factors and plays a central integral role in facilitating autonomous, self-regulatory and goal-orientated strategic learning behaviours (Bown, 2009; Gao, 2010; Huang, 2011; Oxford, 2003; Toohey and Norton, 2003). Therefore, there seems to be a pressing need for “a more complex view of second language learners as agents” (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001: 155), which recognises the dynamic, situated and multi-dimensional nature of agency. With this in mind, this paper seeks to examine whether there are grounds for viewing agency as a complex dynamic system. (p.429)

Larsen-Freeman (1997: 157) characterises language learning as a non-linear, complex process and explains that “we will never be able to identify, let alone measure, all of the factors accurately. And even if we could, we would still be unable to predict the outcome of their combination”. Thus, rather than trying to extricate and separate the variables involved in a piecemeal fashion, complexity theory recognises the need to explore and acknowledge the dynamic complexity inherent in learning a foreign language. It rejects simplistic cause and effect explanations of language learning and accepts its non-linear, dynamic nature which can vary across individuals and is closely tied to a range of contextual factors. (p.429)

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Another core characteristic of a complex system is its dynamic nature. Everything within the system is dynamic and in a constant state of flux giving rise to changing states in the system and the way in which the components interact. Whilst the system continually evolves and adapts internally as well as through external connections to its environment (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008: 43), it can also adapt and thereby generate a kind of ‘dynamic stability’. This does not mean that a system is fixed but rather it can continuously adapt in order to retain a degree of stability. Changes in the system can thus either be smooth, continuous and gradual over time or the system can also be affected by larger perturbations in ways which lead to dramatic and sudden change. As components are not independent of each other, changes in one part of the system will lead to changes in other parts of the system in ways that are not entirely predictable and hence complex systems are typically described as being non-linear. (p.429)

Taking a complex systems approach also requires that the data generated fulfil particular criteria. Firstly, research needs to ensure that it has sufficiently detailed, longitudinal data which covers a range of timescales in order to capture different levels and types of change and variability (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008: 40). The second issue concerns the need to strategically simplify the complexity in order to research a system (Van Geert, 2008: 185). Thus, the system under investigation needs to be bounded in some way for research purposes, whilst consciously acknowledging its interconnectedness with a wider range of systems and further subsystems beyond the scope of the particular study (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008: 35). As Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008: 203) explain, “we will need to select, out of all that is connected and interacting, particular systems to focus on”. (p.430)

As a research method, case study research is especially useful for investigating complex and dynamic systems given its in-depth but yet holistic focus on a single bounded system (Yin, 2003). It enables rich, detailed, personal and contextualised data to be generated, which can lead to “a full and thorough knowledge of the particular” (Stake, 2000: 22). However, case study research is frequently criticised for difficulties in generalising its findings, given its focus on an individual case. Whilst care clearly must be taken not to transpose findings from one context or population to another, as Yin (2003: 10) points out, case studies can be considered “generalizable to theoretical propositions”. Therefore, a case study can be considered ideal for considering the theoretical question underlying this study; namely, whether learner agency can be conceived of as a complex, dynamic system. (p.430)

The important perspective emerging from this study is that a learner’s agency is not a single, monolithic factor but can best be understood as a complex system composed of a number of constituent components; each of which can itself be thought of as a dynamic complex system. Learner agency exists as latent potential to engage in self-directed behaviour but how and when it is used depends on a learner’s sense of agency involving their belief systems, and the control parameters of motivation, affect, metacognitive/self-regulatory skills, as well as actual abilities and the affordances, actual and perceived, in specific settings. No single component or element in the complex system causes Joana to exercise her agency in a certain way, but it is rather a series of multiple, interconnected causes which appear to vary in their relative significance and can interact in unpredictable ways. Joana was seen to ‘soft assemble’ her agentic resources (internal and external) in response to the actual and perceived contextual affordances in order to achieve her personal language learning goals, both short- and long-term. In this study, learner agency is seen to be continually

developing and adapting to changes in different parts of a wider system, occasionally undergoing changes but

sometimes resulting in dynamic stability, and also varying across parameters, such as language domains and contexts. (p.435)

The findings presented in this article do not provide easy formulas or advice for pedagogy. In fact, understanding agency as complex dynamic system poses a challenge for educational theory as to how best educators can use such insights in practical terms to help individuals to become the most effective language learners they can. The findings suggest the benefits of developing certain facilitating learning conditions, such as a positive learning climate, opportunities for self-direction, support for developing self-regulatory skills and positive motivational attitudes; however, above all, they warn against the supposed effectiveness of simple pedagogical ‘recipes’, given the inherent complexity and individuality of every single learner in any particular language learning setting. (p.435)

The findings have shown how agency cannot meaningfully be understood as a single monolithic variable but is perhaps best conceived of as a complex, dynamic system composed of a multitude of interrelated components. This study should not be seen as attempting to present a completed understanding of agency, but is intended to serve as an initial contribution towards an ongoing conversation about both the nature of learner agency and what complexity theory can offer researchers, and more challengingly in practical terms, educators in this field (cf. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron, 2008: 255). (p.435)

# **Miller, G. R., & Patrizio, K. M. (2015). Agency as Place in Teacher Education. *The New Educator*, *11*(4), 309-321.**

We wondered the following: Who educates teachers? What types of knowledge inform their experiences? How do teacher educators see the connection between knowledge and agency? The voices that responded to our questions came from community members, parents, teachers, administrators, and university faculty. They told us that reflection, contextualized activism, and professional learning opportunities were sources of knowledge that inspired agency for teacher educators, students, and communities alike (Miller, Flessner, Patrizio, & Horwitz, 2012). (p.309)

In this article, we situate ourselves in the contested global commons as we present the reasons that it is important for teacher educators to consider the places that knowledge is generated. Then, we turn to place-based education and critical pedagogies of place (Bowers, 2008; McKenzie, 2008; Stevenson, 2008) to focus on what we might learn about the relationship between agency and the *where* of knowledge in teacher education. (p.310)

It is important to consider the “where” of agency for two reasons. First, the world is more closely connected through shared economic interests than ever before in our history, and the market-driven imperatives that tie it together are accompanied by divisive social forces that impede relationships and agency (Hargreaves, 2003). Policies driven by shared global interests in the economy, environment, technology, and issues of public safety can connect people as members of a global citizenry; however, local cultures, values, knowledge, and mores are often overlooked as these policies are implemented (Sahlberg, 2004). (p.310)

Existing scholarship on agency in teacher education provides evidence of the powerful learning that ensues when educators at the school and university expand the boundaries of their curriculum to include the world beyond school walls. Kumar, Dean, and Bergey (2012) draw on student vignettes from a teacher-education-program network to make the argument that agency is a developmental process facilitated by the use of thoughtfully structured conceptual learning activities. Similarly, Blumenreich (2012) describes how the use of oral history projects in her teacher-education classroom provides students with the agency to access prior funds of knowledge, revealing “the vital role of identity, power, and agency in the production of knowledge” (p. 5). (p.312)

Klehr (2012) also explores the potential of community participation requirements in teacher-education programs through the lens of a field-based supervisor. All of this scholarship demonstrates that places beyond the school are important sources of knowledge that can meaningfully inform teaching and learning about the local and faraway places, relationships, cultures, and how social forces inform and influence our efforts to educate in the age of globalization. (p.312)

Based on this argument, we offer the construct of place as a way of understanding the *where* of agency in teacher education. Places are interactional, physical, and social settings that influence people and are, in turn, influenced by them (Steele, 1981). (p.312)

When we use place as the lens through which to focus our considerations of agency, it holds promise to extend the geographical applicability of the work because it highlights the meaningful roles of culture and value systems in our contemporary, globalized context. Summarily, specifically considering the where of agency would seem to help us counter the isolating intolerance of globalization (Ross & Manion, 2012). (p.312)

While we recognize learning opportunities in teacher education that require critical reflection about traditional pedagogy, societal norms, personal biases, and oppressive structures are not unique to these articles, and the work collected here relies on place as a physical and social setting that frames different ways teachers and teacher candidates enact agency with a focus on broader educational, social, and global settings. Our point is not to simply reiterate the notion: Think globally; act locally. Instead, these articles illustrate the iterative process Freire (1988; Freire & Macedo, 1987) argues is a way of reading the world before—and, in effect, simultaneously as—one reads the word. (p.318)

Culturally relevant pedagogy, teaching for social justice, and critical reflection are means to confront, challenge, conserve, and change. In our view, agency in teacher education is the conceptual framework, synthesizing mechanism and overarching approach that mitigates these approaches to education in a cultural commons. Agency is the determination to act or not to act. (p.318)

In teacher education, the means to facilitate and sustain a sense of agency—the confidence to act or not—will remain in flux and will not become any less complicated or contested. Navigating and negotiating what is conserved and what is changed in a cultural commons requires this messiness. What remains essential is teacher educators’ work toward the creation of a program of study that facilitates and sustains agency rather than develops a mere collection of courses and activities that inspire. (p.318)

# **Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2015). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.**

*In the past, national curriculum developments have often been supported by central guidelines, cascade models of staff development and the provision of resources to support the implementation of guidance by teachers. Our approach to change is different. It aims to engage teachers in thinking from first principles about their educational aims and values and their classroom practice. The process is based upon evidence of how change can be brought about successfully – through a climate in which reflective practitioners share and develop ideas. (Scottish Executive 2006, p. 4)*

Approaches such as these mark a significant shift in the light of several decades of policies that worked to de-professionalize teachers by taking agency away from them and replacing it with prescriptive curricula and limiting and sometimes oppressive regimes of testing, inspection and bureaucratic forms of accountability (see, for example, Gewirtz 2002; Ball 2003; Biesta 2010; Wilkins 2011). The (re)turn to teacher agency not only gives explicit permission to teachers to exert higher degrees of professional judgement and discretion within the contexts in which they work but also sees their agency as a key dimension of teachers’ professionalism (see, for example, Heilbronn 2008; Sugrue and Dyrdal-Solbrekke 2011). (p.8)

In addition to structure and culture, there is also the question of individual and collective *capacity*. This is the question of whether teachers – individually and collectively – are still capable of being active agents of their own work, or whether this capacity has been eroded as a result of structures and cultures that sought to restrain rather than to enable teachers’ professional agency. (p.9)

The particular approach to teacher agency we are offering in this book is termed an *ecological* approach (see also Biesta and Tedder 2007). The main distinctive feature of this approach is that we do not see agency as a capacity of individuals, that is, as something individuals can claim to ‘have’ or ‘possess’, but rather see it as something individuals and groups can manage to *achieve* – or not, of course. Agency is therefore to be understood as resulting from the *interplay* of individuals’ capacities and environment conditions. This makes it important not just to look at individuals and what they are able or not able to do but also at the cultures, structures and relationships that shape the particular ‘ecologies’ within which teachers work. It is the *interaction* between capacities and conditions that counts in making sense of teacher agency. This also means that any attempt to enhance teacher agency should not just focus on the capacities of individuals – for example, through programmes of professional learning and development – but should at the very same time pay attention to the factors and dimensions that shape the ecologies of teachers’ work. (p.9)

However, assumptions about the role of teachers as agents of change have been shown to be problematic, particularly because policy has tended to focus on raising individual capacity while not addressing the structural and cultural issues that might constrain or enable teacher agency. A particular issue in this regard is the curricular tension built into the conception and implementation of ‘Curriculum for Excellence’, where an open curricular framework remains embedded in rather strict accountability practices – including use of attainment data and internal inspections – thus constraining the space within which teachers are supposed to develop and exert their professional agency (see, for example, Baumfield et al. 2010). The question this raises, then, is what helps and hinders teachers in achieving agency in their everyday practice and settings. This was the central question in the ‘Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change’ project, which we will now introduce in more detail. (p.16)

The slipperiness of the notion of ‘agency’ can be clearly seen in the common tendency to conflate agency and action. For many, agency is viewed as a *variable* used in explaining or understanding social action. In such approaches, agency is often set against structure, where the key question is whether structure or agency is more important in determining or shaping social action (see Hollis 1994). A regular corollary of such a conceptualization of agency is a tendency to view agency as an *innate capacity* of the human; agency in such a view is seen as something that people possess, so that people can be seen as being more or less agentic as individuals. (p.23)

An alternative conceptualization of agency is to see it as an *emergent phenomenon* – as something that is achieved by individuals, through the interplay of personal capacities and the resources, affordances and constraints of the environment by means of which individuals act. This latter, ecological conceptualization of agency emphasizes the importance of both individual capacity and contextual dimensions in shaping agency and, moreover, views the achievement of agency as a temporal process (see also Emirbayer and Mische 1998). (p.23)

The distinction between *agency as variable*, *agency as capacity* and *agency as phenomenon* is an important distinction that is often overlooked in the literature, resulting in much misunderstanding and miscommunication. (p.23)

We then discuss the theoretical dimensions of the ecological understanding of agency in more detail. In doing so, we show how this approach is both relational – highlighting how humans operate *by means of* their social and material environments – and temporal – as agency is rooted in past experience, orientated to the future and located in the contingencies of the present. Next, we look at the notion of teacher agency – agency that occurs specifically in relation to the professional working practices of teachers. This is an area that is currently under-theorized and we offer in this book a theoretically informed view to address this gap. (p.24)

Agency has been extensively discussed within a large canon of literature going back many years. There are interpretations of agency with roots in a range of different academic disciplines, including sociology, philosophy, economics and anthropology. Also, agency has been theorized according to differing intellectual traditions, including postmodern, post-structural, sociocultural, identity and lifecourse perspectives (for a discussion of these approaches to agency in relation to professional practice, see Eteläpelto et al. 2013). Discussions about agency are often conducted in terms of the structure–agency debate. Fuchs (2001), for example, has shown that there is a tendency in social theory and research to either focus on an over-socialized, macro view of agency – thus ignoring the local and specific – or to concentrate on overly individualized notions of agency – thus ignoring questions of structure, context and resources. (p.24)

In simple terms, agency can be described as the ability or potential to act. Less prosaically, it has been described as the ‘capacity for autonomous action … [independent] of the determining constraints of social structure’ (Calhoun, cited by Biesta and Tedder 2006, p. 5) or as the capacity of actors to ‘critically shape their responses to problematic situations’ (as noted by Biesta and Tedder 2006, p. 11). Agency can also be viewed as autonomy and causal efficacy (Archer 2000). Taylor (cited by Edwards 2005, p. 169) provides a definition that has a similar emphasis, seeing agency as ‘the capacity to identify the goals at which one is directing one’s action and to evaluate whether one had been successful’. Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2011, p. 813) point to a tendency in much writing to see agency as the ‘power to transform … (and) … resistance to and transformation of dominant power relations’. (p.25)

The above definitions seek to capture the nature of agency, but all are potentially problematic, because they may be taken to suggest an overly individualistic view of agency as human capacity, seeing agency as something that people possess to varying degrees as a result of their personal attributes. They can be taken to read that the agentic individual is agentic solely because of his or her personal abilities or agentic capacity, even where that agency cannot be exercised. (p.25)

Agency, in other words, is not something that people can *have* or *possess*; it is rather to be understood as something that people *do* or *achieve* (Biesta and 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 thus helps to understand not only 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. While agency is inherent in human action, agency and action are conceptually distinct and should not be conflated with each other (see also Emirbayer and Mische 1998). (p.26)

While agency *per se* has been extensively theorized (if not well conceptualized), teacher agency – that is, agency theorized 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 and Soini 2012) and existing change models tend to both underplay and misconstrue the role of teacher agency in educational innovation (Leander and Osborne 2008). (p.29)

We start with a caveat: while we can claim that there is a lack of literature explicitly focusing on teacher agency that is not to say that agency has not been utilized as a concept in the literature covering the professional work of teachers. Often the use of the term agency is implicit, linked to discussions of professionalism (e.g. Brown and McIntyre 1993; Goodson 2003; Sachs 2003), accountability (e.g. Hargreaves 1993; Smyth and Shacklock 1998; Sahlberg 2010) or educational change (e.g. Hoban 2002; Fullan 2003). Sometimes, agency appears as a more explicit concept (e.g. Helsby 1999). However, we maintain that rarely is agency actively conceptualized and/or theorized in such literature. (p.29)

Reviewing this literature confirms the contention by Vongalis-Macrow (2007) that there is little literature on the topic. Since Vongalis-Macrow wrote this in 2007, there has been an increase in writing on teacher agency, but this is not significant. Leaving aside our own contributions to the debate (Priestley et al. 2012; Priestley, Biesta and Robinson 2012; Priestley, Robinson and Biesta 2012; Priestley, Biesta and Robinson 2013; Biesta, Priestley, and Robinson 2015), which follow the track outlined in this chapter, the following issues emerge in the literature on teacher agency. (p.29)

First, teacher agency is often conceived as a slogan to support school-based reform. Thus, one regularly hears teachers referred to as ‘agents of change’ (Fullan 2003) in relation to the implementation of policy. In our view, this provides a one-dimensional, and even misleading, view of agency, linking it to innovation or in some cases creativity, but ultimately suggesting that to be agentic is to follow lines laid down by others. This is redolent of the observation by Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 1008) that ‘actors who feel creative and deliberative while in the flow of unproblematic trajectories’ are not necessarily achieving agency. Such notions rarely acknowledge that agency may be achieved by teachers as they *oppose or subvert* policy, often for good educational reasons (Sannino 2010), and that resistance is not always inherently conservative, routinized behaviour but can be an active, agentic process (for an interesting discussion of different forms of teacher mediation of policy, see Osborn at al. 1997). (p.29)

A second issue relates to whether such literature adequately conceptualizes agency. Sannino (2010), in her account of agency as resistance, certainly conceptualizes resistance but does not offer a similar detailed conceptualization of agency, other than to suggest different variants of agency such as resistance and self-initiative. (p.30)

Other authors offer a limited conceptualization of teacher agency, but in an underdeveloped manner. Vongalis-MaCrow (2007), as previously noted, commented on the lack of substantive theorization of teacher agency, but does not offer a detailed account herself. In a paper mainly focusing on the ways in which teachers navigate the changing globalized contexts within which they work, she provides a brief deconstruction of the concept of agency, drawing upon the work of Archer and suggesting that agency comprises three interconnected aspects: obligations, authority and autonomy. In common with much of the literature, this does not provide a clear conception of what agency is but rather seeks to theorize how it is constituted. (p.30)

Similarly, Vaughn (2013) discusses the ‘construct of teacher agency’ (p. 121), suggesting that it involves vision and teaching ‘against the grain’ (ibid.) but does not develop the conception in any detail. (p.30)

Other writers have made more systematic attempts to conceptualize and theorize agency. For instance, Lasky (2005), in her sociocultural treatment of teacher agency, offers an extended discussion, defining agency as both individual capacity (for example, beliefs, identity, knowledge and emotional well-being) and social influences (such as language, policy, norms and social structures). According to Lasky, ‘individual agency to change a context is possible in the ways people act to affect their immediate settings through using resources that are culturally, socially and historically developed’ (ibid., p. 900). This construction of agency seems to chime with the ecological approach, offering potential to both define and theorize agency as a concept and showing how agency is possible for teachers through their relational and temporal connections. (p.30)

This short review of literature illustrates that there is a large space for new ways of understanding and theorizing agency in relation to the work of teachers. (p.31)

# **Bieler, D., Holmes, S., & Wolfe, E. W. (2016). Patterns in the Initial Teaching Assignments of Secondary English Teachers: Implications for Teacher Agency and Retention. *The New Educator*, 1-19.**

We know, for example, that 40–50% of teachers quit within their first 5 years in the profession (Ingersoll, 2003), that first-year teacher attrition surged by one third between 1990 and 2010 (Ingersoll, 2012), and that about 25–30% of students drop out of school annually (Swanson, 2010). (p.2)

In addition, we now know that attrition among English teachers is significantly higher than attrition among the broader population of teachers (Scherff & Hahs-Vaughn, 2008). (p.2)

We used the notion of teacher agency to frame our study because it is widely noted to be a factor in teacher-attrition scholarship, both in general and concerning secondary English teachers specifically, as we describe below. We also chose this frame because agency emerged as a focal concept in an earlier phase of this project in which Bieler (2011) examined the narratives performed by members of the action research New English Teachers for Social justice (NETS) Project. The NETS members wanted to learn whether their experiences were common among a broader population of English teachers and so to craft this study, we used a combination of their narrative-analysis themes and additional factors described in the literature that connects working conditions with attrition. (p.2) We understand agency to be the natural, innate capacity that all people have to take goal-oriented action (Rymes, 2009) and then to “see the results of [their] decisions and choices” (Murray, 1997, p. 381). We see agency as socially situated; each sociohistorical context makes it more or less difficult for people to enact their agency. Because the enactment of agency is satisfying, it is logical to assume that a higher level of agency would be correlated with a higher likelihood of retention (Yost, 2006). (p.2) Separate scholarship examines the relationship between attrition and other aspects of teachers’ working conditions. Though most of these studies do not explicitly use the lens of agency to interpret their results, many provide important illustrations of how teachers’ agency is routinely hindered in their work lives. In their survey, for example, Ingersoll and Smith (2003) found that, of the teachers who cited “job dissatisfaction” as their primary reason for quitting, 84% attributed their dissatisfaction to some aspect of their school’s working conditions. The top four unsatisfactory working conditions cited by teachers who quit after just 1 year of teaching were student discipline problems, poor administrative support, poor student motivation, and lack of faculty influence in decision making. It is striking that all four of these conditions are examples of what teachers perceive to be obstacles to teaching children. That is, it seems telling that these teachers did not cite dissatisfaction with the amount of work or pay as the primary reason they left the profession; rather, they cited hindrances to their teaching. If context-specific features interfere with the job performance new teachers envision for themselves, then these new teachers can be seen as having experienced a thwarting of their agency. (p.3)

Some scholars have argued compellingly that an examination of teachers’ working conditions is best accomplished with an understanding that it is the subject area subunits of schools, the departments, that are the most powerful shapers of schools’ organizational culture and, thus, teachers’ workplace experiences. Stodolsky and Grossman (1995), for example, found that departments’ unique contexts afford particular approaches to hierarchical organization. It follows, then, that much of the potential for agency building or agency thwarting resides at the departmental level. (p.3)

Agency-thwarting factors identified as contributing to English teacher attrition are a lack of support, both collegial (Freedman & Appleman, 2009) and material (Scherff, 2008), and increased responsibilities concerning differentiated instruction (Scherff, Ollis, & Rosencrans, 2006). Scherff and Hahs-Vaughn (2008) found that it is extremely rare (about 10%) for English teachers to receive a reduced number of teaching assignments in spite of the fact that reduced loads have been found to positively correlate with retention (McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). Little (1999) argues that how schools handle teacher assignments is highly suggestive of the kind of professional community beginning teachers experience; this phenomenon is thus extremely important to unpack as part of the effort to improve English teacher agency and retention. (p.4)

Taken together, the results of this study create a compelling portrait of the multiple factors that contribute to the agency thwarting of new high school English teachers, which, in turn, may affect their potential for retention. (p.13)

Given the common characteristics of students who will go on to drop out, such as having low attendance and earning low grades, it follows that new high school English teachers therefore spend much more time than their experienced peers contacting students’ families/guardians, catching students up on missed work, creating and administering makeup quizzes and tests, and providing extra help on course content and skills. Not having a permanent classroom in which to do this additional work and to store materials is sure to create truly exasperating working conditions that prevent new teachers from enacting their agency. As Bandura (2001) notes, “Unless people believe they can produce desired results and forestall detrimental ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act or persevere in the face of difficulties” (p. 10). In other words, such conditions will cause new teachers to leave the profession. (p.13)

At least until we change these cultures, teacher educators and school administrators must intentionally develop new English teachers’ capacity to enact their agency and to improve their initial professional experiences, two key implications suggested by our findings (p.13)

Teacher educators must ensure that their programs prepare teachers to work both with students in all grade and track levels but especially with students in lower grade and track levels, explicitly building instructional differentiation skills and providing a full range of pedagogical content knowledge from young adult literature and spoken word poetry to essays and novels. We encourage teacher educators to stress the major shift students experience in the transition to high school (Langenkamp, 2009) so that teacher candidates can prepare to build on students’ existing knowledge and interests. It is most important, though, to give teacher candidates multiple opportunities to enact their agency at the pre-service level. Agency-building activities might include increasing the amount of choice pre-service teachers have in their coursework, projects, or field placements or requiring that student teachers lead some of their pre- or post-observation conferences. Methodical reflections on their choices and the consequences can strengthen beginning teachers’ sense of themselves as experienced professional decision makers. (p.13-14)

Because we found that teacher agency correlates with having their own classrooms, our study suggests that giving new teachers a place of their own may help increase their agency. At the very least, when providing all teachers with classrooms of their own is impossible, administrators should assign all teachers a home classroom and a teacher’s desk, even if that means that teachers share classrooms. Less-desirable options are for teams of teachers to be assigned to sets of classrooms in which the same kinds of classes are taught or for a collegiate system of classroom space in which all teachers travel but also have a permanent space in which to conduct meetings, store materials, plan, and grade. (p.14)

Teacher agency—like teacher recruitment and retention—is necessarily impacted by the larger society’s attitudes toward teachers and their work. When society demonizes teachers and the profession; holds teachers in low status; bashes teacher education programs and allows, as an alternative, non-Institutes of Higher Education (IHEs) to award teacher certification; and deprofessionalizes teaching by supporting graduates from elite colleges without any professional education to populate the teaching force, for example, there seems to be little reason for anyone to enter the teaching profession, let alone choose to teach in a public school or remain in the profession for any length of time. If agency is the capacity to take goal-oriented action and to see the results of one’s decisions and choices, imagine how damaging it is to professionally prepared teachers’ sense of agency to witness school districts actively recruiting untrained teachers. (p.14-15)

# **Van der Heijden, H. R. M. A., Geldens, J. J. M., Beijaard, D., & Popeijus, H. L. (2015). Characteristics of teachers as change agents. Teachers and Teaching, 21(6), 681-699.**

Teachers play a key role in realizing successful changes in education. Essential for this is that they are already from the beginning actively involved in a process of change in their schools (Bakkenes, Vermunt, & Wubbels, 2010; Fullan, 2007). Teachers differently use their ‘professional agency’ in such processes (see also Lasky, 2005; Sannino, 2010). Their professional agency is expressed in the ways they influence work-related matters, make choices and decisions at work, and act accordingly (Vähäsantanen, 2013). Teachers may use their agency to support, take a critical stance, or even resist educational change in their schools (Sannino, 2010). However, not much is known about how and to what extent teachers actually do so in daily practice. (p.681)

It is generally agreed that the way teachers act, develop themselves, and learn from and through their work in schools is influenced by personal factors, including the way they (want to) see themselves as teachers (self-image), and the educational context (or environment) in which they work (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Clardy, 2000; Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007; Kelchtermans, 2009; Lasky, 2005; Scribner, 1999; Van Eekelen, Vermunt, & Boshuizen, 2006). Teachers’ sense of their professional selves influences how they practice agency at work (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). Teachers’ professional agency and the social context in which they work can be seen as being mutually constitutive and highly interdependent (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Lasky, 2005; Vähäsantanen, 2013; van Oers, 2014). (p.682)

It seems important to create supportive school contexts in which teachers are encouraged to be agentic in order to positively influence or change their education, and to learn and develop themselves both individually and with their colleagues (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; Fullan, 1993b). Kwakman (2003) concludes in her research on teacher professional development, that personal characteristics of teachers (for example, their attitudes towards something new or what they do or do not appraise as meaningful) have more influence on teacher learning and development than school contexts do. Hattie (2012) also points out that individual characteristics of teachers, such as their beliefs and commitments, have the greatest influence on their students’ achievement. Personal characteristics explain to a large extent differences among teachers in the way and the extent to which they enact professional agency in order to influence or change education, also within the same school (e.g. Bakkenes et al., 2010; Fullan, 2007, 2013). (p.682)

The rapidly changing society of today requires from teachers that they are able and willing to cope with the many challenges of change. In today’s schools, teachers are needed who are real change agents, thus teachers who are willing to learn and change from ‘inside’ (internal drive to reflect and make sense of things) and ‘outside’ (meeting external demands), both individually and in collaboration with others in their schools (Fullan, 1993a, 1993b, 2013; Hattie, 2012). Until now, little empirical research has been done on what characterizes teachers as change agents as they influence, change, or improve education in daily practice by using their agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Lukacs, 2009; Van der Bolt, Studulski, Van der Vegt, & Bontje, 2006). (p.682)

Vähäsantanen (2013) distinguishes three complementary perspectives of professional agency, namely in terms of: (1) influencing one’s own work; (2) making decisions and choices about one’s own involvement in educational reform; and (3) negotiating and influencing one’s own professional identity. Eteläpelto et al. (2013) provide a conceptualization of professional agency at work from a subject-centered sociocultural and lifelong learning perspective. The focus in this perspective is on the processes by which teachers construct and actively negotiate their identity position at work, how they develop themselves professionally (lifelong learning), and the way they enact their agency at work. Investigating teachers’ professional agency from this perspective seems important, as the way teachers think, act, and learn, through and during their work, is imbued and resourced (or constrained) by the sociocultural context in which they work (Lasky, 2005; Vähäsantanen, 2013; van Oers, 2014). (p.683)

Bandura (2001) states that ‘to be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one’s actions’ (p. 2). In line with this statement, teachers as change agents are open to change and act accordingly, while being self-conscious of the complexity of change processes in their schools (Fullan, 1993a, 1993b). In the literature, two terms are used interchangeably for these teachers: ‘change agents’ (Fullan, 1993a, 1993b; Hattie, 2012; Lukacs, 2009) and ‘agents of change’ (Price & Valli, 2005; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Vrijnsen-de Corte, 2012). (p.683)

# **Paris, C. L. (1993). Teacher Agency and Curriculum Making in the Classrooms. Teachers College Press.**

Before undertaking our analysis, we provide an overview of some of the existing theory relating to agency. Inevitably, such a review is selective, as human agency is both a much-debated concept with diverse theoretical framings informing it. While agency per se has been extensively theorised, Fuchs (2001) suggests that there has been a tendency in social research to either focus on an over-socialised, macro view of agency—thus ignoring the local and specific—or to concentrate on overly individualised notions of agency. (p.194)

In simple terms, agency can be described as the capacity of actors to “critically shape their responses to problematic situations” (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11), or the “capacity for autonomous action . . . [independent] of the determining constraints of social structure” (Calhoun, cited in Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 5). According to Archer (2000a), agency has been seen as autonomy and causal efficacy. Such statements may be taken to suggest an overly individualistic view of agency, rooted in psychological views of human capacity, and indeed many writers have taken such a view. This perspective has come under sustained criticism from thinkers as diverse as Usher and Edwards (1994) and Archer (1998, 2000a) for underemphasising the influence of societal structures and human culture and discourses on agency. Such a view sees humans as “self-motivated, selfdirecting, rational subject(s), capable of exercising individual agency” (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 2). In Archer’s (1998) view, this is an “undersocialised view of man [sic]” (p. 11), where people operate relatively unimpeded by social constraints, and society is epiphenomenal to the individual or group. Here agency is often conflated with the concept of autonomy as a form of freedom from constraints. (p.195)

An alternative view of agency is grounded in the influence of society over the individual, seeking to supplant agency with structure. For example, according to Popkewitz, “many of the wants, values and priorities of decision making are determined by the structural and historical conditions of our institutions” (cited in Paechter, 1995, p. 47). This variety of world view has also come under attack by those who see it as a form of social determinism. For instance, Archer (2000b) has criticised what she sees as an over-socialised view of someone who is “shaped and moulded by his social context” (p. 11), an individual who is little more than an epiphenomenon of society. It is also a criticism that lies at the heart of the various studies of the relationships between power, knowledge and subjectivity in the works of Foucault (1980). (p.195)

In a similar vein to Archer, Biesta and Tedder (2007) have developed a useful ecological view of agency, positing the notion that agency is achieved under particular ecological conditions. This notion suggests that even if actors have some kind of capacities, whether they can achieve agency depends on the interaction of the capacities and the ecological conditions. Rather than agency residing in individuals as a property or capacity, it becomes construed in part as an effect of the ecological conditions through which it is enacted. In other words, agency is positioned as a relational effect. According to this view, agency is a matter of personal capacity to act, combined with the contingencies of the environment within which such action occurs. Further an individual may exercise more or less agency at various times and in different settings. In a sense, this renders the question “What is agency?” sterile, supplanting it with questions of “How is agency possible?” and “How is agency achieved?” (p.196)

[T]his concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment . . . the achievement of agency will always result in the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations. (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137) (p.196)

Thus, human agents are reflexive and creative and can act counter to societal constraints as well as with societal possibilities. As reflexive people, agents are influenced by, but not determined by, society (Archer, 2000a). Through inner dialogue (Archer, 2000a) and “manoeuvre amongst repertoires” (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11) they may act to change their relationships to society and the world in general, contributing to a continually emergent process of societal reproduction and transformation. (p.197)

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) develop a temporal theme to agency, seeing it as

a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment). (p. 963) (p.197)

Utilising this chordal triad of the iterational (past), projective (future imaginings) and the practical-evaluative (present) elements makes it possible to characterise the particular “tone” of people’s engagement with events in their lives. On an empirical level, however, the conception of agency espoused by Emirbayer and Mische requires not only the “composition” of agency to be explored, but simultaneously “it requires a characterisation of the different temporal-relational contexts within which individuals act” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137). This way of understanding agency provides space for the agentic orientations of people to differ in different contexts and times. (p.197)

In this formulation, agency is something that can potentially develop over time through a continual process of engagement and emergence. According to Archer (2000a), the capacity for agency emerges as individuals interact with the social (both cultural and structural forms as well as other people), practical and natural worlds. Thus people’s potential for agency changes in both positive and negative ways as they accumulate experience and as their material and social conditions evolve. In line with the insights provided by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), such development is an ongoing process and has its roots in practical-evaluative activity. In Archer’s (2000b) view, “our sense of self is prior and primitive to our sociality” (p. 13), but the emerging sense of self is heavily influenced by social interaction and by other experiences. (p.197)

The insights provided by this literature on agency were used to inform the analysis of the data from the Curriculum Making project. In particular, the following key ideas were utilised:

1. Agency can be understood in an ecological way, that is, strongly connected to the contextual conditions within which it is achieved and not as merely a capacity or possession of the individual. Agency is achieved in particular (transactional) situations. (p.197)

2. Agency can be understood temporally as well as spatially; thus analysis of agency should include insights into the past experiences and the projective aspirations and views of agents, as well as the possibilities of the present.

3. Analytical dualism provides a methodology whereby the various components of each setting can be disentangled for the purpose of analysis. For example, one might investigate the causative influence of the capacity of individuals on a particular instance of agency, as well as the influence of contextual or ecological factors (including social structure, cultural forms and the material environment). (p.198)

It is clear that two of our three teachers were greatly concerned with the provision of a curriculum that was educational as opposed to instrumental. Both Gerald and Debbie espoused strongly held views that education should not be narrowly focused on exams. Their projections also supported the need for suitable educational methods that should encompass experiential, dialogical and student-centred approaches, engaging students more widely and enabling them to develop thinking skills and to make links within and between their different areas of study. Our third teacher, Donald, espoused more narrowly focused projections. His teaching was mainly geared to motivating students and raising attainment. Put simply, Donald did not achieve practical-evaluative agency in respect of broadening the scope of the educative experiences of his students because he harboured few or no aspirations in this respect. Given his biography, it might be suggested that he had fewer and more limited iterational experiences in his past to draw upon in developing curriculum making. We would also tentatively conclude from this, therefore, that a well-articulated educational philosophy related to the wider purposes of education is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the sorts of agency that might enrich or challenge the official discourses in this school. (p.209)

According to Doyle and Ponder (1977), rational assessment of cost/benefit plays a large part in teacher decision making. This element is certainly evident in Gerald’s approach to curriculum making. He was absolutely explicit about the risks involved in developing pedagogy that might impact on examination results. In Gerald’s case, the implication was clear that he should go for tried-and-tested methods despite the obvious dissonance with his views on education. This manoeuvre between repertoires (Biesta & Tedder, 2006), a carefully considered weighing up of alternatives, is illustrative of the active role of human reflexivity in agency, and of inner dialogue (Archer, 2000b). However, such a position cannot be ascribed to Debbie, whose teaching appeared to be bolder and more experimental in its strategies. She seemed to draw expansively upon a wider range of repertoires in manoeuvring between her projective and practical-evaluative approaches to curriculum making. (p.209)

The nature of this ecology goes a long way in explaining the subsequent behaviour of teachers in curriculum making. Such structures and systems exert causative influences on teachers, with emergent consequences: projections of risk, circumscribed social practices in department and classrooms and the development of values towards education. We emphasise here that this is not a form of social determinism. Within each social situation, there is always room for manoeuvre, and this is evident from the differing approaches of different teachers to similar teaching contexts. (p.210)

The iterational aspect of agency seems to be especially significant. It is evident that the two teachers (Gerald and Debbie) who espoused broad, educational aspirations in respect of their teaching shared similar past experiences both in terms of work and extra-career activities. Conversely, Donald, with his more traditional trajectory into teaching, exhibited different aspirations. While we clearly cannot generalise from such a small project, we are able to note the direct correspondence in the cases of Gerald and Debbie between their previous professional lives and their aspirations for their teaching. Put bluntly, these teachers were able to bring to bear their often-rich past experiences in tailoring rich and meaningful educational experiences for their students as their projections were not solely circumscribed by the cultural ecology of schooling in general and their particular school. (p.210)

We conclude this analysis with three points, one specific to these cases, and two general. First, the analysis does not explain why one teacher with rich prior experience and strongly held views about education was able to translate this so strongly into her teaching, whereas the other was less successful. It is likely that the answer lies in the personal biographies of the teachers concerned. Perhaps Gerald’s putative protestant work ethic makes him less likely than Debbie to rock the educational boat. Perhaps the temporary nature of her contract made risk taking more viable. Or maybe the newness of her position in school meant that she was less enculturated by dominant school mores and cultural patterns than were her colleagues. Our data do not provide answers to these questions. (p.210)

We have taken the view in this article that teacher agency is largely about repertoires for manoeuvre, or the possibilities for different forms of action available to teachers at particular points in time. These are dependent upon temporal aspects—the iterative and projective, as well as the practical evaluative possibilities afforded by the material and social configurations of the present context. In the case of our three teachers, we see varying potential for agency, framed by ontogeny (the iterative), the possibilities created from this for aspirations about education (the projective), and enacted within the complex and contingent possibilities of the present (the practical-evaluative). (p.211)