



## Teacher agency and identity commitment in curricular reform



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We examined the interaction of teacher agency and identity commitment to professional development in curricular reform.
- We interpreted agentic *choices* and *actions* in their professional trajectories from a sociocultural developmental approach.
- Teachers' agentic *choices* were mediated by their identity commitment.
- Teachers' individualized ways of enacting agency was affected by their prior experience.
- These findings inform how to prepare and support teachers as agentic professionals in the shifting educational contexts

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how teachers enact agency to facilitate their professional development during curricular reform at a Chinese university. An analysis of data derived from life history interviews with eight language teachers complemented with field notes reveals differential agentic *choices* and *actions*. The teachers' learning, teaching and research endeavours in relation to the new curriculum are directed by various identity commitments and enacted in highly individualised ways, as mediated by their prior experiences. By situating teachers' agency in their individual professional trajectories, this study conceptualises interaction of teacher agency and identity commitment to professional development during curricular reform.

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### 1. Introduction

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; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 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

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(Sannino, 2010; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009). Therefore teachers are not “pawns in the reform process” but “active agents, whether they act passively or actively” (Lasky, 2005, pp. 900–901). Agentic teachers not only fulfil complicated tasks but also “have the skills and will to strengthen their own ... capabilities for life-long learning and sustained professional growth” (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011, p. 812). In other words, teacher agency plays a critical role in sustaining teachers' professional development. It directs them to stay true to themselves on their career path and attain self-realisation (Ketelaar et al., 2012), a sign of the intricate relationship between agency and identity. 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

(Leander & Osborne, 2008; Vähäsantanen, 2015). 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. As teachers' professional development can be understood as “a process of life-long learning” (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004, p. 122), our inquiry draws on the life-course notion of agency and takes a socio-cultural developmental approach (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013) to examine how teacher agency interacted with identity commitment to mediate their professional development in the midst of educational reform.

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). We discuss below how teacher agency and identity commitment have been used to explore teachers' professional development in light of educational change, and elaborate the socio-cultural developmental approach used in this study.

## 2. Professional development: teacher agency and identity commitment

Rather than something that is done to teachers, professional development has been reclaimed as something “for teachers, by teachers” (Johnson, 2006, p. 250). That recognises teachers' ‘right’ to direct and ‘responsibility’ to sustain their professional development throughout their careers (ibid.), highlighting teacher agency. 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, Pyhältö, & Rust, 2015, p. 615). In other words, more research is needed to link teacher agency and professional development during educational changes (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

Teacher agency plays a key role in teacher learning as manifested in collective efforts to confront, resist and work out pedagogical conflicts (Sannino, 2010). Similarly, Lai, Li and Gong's (2016) study of professional learning in an institutional environment where Chinese and Western teachers co-exist demonstrates that an agency-oriented approach can overcome unequal power relations

and lead to mutual learning in cross-cultural communication. Other studies have investigated professional practices such as research performance (Hökkä, Eteläpelto, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2012) and the supervision of vocational students' workplace learning (Vähäsantanen, 2015). Thus, teacher agency is multifaceted and involved in professional growth in many different facets of a teacher's daily work. There are also consequences to teachers' professional well-being when their agency is limited. For instance, Lasky (2005) reports on teachers' increased feelings of vulnerability during a secondary school curriculum reform that placed more emphasis on accountability. Lasky shows that professional vulnerability co-occurs with the constraint of agency and also a disjuncture between teacher identity and the reform mandate. Thus the interaction between agency and identity cannot be underestimated.

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; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 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). 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 (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). In this study, we define identity commitment as the combination of a teacher's professional interests and aspirations (Vähäsantanen, 2015) and examine its interaction with teacher agency. Taking a more holistic approach to teachers' professional development, we do not confine our examination of teacher agency to teaching practices, and investigate other areas that the participants considered relevant to their everyday work and professional trajectories. Thus we interpret individual teachers' *actions* and *choices* within their professional history as well as an institutional context, and explore the interplay between teacher agency and identity commitment. To do so, we adopt a socio-cultural developmental approach to teacher agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

## 3. Towards a socio-cultural developmental approach to teacher agency

Recent research on teacher agency has been problematised, as it tends to offer “an uncritical privileging of the immediate social contributions” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 56) such as activity theory. We accordingly draw on the life-course notion of agency to expand the temporal dimension that helps understand teacher agency within a professional trajectory dictated by contextual resources and constraints (ibid.). This life-course theoretical orientation towards agency posits that “individuals construct their own life course through the *choices* and *actions* they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance” (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003, p. 11, italics added, also see Gao & Xu, 2014). This implies the primacy of individual development

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