

Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change

(ESRC reference: RES-000-22-4208)

The *Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change* project began in March 2011, and will run until May 2012. The project is conducted at the University of Stirling, in partnership with a Scottish Local Authority. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The research team is:

- Dr Mark Priestley (Principal Investigator) – m.r.priestley@stir.ac.uk
- Professor Gert Biesta (Co-Investigator) - gert.biesta@stir.ac.uk
- Dr Sarah Robinson (Research Fellow) - s.c.robinson@stir.ac.uk

The project comprises a number of in-depth ethnographic case studies in three Scottish schools (primary and secondary). The immediate context for the research is the implementation of Scotland's new *Curriculum for Excellence*, a policy that aims to change the structure, content and method of Scottish education, and which is an example of modern curricular reform in which teachers are explicitly positioned as agents of change. The project focuses 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. The project has two key aims:

- to trial a set of methodologies for identifying the factors that impact upon teacher agency
- to develop an understanding of key factors that impact upon such agency in contexts of educational change.

This paper is one of a series publications being produced as part of the research. This, along with other publications, including working papers (as they become available) may be downloaded from the project website at <http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/events/tacc.php>.

Understanding Teacher Agency: The Importance of Relationships

Mark Priestley, Gert Biesta & Sarah Robinson
School of Education, University of Stirling, UK

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, 13-17 April 2012.ⁱ

Introduction

There is an emerging tendency in curriculum policy in the UK and elsewhere to construct teachers explicitly as agents of change (e.g. Goodson, 2003; Priestley, 2011; Nieveen, 2011). The last ten years have witnessed the development of a new form of national curriculum in a range of countries – such as Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence*, the *New Zealand Curriculum* and recent changes to England's *National Curriculum*¹ – that seek to combine what are claimed to be the best features of top-down and bottom-up approaches to curriculum planning and development, providing both central guidance for schools (thus ensuring the maintenance of national standards) and sufficient flexibility for practitioners to take account of local needs. Intrinsic to these developments is a renewed vision of teachers as developers of curriculum and as agents of change. The concept of teacher agency thus lies at the centre of these initiatives.

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. This [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. The renewed emphasis on teacher agency raises a number of questions. These are partly questions about definition and theory, such as the question what we mean by agency and how it might best be theorised. More specifically these are questions relating to *teacher agency*, and what it would mean for teachers to be agents of change. And these are partly empirical questions about the factors that promote or hinder teacher agency.

In this paper we focus on aspects relating to both sets of questions. We provide an overview of a theory of teacher agency, and we draw upon empirical data from two schools – both secondary – participating in the Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change project. Our aim is to understand why agency is *achieved differently* in different settings by teachers who have *broadly similar* values, beliefs and levels of experience in common. In what follows, we first set out how we define and theorise agency, and what this means for understanding and researching the factors that contribute to teacher agency. We present our view of agency as an emergent phenomenon rather than as a capacity residing in individuals. We then relate this concept to the work of teachers, thereby setting out a framework for understanding teacher agency. Against this background, we present findings from our research that highlight the impact of relational dimensions on the achievement of agency by teachers as they enact *Curriculum for Excellence* within different contexts of the Scottish school system.

ⁱ This paper can be cited as: Priestley, M., Biesta, G.J.J. & Robinson, S. (2012). *Understanding teacher agency: The importance of relationships*. A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, Canada, 13-17 April 2012.

Defining and Theorising Agency

Teacher agency – in other words, agency that is theorised specifically in respect of the activities of teachers in schools – has been subject to little explicit research or theory development (see 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 *et al.*, 2012; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2012), existing change models tend to both underplay and misconstrue the role of teacher agency in educational innovation (Leander & Osborne, 2008), and it is often utilised as a slogan to support school-based reform. Unlike *teacher* agency, agency *per se* has been extensively theorised, particularly in the sociological literature. Fuchs (2001) has argued that there is a tendency in social theory and 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 – thus ignoring questions of structure, context and resources. A number of sociologists have made attempts to find a middle ground on this position, or indeed to reframe the debate altogether. These include Bourdieu's (1977) notion of 'habitus,' Giddens's (1984) theory of 'structuration,' and Archer's (1995) realist social theory. While such work has done a great deal in refining our understanding of the factors that pertain on social action, it is important to see that this discussion is predominantly located within a sociological problematic where the main ambition is to explain or understand social action (see Hollis, 1994). In the so-called 'structure-agency' debate 'agency' thus tends to appear as an independent variable in the explanation of social actor, rather than as a phenomenon in its own right.

Our interest, however, lies in the phenomenon of agency itself and in how agency is 'achieved' in concrete settings and under particular 'ecological' conditions and circumstances (see Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Our perspective on agency is therefore not sociological but has its roots in the theory of action, particularly as it has been developed in the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead (see Biesta, 2005, 2009). Agency is viewed here as the capacity of actors to 'critically shape their responses to problematic situations' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11), as autonomy and causal efficacy (Archer, 2000). Rather than seeing agency as residing in individuals as a property or capacity, the ecological view of agency sees it as an emergent phenomenon of the ecological conditions through which it is enacted.

[T]his concept of agency highlights that actors always act *by means of* their environment rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from 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; emphasis added)

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

Building on pragmatism, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) have argued for a conception of agency that aims to overcome the one-sidedness of existing theories of agency which, in their view, tend to focus either on routine, or on purpose or on judgement. They make a case for a 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' (*ibid.*, p.963). For this reason 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

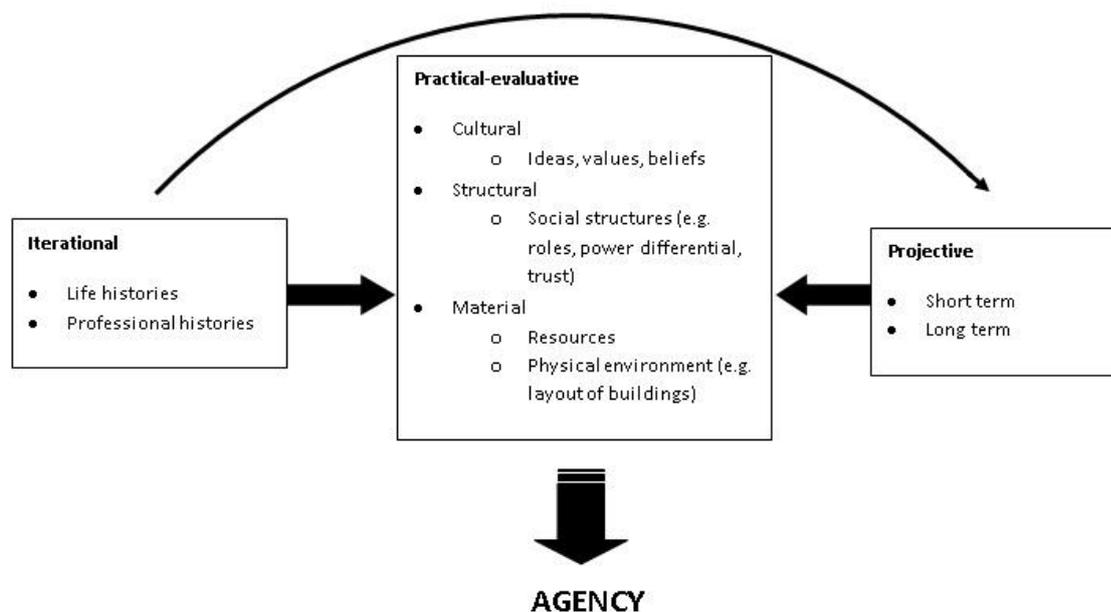
refer to these three dimensions as the *iterational*, the *projective* and the *practical-evaluative* dimension respectively. In concrete actions all three dimensions play a role, but the degree to which they contribute varies. This is why Emirbayer and Mische speak of a '*chordal triad of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones*' (ibid., p.972; emphasis in original). Thus they suggest that agency should be understood as a 'temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and 'acted out' in the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment)' (ibid., p.963). This, in turn, leads them to define agency 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*' (ibid., p.970; emph. in original).

Emirbayer's and Mische's ideas are helpful because they first of all show that agency doesn't come from nowhere but builds upon past achievements, understandings and patterns of action. This is expressed in the iterational element of agency which has to do with '*the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time*' (ibid., p.971; emph. in original). Their approach also acknowledges, however, that agency is in some way 'motivated,' i.e., that it is linked to the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past. This is encapsulated in the projective element of agency which encompasses '*the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future*' (ibid., emph. in original). Although agency is involved with the past and the future, it can only ever be 'acted out' in the present, which is precisely what is expressed in the practical-evaluative dimension, which entails '*the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations*' (ibid., emph. in original). Emirbayer's and Mische's analysis emphasises the importance of context and structure in that agency is seen as the 'temporally constructed *engagement* with different structural environments' (ibid., p.970; emph. 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' (ibid., p.974).

Understanding Teacher Agency

This three-dimensional perspective on agency makes it possible to generate rich understandings of how agency is achieved by concrete individuals in concrete situations, and of the different factors that promote or inhibit the achievement of agency. Based on the assumption of agency as a situated achievement, and informed by Emirbayer's and Mische's suggestion that the achievement of agency is the outcome of the interplay of iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions, we have developed the following model to guide data-collection and assist data-analysis. Within each dimension we have identified a number of further aspects that are likely to contribute to the achievement on agency. With regard to the iterational dimension we distinguish between the influence of the more general life histories of teachers and their more specific professional histories (which includes both their own education as a teacher and the accumulated experience of being a teacher). Within the projective dimension we distinguish between short term and long[er] term

orientations of action. Both the iterative and projective dimensions of agency relate primarily to the qualities that individuals bring to transactions (although clearly these are shaped by previous transactions; individual emergent properties include the development of identity, values, and beliefs – see Archer, 2000). And in respect of the practical-evaluative dimension, and again following the work of Archer (1988, 1995, 2000), we make a distinction between the cultural, structural and material domains in particular social settings. Cultural aspects include shared ideas, values and beliefs. Structural aspects encompass the social structures that contribute to the achievement of agency; such structures are primarily relational, comprising the configurations of particular relationships and roles, and the emergent properties of these (for example, power and trust). In line with Archer, we view these domains as real, in that they persist over time, and exert what Scott (2010) terms causative influences on the actions of people. According to Archer the cultural and structural domains are independent, but parallel, and linked via human transactions. Thus, for example, particular ideologies or ideas about learning may be used to justify the establishment of particular roles and structures, and in turn the power emerging from such structures may be used to perpetuate the cultural forms in question. Material aspects relate to the physical resources that promote or hinder agency and the wider physical environment in and through which agency is achieved.



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

Research design

Analysis of socio-cultural interactions and social practices, including an interpretivist approach to the study of participants’ meanings (Corbin & Holt, 2005), provided the methodological point of entry to the research. The study generated data within the settings where actors engaged with one another

in response to the new curriculum, allowing us to construct detailed case studies for each setting, mapping the ecology within which the curriculum was enacted in each case. The project covered a full school year, undertaken over three distinct phases following an iterative design, where each phase was partially determined by the findings of the previous phase. It employed a multi-method approach to the generation of data, to maximise the generation of rich case studies.

1. *Observation*. Researchers spent three blocks of time (approximately two days on each occasion) within each setting, taking extensive field notes.
2. *Semi-structured interviews*. There were three interviews in each setting. At the start of the project, each teacher was interviewed to: 1) construct a detailed biography and background for each setting; 2) to focus more directly on understandings of the new curriculum. Subsequent interviews explored emerging data in respect of the enactment of the curriculum (for example analysis of teacher beliefs and values; analysis of relationships).
3. *Analysis of key texts*. This allowed analysis to focus on identifying local curricular policies, underlying philosophies and patterns, and significant events and milestones as they applied to each case study.
4. *Relationship mapping*. Drawing upon the above sources, participants mapped the incidence and nature of significant connections with colleagues, the local community and other professionals that impact upon the enactment of the curriculum. These were further explored within interviews.

The research was undertaken within a single education authority in Scotland in one primary school and two secondary schools (two experienced and innovative teachers and one senior manager in each setting). Case studies highlight the biographies of teachers, the nature of the culture in each setting, social relationships which impact on the decision making of each teacher and the incidence of significant events. The construction of these case studies allowed us to infer how the ecology of each setting (existing cultural forms, social structures and personal capacity) impacted on the subsequent teacher practices. The research extended to consideration of how connections with key personnel and policies within each school and the relevant sections of the education authority and other agencies impacted on the work of each teacher.

Data-analysis comprised open coding of all data to identify key themes for each case. The case studies constructed for each setting were then subjected to a comparative analysis to generate concepts, themes and meanings inductively from each setting. Instances of the achievement of agency – or lack thereof – were analysed in light of the distinction between the iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions of agency, and with a focus on how discursive, relational and material resources shaped agency differently for teachers with broadly similar backgrounds, beliefs and values about education.

The research adheres to the guidelines for the ethical conduct of research of the British Educational Research Association. In the following discussion, while presenting data by case study, we minimise the risk of identification by assigning pseudonyms to the schools. We only identify the teachers by role (i.e. teacher, senior manager), removing identifiers from transcripts extracts where necessary to further anonymise data. These measures aim to protect respondents in a study, where the identities of participating teachers are known to managers, and where the publication of their responses potentially places them at risk.

Findings

We present the findings in several sections. First we briefly show how our participants (all experienced teachers considered to be effective by colleagues and managers) shared broadly similar

beliefs and values about education. In other words, we show that there are not significant differences between these teachers in terms of the iterational dimension that plays a role in the achievement of agency – that is the experience that these teachers bring with them to particular situations and actions in their working lives. Second, we examine the contexts within which these teachers work. This is done via the development of a vignette for each school. We show how differences in context shape their differing responses to the demands posed by new curricular policy. We note here too that the schools are highly similar in terms of the availability of material resources: all three are located within the same local authority, so are subject to the same constraints on budgets, implementing a new curriculum as a time of austerity and staffing cuts; moreover, both schools are located in very similar new buildings, with common spatial characteristics and resourcing. In particular, we examine how a particular aspect of the structural conditions experienced by the teachers – the nature and extent of their relationships – is a key factor in determining whether they are able to achieve agency as they enact a new and unfamiliar curriculum. We conclude the paper by offering some observations about the significance of strong collaborative cultures and well-developed relationships for teacher agency.

Iterational and projective dimensions of teacher agency

We preface this section by noting a caveat: the scope of this paper precludes a detailed analysis of the personal biographies, beliefs and values of our participants. The purpose of this section is thus to briefly highlight a number of commonalities amongst the teachers, illustrating that in many key respects, there was a relatively common baseline for their achievement of agency.

Three out of the four teachers in these case studies had prior experience of working in careers outside of teaching, potentially allowing them to draw on wide experiences in framing their teaching. In each case we were impressed by their levels of commitment to their work. All of them admitted to working in the evenings and sometimes at weekends; preparing lessons, marking and assessing as well as reporting. All of them were highly active participants in the wider civic society of their schools. They each had experience of leading and/or developing initiatives focused on the development of new (to their schools) forms of pedagogy, for example cooperative learning and Philosophy for Children². Each had experience of involvement in whole-school initiatives, for example working parties to develop aspects of the curriculum. In one case, the teacher had gone beyond this school-level activity, having been regularly involved in national working parties to develop assessment and the curriculum. Another common strand lay in their strong focus on classroom teaching as a vocation. The four teachers were all enthusiastic about teaching, and moreover showed little interest in developing their careers into management positions. One of the teachers had undertaken a temporary role as a faculty leader, and experienced discomfort in this role. Another was actively, at the time of the research, resisting pressure from a senior colleague to apply for management positions. All of these teachers were thus characterised by a strong desire to work with students in classrooms.

All of the four teachers manifested a strong commitment to their students, and especially to their roles as teachers of the whole child rather than just deliverers of content. These teachers were quite eclectic in their teaching approaches; they all expressed a liking for student-centred, dialogical and active pedagogy, while being equally comfortable with more didactic forms of pedagogy. Student learning was central to their work, and while student attainment was clearly important to them, their teaching was not narrowly focused on this. The teachers clearly cared about their students and highlighted the importance of establishing good relationships with them. One teacher expressed it as follows:

I'm a firm believer in that so much of teaching is about relationships. You could be the most clued up person in the world about your subject. But if you can't relate to the kids, if you can't engage with them as people, then that's your problem. You are not going to make them enthusiastic. You are not going to make them interested because the relationship isn't there. (*Teacher interview, Lakeside High School*)

Such sentiments were common to all four of the teachers, all of whom expressed commitment to strong educational values centred on what they described as 'developing and encouraging the individual pupil's learning.' One teacher planned to come to work even when suffering a debilitating injury, as she thought that her duty lay with teaching students. This teacher exhibited in her work what has been termed 'protective mediation' (Osborn *et al.*, 1997). She mentioned that she sometimes gave tests without telling pupils that they were being tested. When we asked her about this, she stated that she believed that excessive testing placed harmful demands upon students; thus, while she felt obliged by the 'system' that structured the context for her actions to administer tests, she sought to protect students from their worst excesses. The other teachers expressed similar reservations about the culture of attainment within which they worked. We were not surprised to find that all of these teachers were enthusiastic about the opportunities afforded by Scotland's new Curriculum for Excellence, even where they expressed anxieties about the implementation process. We would expect that the strong projective orientation of these teachers – the clearly thought-out aspirations for their students – would serve to increase their agency as they implemented and enacted the curriculum.

However, despite their focus on their students, it was clear that many of their aspirations and goals were formed, and limited by acculturation into their professional environment. Despite the reservations about the pressures wrought by assessment-driven accountability, all of the teachers appeared to subscribe to some extent to the discourses of this culture. More than only a cultural dimension of their contexts for action, it had become part of their orientations and thus also influenced the projective dimensions of their agentic orientations. For example, in both schools, a commonly expressed view was that it would not be right to put students into exams that they are not expected to pass, perhaps echoing Apple's dictum that there has been a 'subtle shift in emphasis ... from student needs to student performance, and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school' (Apple 2001, p. 413). Allied to this, we found evidence that much teacher decision-making in these schools was about survival rather than the realisation of long-term aspirations.

Often it is just a survival [laughs] from one day to the next. And not thinking 'this whole exercise has been great'. Stop and think occasionally about what am I actually trying to do as opposed to just get through the day and get on to the next day. (*Teacher interview, Hillview High School*)

Thus, we suggest here that while their focus on students and their conscientious working practises clearly influenced the projective dimensions of their action, the 'force' of these projective orientations was tempered by the culture of accountability and performativity in which they acted (see Priestley, Robinson & Biesta, in press, for a more detailed discussion of these issues).

The discussion so far shows how four teachers working in two secondary schools are remarkably similar in many respects. This can be largely explained by their common experiences (in terms of their own education, their aspirations and the wider discourses that frame their work). However, as we shall demonstrate in the next sections of this paper, they achieve agency very differently. The answer to the question why this might be so must have to do with characteristics of their working environments, which, as we will show, manifest different features in at least one important respect, viz., the qualities of the particular relationships they are engaged in. The following two case studies illustrate this difference.

Hillview High School

We noted above the similarities within our group of respondents in terms of their *general* aspirations, characterised as a projective orientation with similar strengths and limitations. This projective orientation did however work out differently in the two schools that we report on in this paper, which provides an indication of the different degree of agency that was achieved by these teachers. At Hillview High School, the teachers seemed to be more limited in their aspirations about what was made possible by CfE, and exhibited markedly lower confidence about their abilities to engage with the new curriculum than did their colleagues at the second school, Lakeside High School. In short there was a reduced sense of agency in respect of implementing the new curriculum, both in the sense of seeing what might be possible, and in terms of their practical evaluations of what was actually possible. The sense of agency thus 'translated' into a more limited achievement of agency. The following comments provide a flavour of this sense of helplessness and lack of progress.

It will be really difficult for the things that people want to know about. Like the Curriculum for Excellence, I can't think of anybody that's feeling like they are particularly in a position to be an expert and to help people. *(Teacher interview, Hillview High School)*

Oh my goodness, that is a whole year and I don't know that I am any further forward with feeling confident about implementing Curriculum for Excellence. *(Teacher interview, Hillview High School)*

A lot of the time it's been reading documents and making sure that we're familiar with the content of what we're supposed to cover. Recording what we've done with pupils. So [name removed]'s come up with a system for us recording. There's a template for the level three E's and O's³ for first year and/or second year. And just to record what we've covered but for each individual pupil and how well they've done with that. So it's been stuff like that, much more...tasky things. Not discussions about implementation or what it means for us or what I don't know is how other people are doing it. So I'm still no further forward with that than I was when I first spoke to you. I'm just kind of doing my own thing and hoping that it's okay. *(Teacher interview, Hillview High School)*

We attribute this limited achievement of agency to a particular feature of the context of school, while noting that this has not always been the case.

But I think we had a clear idea of where we were going when the last head teacher, two head teachers back; we were quite far ahead of other schools with our methodologies and initiatives we were bringing in. That all met with the CfE values but I feel some of that has fallen away recently.

As at Lakeside High School, the data suggest that senior management at Hillview were approachable and supportive of teachers. Similarly, there is little evidence that these teachers were any more risk averse than were their colleagues at Lakeside, nor that their working environment was inherently more risky. The major factor behind this comparatively lower degree of achieved agency appears to lie in the nature and scope of relationships in the school. Strong formal connections tended to be vertical; primarily with line managers, and within faculties. Formal structures included faculty meetings and weekly meetings of faculty heads with the senior management team. Whole staff meetings were described as information giving sessions – like 'assemblies' – with little opportunity for dialogue, other than occasional breakout groups, described as 'not really an ideal forum'.

There appeared to be a paucity of formal horizontal channels for communication in the school. According to one teacher, 'we do not have a lot of working across faculties'. Principal teachers (PTs)⁴ met weekly with senior management, but the outcomes of such meetings were disseminated

vertically via faculties. Departmental and faculty meetings tended to focus on routine issues (e.g. student behaviour).

It has not been something that we have discussed in faculty. And I don't know if that is just us. I don't think it is. It's everybody. We are all in the same boat. The faculty meeting ends up being taken up with things that are important but not big important things. Like little important things that we need to know about stuff going on in school. So it is giving us information rather than talking at a higher level. *(Teacher interview, Hillview High School)*

Well, we have tried to get going with some curriculum development for S2⁵ and we haven't been able to get on with that because of the other things that need to be discussed at the faculty meetings. It is two or three times I have had these things on the agenda and have had to put them aside. *(Teacher interview, Hillview High School)*

Such formal structures were supplemented by other formal forums for discussion, including peer observation, although increasingly these were noted to be disappearing in response to time and resourcing pressures.

We did have a good system in place where we had an annual review and from the review you could go over your own personal development needs and then from that try to find things appropriate. It is not being done anymore PTs are finding it more and more difficult to find the time to do that with the staff. It should still be going on. *(Teacher interview, Hillview High School)*

Both teachers were involved in school-wide working initiatives, but it was noted that dialogue was often limited, and dissemination more often than not consisted of briefing, rather than discussion, with some evidence that this did not fully percolate down to mainstream staff. Membership of working groups was decided by senior managers. Opportunities for teachers to engage with colleagues in different faculties (at a level below middle management) were more limited. Other formal horizontal relationships did exist (e.g. guidance issues, and increasingly mechanisms for inter-disciplinary working, although this was not well developed at the time of the research). However, contact was often instrumental, focused on particular issues – 'I tend not to see people unless it is for something specific' – or simply fortuitous.

I had been along in the art department one day. And I just loved the way it was all set out with their glass cases, exhibiting. And I really thought 'I wish we could do something like that in [subject removed], why can't we do something like that'. *(Teacher interview, Hillview High School)*

In exploring this case, we were left with a sense of opportunities missed. Both respondents had well-developed educational values, and strong aspirations. Both were frustrated by the lack of opportunity to fulfil these aspirations. Our data suggest that the key factor lay in the limitations placed upon agency by the nature and scope of relationships in the school, and a corresponding lack of affordance for generative teacher dialogue – inherently a sense-making process – about the new curriculum.

But then it's now at the point of right so can we do any of these? And it sort of reached a plateau of trying to implement some of these changes because us coming up with the idea is that doesn't mean it's going to happen. It's got to go through a whole process of the senior management team and getting the okay from that. So we're at a frustrating stage where we've got lots of things we'd like to do.

These practitioner views about the nature and scope of relationships within Hillview are supported to a large extent by the transcript of the interview with a senior manager. A great deal was said about the importance of strong, supportive and visionary leadership, but there was an absence of

reference – despite prompting by the interviewer – to the role of managers in developing and sustaining relationships and connections between teachers. We suggest that in this case, teachers struggled to achieve agency in their enactment of the new curriculum, and that their agency was impeded by a lack of available relational resources in the practical-evaluative domain.

Lakeside High School

We next turn to Lakeside High School. Here we found a contrasting situation. A tangible difference lay in the sense of teachers' confidence and optimism about CfE, something articulated by both teachers and senior managers.

That's partly why CfE could be a really positive thing because we are constantly looking at what we are doing. And that we also share our ideas across the faculty. *(Teacher interview, Lakeside High School)*

That is why I am not scared about the future with Curriculum for Excellence because I made those decisions when it started three, four years ago. And I am feeling fairly secure. But I can totally understand why other people are not. *(Teacher interview, Lakeside High School)*

It was thus clear to us that, in contrast to many other schools currently implementing CfE (including the other schools in our Teacher Agency project; see also Priestley & Minty, 2012), these teachers were achieving (a higher degree of) agency in respect of the implementation of CfE.

This might be attributed to the culture of Lakeside High School. Interviewees talked about a culture where innovation and risk-taking is encouraged and supported, as well as a culture of sharing. The following extracts from an interview with a senior manager clearly exemplify this approach to running the school.

We are quite lucky here in that the staff trust SMT⁶ and they trust that they are doing things for the right reasons. And they are not being Machiavellian and they are not doing things because they are being nasty to people and wanting to score points. *(Senior manager interview, Lakeside High School)*

And if you are encouraging staff to do things that are a wee bit different or to not always follow things in a mainstream way, there is much more chance that they will develop as teachers, as professionals and as members of staff. So when someone comes with a crazy idea and says 'I want to try and do this with the second year class', okay, have a go at that ... If they make a mess of it and it does not work, well that is okay. 'You tried, it did not work, we will try something different next time'. *(Senior manager interview, Lakeside High School)*

Such sentiments were supported by other respondents who pointed to high levels of collegiality and the approachability of managers. One teacher, talking about her line manager, said:

There is equality because [name removed] has never been 'I am superior to you' or whatever. So it is level on that front. I know that she views herself as a teacher, and I am a teacher and we are totally level. *(Teacher interview, Lakeside High School)*

In one case, a team of teachers who were extremely unhappy about an initiative they had been asked to develop, felt comfortable about complaining to their link senior manager about the allocated timescales and processes. They were listened to, and their concerns were taken on board to the extent that the timescales were altered.

It would be easy to attribute the tangible sense of teacher agency in this school to this collegial culture. However, we note that we found similar sentiments in the other school about approachable

senior managers, collegial support and a desire to pull together for the sake of the students. It is in the *social structures of the school* that we found more substantive differences, which might explain differences in teacher agency. There appear to be a number of aspects of this. First, there were strong informal relationships at a faculty level; these were characterised by high levels of trust.

We can all empathise with one another. In this department we can all have our sticky moments but I don't think there are any egos. There isn't anyone who thinks they are more important than anyone else or busier than anyone else. Everybody is aware of everybody else's pressures and I think we do try to have positive relationships. *(Teacher interview, Lakeside High School)*

Second, there was a strong push from the senior management of the school to develop strong, reciprocal 'relationships within the school so that staff get on well with staff, staff get on well with pupils and pupils get on with other pupils'. Some of these relationships were clearly vertical; for example, while at least one senior manager was seen as patronising and unapproachable, the norm was for an open door policy. Others were horizontal. In many cases, as at Hillview, many relationships were informal in nature, growing organically out of short term needs.

Because again it comes down to the simple social relationships that you have. And they are all people who understand the pressures of teaching, who get frustrated by the same things we do, who have the same worries we do. Who very often have similar kids to ourselves as well. So our subjects have made us link. So sometimes the link can be because of individual people or it can be because of your subject. *(Teacher interview, Lakeside High School)*

However, unlike the case presently at Hillview – where our data suggest that formal relationships have been progressively disappearing – at Lakeside, there was a sense that they were burgeoning as a consequence of an active policy of fostering collegial, professional relationships that work both within and across faculties.

Some have just come about accidentally. But some have come about because of those meetings that we had. *(Teacher interview, Lakeside High School)*

A particular focus lay in the need to develop inter-disciplinary working, something that was a clearly articulated school priority for CfE.

And we share in there what we are doing and good practice and things across these things. So we are all coming together at various points and saying how can we tackle this and what ideas have you got and how should we take this forward and how do you do this in your department. And trying to come up with a common code of skills yeah. Core skills that we can all be promoting across the whole school. *(Teacher interview, Lakeside High School)*

We earlier noted the diminishing scope and frequency of peer observation of teaching at Hillview. Conversely, at Lakeside this was promoted by the senior management as a priority. We note also, that this development was not framed in a managerial or hierarchical sense; teachers appeared to be trusted to get on with it, and they appeared to welcome the opportunities it provided for sharing practice.

We are doing that on a number of levels now. Over the past few years it has developed. It started off as probably about four years ago, five years ago, there was no observation at all in the school. So we started it off at SMT level where we worked out a calendar for the year. And SMT visited every member of staff's class twice in the year. And it was a week in advance saying 'right I am coming to see you teach this higher geography class' or whatever it may be. And then informal feedback was given about how the lesson had gone and so on. And that still happens. But on top of that now we have built a principal teacher observation as well... And also three years ago we started doing, on a

voluntary basis, staff matching up with another member of staff... And going to visit them in their class and seeing how they teach. ... everyone has a matched partner who is not in their faculty. So they are having to go with their art teacher, they are going to science. If they are English they are going to technology or whatever. And they visit each other during the year as many times as they can. And they also talk about collaborative work. They can do that as well. And a new thing we started last year which I described already, we called it follow a pupil day where I took all staff off timetable for a day. And they followed a first or the second year pupil for a whole day. (*Senior manager interview, Lakeside High School*)

Another key difference between the schools in terms of relationships concerned the existence of external connections and relationships. At Lakeside High School, one of our respondents reported the benefits of their outside links. In one case, this had involved a formal school role to develop cooperative learning. In another, the formal mechanisms were less tangible, but the benefits evident. In the case of a teacher who had been an active participant in national initiatives – with national agencies to development assessment and curriculum policy – such experience was fed-back frequently into school practices, and served as a source for new ways of thinking and an interruption to habitual forms of practice.

I think the external links are important. But if you take that I am the only one. In this faculty we are down to nine now are we? I am the only one who is doing the whole Curriculum for Excellence SQA, QDT, LTS⁷, whatever. But what I am bringing back to them, I am not just bringing it just back for [subject removed]. I am bringing it back for the whole faculty.

We therefore suggest that, at Lakeside High School, strongly developed relationships acted as a catalyst for enhanced teacher agency, and as such constituted the key difference in context that account for the puzzle as to why teachers with broadly similar experiences, beliefs and values, working in similar schools achieved agency differently and to a different degree.

Conclusions

We started this paper by asking why there might be significant differences in the agency achieved by teachers, when the teachers involved exhibited similar characteristics – particularly in terms of their values and orientations – and when the professional contexts were ostensibly similar, particularly in terms of culture and material resources. The case studies demonstrate powerfully that there were significant differences in terms of the quality and scope of *relationships* experienced by the teachers (the structural dimension of the context in and through which agency is achieved). In turn this appears to explain the differences in the agency achieved by the teachers. We suggest here that there are a number of dimensions to the relationships at Lakeside High School which make them more likely to enable teachers to achieve agency (in comparison to their colleagues at Hillview High School). The first relates to the predominant *orientation* of the relationships within the school. At Hillview, these were largely hierarchical or vertical; conversely, at Lakeside, such relationships were supplemented by strong horizontal ties, which appeared to facilitate (or at least be indicative of) a collegial and collaborative culture in the school. Another difference lies in the *symmetry* of the relationships, and linked to this are issues of *reciprocity*. At Hillview, relationships tended to be slightly more asymmetric than at Lakeside, and certainly less reciprocal. Channels of communication were thus more likely to be one way, encouraging a culture of dissemination, rather than one of generative dialogue. The above factors seem to have the potential to impact on the *formality*, *strength* and *frequency* of relationships. Thus at Lakeside, the existence of relatively reciprocal, symmetric relationships seemed to generate a collaborative culture where strong, frequent, and informal teacher relationships were able to flourish. Moreover, this appears to be an autocatalytic process.

Our data suggest that even where individual teachers have extensive experience and strong aspirations for their work – thus providing strong iterational and projective orientations to their agency – this can be stymied in situations where collaborative work is limited and difficult. In the case of Lakeside High School, the teachers were able to draw upon powerful relational resources afforded by the strong web of connections within which they worked. This in turn helped to create a strong collaborative culture – which in turn facilitated the further development of relationships, and so on. Conversely, at Hillview High School, a comparative lack of such resources proved to be a disabling factor, which reduced teachers' achievement of agency, inhibiting their capacity to address the complexities encountered in their implementation of a new, national curriculum. We make the point, also, that the practical-evaluative dimension encountered today, becomes the iterational dimension of tomorrow, and helps define teachers' future aspirations – the projective dimension of tomorrow. Thus, current contexts that inhibit agency today also hinder the development of the sorts of experience that enhance agency, and might lead to a truncated development of future aspirations and expertise. This in turn might seriously limit the potential for today's teachers to achieve agency in future.

We conclude, then, with the suggestion that if teachers are to become agents of change – as is strongly supported by contemporary curricular policy – then school managers should carefully consider the relational conditions through which teachers achieve agency, bearing in mind that a collaborative *culture* to strengthen agency is to a large extent dependent upon the nature and scope of *relationships* within the school.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the dedicated teachers and senior managers, with whom we have worked on our teacher agency project, and without whose help this paper would not have been possible.

References

- Apple, M.W. (2001). Comparing neo-liberal projects and inequality in education. *Comparative Education*, 37, 409-423.
- Archer, M. (1988). *Culture and agency: The place of culture in social theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. (2000). *Being human: The problem of agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2005). George Herbert Mead and the theory of schooling. In D. Troehler & J. Oelkers (eds), *Pragmatism and education* (pp. 117-132). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2009). Pragmatism's contribution to understanding learning-in-context. In R. Edwards, G.J.J. Biesta & M. Thorpe (Eds.), *Rethinking contexts for teaching and learning. Communities, activities and networks* (pp. 61-73). London/New York: Routledge.
- Biesta, G.J.J & Tedder, M. (2006). *How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement. Working paper 5*, Exeter: The Learning Lives project.
- Biesta, G.J.J. & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective, *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39, 132-149.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Corbin, J. & Holt, N.J. (2005). Grounded Theory. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.), *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (pp. 49-55). London: Sage.
- Emirbayer, M. & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *The American Journal of Sociology*, 103, 962-1023.
- Fuchs, S. (2001). Beyond agency, *Sociological Theory*, 19, 24-40.

- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Goodson, I.F. (2003). *Professional knowledge, professional lives*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Hollis, M. (1994). *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leander, K.M. & Osborne, M.D. (2008). Complex positioning: Teachers as agents of curricular and pedagogical reform, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40, 23-46.
- Nieveen, N. (2011). *Teachers' professional development in curriculum design in the Netherlands*, Paper presented at the European Conference for Educational Research, Berlin, 14 September, 2011.
- Osborn, M., Croll, P., Broadfoot, P., Pollard, A., McNess, E. & Triggs, P. (1997). Policy into practice and practice into policy: Creative mediation in the primary classroom, in G. Helsby & G. McCulloch (eds.), *Teachers and the national curriculum* (pp. 52-65). London: Cassell.
- Pignatelli, F. (1993). What can I do? Foucault on freedom and the question of teacher agency, *Educational Theory*, 43, 411-432.
- Priestley, M. (2011). Whatever happened to curriculum theory? Critical realism and curriculum change, *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 19, 221-238.
- Priestley, M. Edwards, R., Miller, K. & Priestley, A., (2012). Teacher agency in curriculum making: Agents of change and spaces for manoeuvre, *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43[2].
- Priestley, M. & Minty, S. (2012). *Developing Curriculum for Excellence: Summary of findings from research undertaken in a Scottish local authority*. Stirling: University of Stirling.
- Priestley, M., Robinson, S. & Biesta, G.J.J. (in press). Teacher Agency, Performativity and Curriculum Change: Reinventing the Teacher in the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence? In B. Jeffrey & G. Troman (Eds.), *Performativity across UK education: ethnographic cases of its effects, agency and reconstructions*. Painswick: E&E Publishing.
- Pyhältö, K., Pietarinen, J. & Soini, T. (2012). Do comprehensive school teachers perceive themselves as active professional agents in school reforms?, *Journal of Educational Change*, 13, 95–116.
- Scott, D. (2010). *Education, epistemology and critical realism*. London: Routledge.
- Vongalis-Macrow, A. (2007). I, Teacher: Re territorialisation of teachers' multi-faceted agency in globalised education, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28, 425–439.

¹ The development of England's National Curriculum manifested various common trends with its counterparts elsewhere in the UK until the election of a Conservative government in May 2010. Since this date, there has been considerable divergence, as England has moved back to a more traditional, subject content-focused curriculum.

² Cooperative learning and Philosophy for Children are externally developed initiatives. In both cases, the local authority has invested in packages of teacher development to facilitate their introduction. While these initiatives are independent of CfE they both potentially provide teachers with pedagogical resources to meet the purposes of the new curriculum.

³ Experiences and Outcomes – see

<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/understandingthecurriculum/howisthecurriculumstructured/experiencesandoutcomes/index.asp>

⁴ Principal Teachers have management responsibility for a subject, or equivalent.

⁵ S2 denotes the 2nd year of secondary schooling (12-13 year old students).

⁶ This acronym denotes the Senior Management Team. In both schools this comprised the Headteacher and a number of Depute Heads

⁷ Scottish Qualifications Authority; [local authority] Quality Development Team; Learning and Teaching Scotland (curriculum development agency).