



Teacher agency in challenging contexts as a consequence of social support and resource management

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in post-colonial settings are required to function within the constraints of structural disparities. Teacher agency is explained as an outcome of collectivist coping, using instrumental social support for resource management. Following an asset-based intervention with teachers ($n = 37$, male = 4, female = 33) in high-risk schools ($n = 4$, secondary = 1, primary = 3, urban = 3, rural = 1) in three South African provinces, these teachers demonstrated agency, in spite of deprivation, to draw on the available resources to cope with contextual hardship. The data sources of the nine year school-based study include multiple researchers' observation data (field notes, researcher diaries, photographs), as well as participatory reflection and action (PRA) data (obtained from verbatim transcriptions of video and audio recordings).

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1. Introduction

Teachers in South Africa, like others in similar postcolonial global southern countries, have to teach within the confines of inherited structural disparities. In a young South African democracy, teachers' professional and personal lived experiences are therefore coloured by factors such as health challenges, the threatened livelihoods of students and their families, an inadequate school infrastructure and limited professional development for teachers. Poor service delivery and inadequate policy implementation compound the structural challenges. Teachers struggle to gain access to treatment when illness is identified, families with a low household income or death cannot gain access to welfare because of literacy limitations, textbooks are not delivered to schools, and health and safety in schools are limited because of the unreliable supply of transport, water, electricity and sanitation. Teachers in under-resourced schools are usually those required to provide the most challenging forms of care and support to students (Bhana et al., 2006).

Following an asset-based (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993) intervention with teachers in several challenging school contexts (Ferreira and Ebersöhn, 2011), the participating teachers conducted several projects to address the chronic challenges. The aim in this

article is to provide an explanatory framework, showing how these teachers became agents following this intervention, in spite of the continuing contextual disparities: How can teacher agency amid structural disparity be explained?

2. Background and contextualisation

2.1. Challenging contexts of south african schools

South Africa struggles with the inequalities of post-colonialism, particularly poverty and HIV and AIDS, which lead to damaging consequences for individuals, families, schools and communities (Smit and Fritz, 2008). The number of orphaned and vulnerable children escalates and aggravates the existing socio-economic problems encountered in many South African communities. Currently South Africa is the most unequal society in the world (OXFAM, 2013; The World Bank, 2012). At policy level, such inequality in education implies that school leaders and teachers have to keep abreast of constant policy changes to achieve transformation. In schools, effective teaching has to occur amid shortages of textbooks, teacher aids and limited infrastructure. Poor service delivery means that schools cannot count on dependable access to potable water, and that sanitation, electricity and transport to schools are not a certainty. Students attending school live in communities struggling with high rates of crime and violence, especially towards children and women. The students know what it means to live in households with no or an infrequent

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income, may come to schools hungry and worry about their parents in a country with significant HIV infection and AIDS-related deaths.

Due to the many socio-economic problems in South Africa, schools are sometimes the only places where children might expect and find any level of care and support (Bhana et al., 2006). Schools and teachers are well positioned to act as potential protective resources in providing school-based psychosocial support to vulnerable individuals and high-risk communities (Ebersöhn and Ferreira, 2011; Morrison and Allen, 2007).

In spite of the fact that schools and teachers are well positioned to act as potential protective resources in providing school-based psychosocial support (Morrison and Allen, 2007), the lack of resources, an overloaded curriculum, time constraints and the multiple complex demands on teachers mean that such responsibilities are often difficult and may not be fulfilled (Bhana et al., 2006). Furthermore, teachers often lack the skills needed to provide sufficient psychosocial support to students (Bhana et al., 2006; Hall, 2004; Wood and Goba, 2011). Visser (2004) believes that teachers have the potential to be agents for change, provided that they receive the right training and support. Against this background, we explain teachers' actions following an asset-based intervention to support students and their families to overcome the psychosocial challenges encountered in the contexts of high poverty, school and community.

2.2. Collectivist coping and social support

A growing body of research on coping has begun to identify the occurrence and the practical relevance of collective coping behaviours (Moore and Constantine, 2005; Yeh et al., 2006; Kuo, 2013). These emerging findings are significant as they prove the important role that collectivism plays in the process of coping with adversity and risk. The theoretical model for collectivist coping, as counterpart to the dominant Western individualistic coping paradigm, highlights the importance of cultural values and norms as pathways of coping (Yeh et al., 2006). Kuo (2013) explains collectivist coping behaviours as a result of the communal and relational norms and values of a cultural group (Kuo, 2013). Collectivist coping also includes a broad spectrum of stress responses, varying from value-driven to interpersonally based, to culturally conditioned emotional/cognitive and to religion-based and spirituality-grounded coping strategies (Kuo, 2013). In the literature, the important role that constructs such as social connectedness, social capital and the sense of belonging play in the context of collective coping are well documented (Campbell and Foulis, 2004; Taylor et al., 2005). As such, social connectedness has been found to have a direct negative effect on psychological distress (Lee et al., 2001) and the need for social connectedness is one of the key motivating principles that underlie social behaviour (Smith and Mackie, 2000).

Nurullah (2012) argues that it is important to consider that although social support stems from members of a specific social network to which an individual belongs, the mere existence of a social network does not necessarily entail providing or receiving social support. Instead, social support derives from significant assistance by others (in the form of meeting informational, emotional, material and/or companionship needs) which are acknowledged as support by both the recipient and the receiver. In a similar way, the existence of social capital does necessarily guarantee that social support will be available when needed by people in stressful situations (Nurullah, 2012). Recent studies suggest that the cultural context, (Kim et al., 2008, 2006) provider motivation, reciprocity, gender (Luszczynska et al., 2007) and the fitness of a match between the kind of stressors and the nature of the support provided (Lakey and Cohen,

2000) all influence the outcome of receiving and providing support.

In Nurullah's (2012) review of some recent developments in the area of received and provided social support, he highlights the cross-cultural contexts in which providing and receiving social support occur as an important area for future research. In this regard, researchers (Taylor, 2011; Kim et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2005) differentiate between implicit instrumental social support (the comfort that comes from knowing that one has access to close others who will be supportive) and explicit instrumental social support (apparent emotional solace and instrumental aid from others) in cultural contexts. However, Nurullah (2012) argues that their research has so far focused more on the perceived availability of social support, not on the actually performed social support. In our article, we aim to build on existing knowledge in the area of social support and collectivist coping, by providing a framework of how teachers in challenging contexts acted as active agents of change as a consequence of social support and resource management.

2.3. Teacher agency

Educational research, practices and policies have long been focused on the notion of teachers as active agents of change at school level in order to improve teaching and learning (Toom et al., 2015; Datnow, 2012). The idea of teacher agency has emerged in research to explain teachers' active efforts in taking intentional action and making choices in order to make a meaningful difference (Toom et al., 2015). Yet, one of the questions is how can teachers become agents for change in spite of the continuing contextual disparities?

We conceptualise agency by looking through the lens of the ecological approach, where agency is explained as a configuration of three interrelated dimensions, namely influences from the past, orientations to the future and engagement with the present (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Firstly, agency is embedded in past experience; and therefore individuals who draw upon previous experience are more likely to achieve agency than those without such previous experience. The second dimension of agency entails being oriented to the future by setting goals, envisaging possibilities and aspiring for positive outcomes. It therefore implies that people who are able to make extensive forecasts about their future paths might be expected to achieve greater levels of agency than those with limited aspirations. Thirdly, agency is acted on in the present, influenced by previously experienced risk factors and the resources available. The ecological approach to agency suggests that agency is linked to the motivation to generate change which differs from the past and present (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Agency can therefore be conceptualised as an emergent phenomenon, which occurs or is reached in constantly changing contexts over time and with an orientation to the past, future and present (Priestly et al., 2015).

2.4. STAR as asset-based intervention

Kretzmann (1992) argues that schools are a compilation of assets and resources, and are essential contributors to community support and development. He refers to a list of potential areas of contributions by schools as active community partners towards community support and development. Asset-based initiatives can therefore promote community development and support. The focus is on the development, mobilisation and co-ordination of resources in a community context. Individuals are able to facilitate and steer support and development by accessing and managing the assets, resources, skills, capabilities and talents in schools and school communities. In this way, individuals are provided with the

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