



Research paper

An exploratory study of teacher agency for social justice



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H I G H L I G H T S

- Teachers see themselves as role-implementers as well as agents of social justice.
- They see social justice as helping pupils adapt to existing institutional setting.
- Teachers focus their agency on classrooms and pupils' needs over other demands.
- Relationships and collaboration with others are critical conditions for agency.
- Mixed methods are required for study of teacher agency across contexts.

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A B S T R A C T

This paper presents a case study of teacher agency for social justice in a primary school in Scotland. Mixed methods and tools, including a questionnaire, interviews and observations, were used to explore the expressions of teachers' sense of agency in their beliefs and context-embedded practices. Teachers perceived agency for social justice as part of their role in helping students adapt to the institutional structures. Relationships with students, families, colleagues and other professionals, and participation in decision-making were seen as both functions of agency, and as features of structural environments that enable agency. Methodological challenges for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Development of teachers as agents of change has been promoted in the literature for some time (Fullan, 1993a,b; Zeichner, 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and is increasingly endorsed as a strategy for promoting social justice (see, e.g. Ballard, 2012; Scottish Government, 2011). Studies of teacher agency have begun to identify some common factors that seem to matter most for such agency, including relationships and collaboration with other agents (Heijden, van der, Geldens, Beijaard, & Popeijus, 2015; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2012b; Soini, Pietarinen, Toom, & Pyhältö, 2015). Although, 'agency for change' in these studies often implies a change towards more inclusive and equitable education, the link between teacher agency and social justice has not yet been explicitly explored. Similarly, although research in the areas of

inclusion and social justice has not been articulated in the language of teacher agency, a number of studies offer valuable insights into the ways in which teachers can contribute to the transformation of classroom and school practices (Flecha & Soler, 2013; Florian & Spratt, 2013; Hayes, Mills & Lingard, 2005).

However, teachers' practices are highly contextualised and dependant on those of others, in ever changing constellations of human interactions located in complex, politically and culturally shaped educational settings (Berliner, 2002; Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). While teachers often report commitment to making a difference towards social justice as a reason for entering the profession, they may inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of inequitable educational outcomes for some learners because of the assumptions embedded in the institutional contexts in which they work (Allan, 2006) or because of their own unexamined assumptions. Consequently, it has been difficult to make theoretical sense out of the why and how of teachers matter, despite the evidence that teachers and schools can and do make a difference in students' learning (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2011; Hattie, 2009; Hayes et al., 2005). Moreover, contested theoretical knowledge and variable

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enactment of social justice in practice can leave researchers with the problem of varying and competing interpretations. As a result, empirical investigations have been small scale, mostly qualitative explorations of how agency is exercised within particular locations, although calls have been made for complementary mixed-method analysis (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012a; Vähäsantanen, 2015).

Designing studies that are both meaningfully contextualised and more broadly generalizable with regard to the more probable and less likely patterns in social behaviour (Opfer & Pedder, 2011) is essential for building the knowledge base for relevant teacher education. This case study examines the face validity of previously designed research tools for capturing teachers' beliefs and enacted practices, as well as structural conditions that support or impede agency with a view towards replication across contexts. A new analytical model of teacher agency is used for a comprehensive mixed-method analysis of agency for social justice that takes into account teachers' beliefs and context-embedded practices. We employ the tools designed to analyse different components (see section 2 below) that constitute teacher agency to explore how they can be adequately combined to address the above challenges and enable comparable studies across different contexts.

2. Theoretical background and related work

The conceptual model for study of teacher agency for social justice (Pantić, 2015a) was developed drawing on the broader theories of human and professional agency (Archer, 2000; Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Edwards, 2007; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Giddens, 1984) applied to inclusive teaching practices (Pantić & Florian, 2015). In this model teacher agency is constituted by their *sense of purpose* (belief that a certain practice is worthwhile for achieving a certain outcome), *competence* (knowing how to influence a desired outcome in practice), *scope of autonomy* (power to make a difference within given structural environments) and *reflexivity* (a capacity to monitor and evaluate one's actions and structural contexts). The model adopts a socio-cultural perspective of agency in which agents are embedded in their contextual conditions, yet capable of transforming these conditions (Edwards, 2007; Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Lasky, 2005). In an ecological view of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) agents act upon their beliefs and values within the contingency of particular contexts-for-action. Agency is seen as temporal and situated within the complex interplay of cultural and institutional contexts (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Thus, actors might exercise agency in one situation but not in another considering the desired outcomes as well as potential gains and losses in a given environment.

Nevertheless, a growing number of studies that consider various aspects of teacher agency in different contexts point to the similar structural factors that support or constrain agency. For example, researchers have looked at the ways in which teacher agency operated in contexts of secondary education reform in US Lasky (2005), and in the implementation of the *Curriculum for Excellence* in Scotland (Priestley et al., 2012a). Recently, a Special Issue of *Teachers and Teaching* journal reported a number of empirical studies of teacher agency in a variety of contexts, including Finland, Netherlands, Scotland and US (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Buchanan, 2015; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, & Hökkä, 2015; Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard & Popeijus, 2015; Stillman & Anderson, 2015; Toom, Pyhältö, & Rust, 2015).

The present study draws on the findings of these and other studies to explore the specific form of teacher agency employed to address issues of social justice and inclusion. Following the above model, the study focuses on agents' sense of purpose expressed in teachers' beliefs (about their role and about social justice), and

competence (enactment of these beliefs in context-embedded practices, within given degrees of autonomy). The study addresses the following questions:

- 1) What are teachers' beliefs about their professional role and understandings of social justice?
- 2) How do such beliefs and understandings reflect in their context-embedded practices? What features of their working environment do teachers perceive as enabling or constraining their agency for social justice?

The study also refers to teachers' reflexivity but this aspect is not systematically explored in this paper.

2.1. Sense of purpose

Teacher agency involves a commitment to pursue a sense of, at least partly self-determined, purposes (Frost, 2006; Giddens, 1984) informed by the underlying beliefs about their professional roles (Biesta et al., 2015). Teachers might perceive their roles as implementers of their school or authorities' policies, as well as 'step up' above and beyond the perceived expectations of their roles, or 'push back' when there is a dissonance between their own beliefs and policies (Buchanan, 2015, p. 710). One of the basic assumptions of teachers acting as agents of social justice is that they *believe* such agency is part of their professional role.

With regard to agency for social justice, Villegas and Lucas (2002) regard teachers' beliefs about schooling and their roles as a continuum between views of teachers as 'technicians' who apply rules and procedures uncritically accepting standard school practices, and those of teachers as 'agents of change' who see schools as potential sites for promoting social equality (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 54). In the present study such a continuum was used to explore teachers' perceptions of their roles (see section 3.3.1). We also sought to account for the contested and contextual nature of 'social justice' and its underlying principles. One of the most common theoretical distinctions is made between the distributive justice referring to the principles by which resources are distributed in society (Rawls, 1972), and the justice of power relationships which structure society (Gewirtz, 1998). Nancy Fraser's more recent theorisation (Fraser, 2008) also includes political justice referring to representation of different voices in the institutional set-up. These underlying principles will have varying implications for educational practice. For example, where disadvantage is thought to be an economic issue, redistributive measures might be prioritised; but where it is thought to arise from cultural barriers, the focus might be on increased cultural recognition (Keddie, 2012). Accordingly, teachers committed to the same broad cause of promoting social justice could act in considerably different ways. We included an explicit interview question (see Table 1) to explore teachers' potentially diverse understandings of social justice.

2.2. Competence

Guided by their sense of purpose and beliefs, competent agents use their knowledge to achieve the desired quality or outcome (Giddens, 1984). However, teachers' espoused beliefs may differ from their practiced beliefs or competence, i.e. the enactment of these beliefs in practice (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Pantić, 2011). We explored how teachers' sense of purpose reflected in their competence, focusing on both beliefs and practices in relation to social justice.

In particular, the study focused on teachers' perceived influence in addressing the risks for vulnerable students relative to external influences, such as pupils' backgrounds and home situations, or the

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