



# Teachers' perceived professional space and their agency

Helma W. Oolbekkink-Marchand <sup>a,\*</sup>, Linor L. Hadar <sup>b</sup>, Kari Smith <sup>c</sup>, Ingrid Helleve <sup>d</sup>,  
Marit Ulvik <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Radboud Teachers' Academy, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Beit-Berl College, The University of Haifa, Israel

<sup>c</sup> Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Norway

<sup>d</sup> University of Bergen, Norway

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Two trajectories of teachers' agency development were found: gradual growth and bumpy moments.
- Teachers' agency within these trajectories is described as 'bounded' and 'contested'.
- Personal and contextual factors influence the course of both trajectories.
- Similarities and differences in teachers' agency between three national contexts are identified.

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## ABSTRACT

In order to increase student performance, governments stress the importance of standardization for teaching which is seen as a threat to teachers' professionalism. In this small-scale study we investigated the way teachers use their professional space in these changing circumstances. We studied eighteen cases of secondary education teachers in-depth, using observations, interviews, and storylines. Our analyses revealed two types of trajectories which can be characterized by *bounded* and *contested* agency. In both trajectories the importance of personal factors and environmental factors were acknowledged. Insights into the relation between perceived space and agency can promote our understanding of teacher professionalism.

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## 1. Introduction

To increase student performance, educational leaders increasingly stress the importance of standardization, which mainly includes a focus on student testing and transparency of school results to the public (e.g. Buchanan, 2015). This tendency is seen as a threat to teachers' professionalism, reducing teachers' professional autonomy. Wills and Haymore Sandholtz (2009) describe this as *constrained professionalism* which denotes that the autonomy of teachers as professionals is constrained by contextual factors such as the standardization of the curriculum. In this study, we take another perspective. We are interested in teachers that make active use of their professional space, in spite of the growing emphasis on standardization. Teachers that perceive, decode and make sense of

or "read" the semiotic configurations of their work place (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007) and are able to navigate and rely on their expertise and judgment and thus hold continued authority (Wills & Haymore Sandholtz, 2009) over their practice. We therefore choose to take the bottom-up perspective that puts teachers at the centre of the educational process, in spite of the most common prescriptive, top-down approach for teacher practice (Priestley, Biesta, Philippou, & Robinson, 2015).

By taking this perspective we acknowledge the importance of teachers' intentional use of their professional space. This intentional exploitation of professional space forms a significant aspect of teacher leadership. It is built on teachers' "capacity to initiate purposeful action that implies will, autonomy, freedom and choice" (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011, p. 812). This form of leadership manifests teacher agency (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011); which encompasses teachers' active involvement in directing and designing their practice (Van der Heijden, Geldens, Beijard, & Popeijus, 2015).

In this paper, we document the relations between teachers'

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [h.oolbekkink@docentenacademie.ru.nl](mailto:h.oolbekkink@docentenacademie.ru.nl) (H.W. Oolbekkink-Marchand).

interpretation of their professional space and their agentic behaviour, in other words, how s/he makes active use of this space. Attending to our goal, we take a multi-cultural perspective and explore these relations in the Netherlands, Norway and Israel. Our attempt to understand the relations between professional space and agentic behaviour provide a new frame of reference to acknowledging teacher professionalism.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Teachers' professional space

The notion of professional space is related to the “amount of say” teachers have in their own teaching practice (Dutch Educational Council, 2013; Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007). This definition relates to factual or objective professional space such as school internal and societal boundaries in which teachers work. That is, teachers have to conform to a set of objective rules in their practice, for example found in policy documents and school rules. One aspect of studies on teachers' professional practice in schools is that the context in which they act is treated as “objective” – as a characteristic of the context in which teachers work (policy rules and regulation). These conditions are assumed to play a role in teachers' autonomy and their practice (Imants, Wubbels, & Vermunt, 2013).

However, the *perceptions* of space can be more influential on teacher actions than the objective factors themselves (e.g. Anderson, 1982; Hoekstra, Korthagen, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Imants, 2009; Imants, Wubbels & Vermunt, 2013; Owens, 1995). These perceptions mediate the effects of the factual contextual space. In this study we refer to these perceptions as perceived professional space. As pointed out by Ellström, Ekholm, and Ellström (2007), ‘Whether or not a certain situation should be considered as enabling or constraining is assumed to depend, not only or primarily on its objective characteristics, but rather on how these characteristics are subjectively evaluated and dealt with by the learning subject’ (idem, p. 86). Teachers can therefore be seen as active interpreters of the school context and the space they have, to act on their own personal goals. These goals can be different from those of the institution in which they work (Imants et al., 2013).

In our attempt to understand teacher leadership we examine how teachers actively evaluate their space and we consider their perceptions of professional space in relation to the enactment of their personal teaching goals (agency).

### 2.2. Teacher agency

In recent literature, much attention has been paid to teacher agency (e.g. Buchanan, 2015; Priestley, Biesta, Philippou & Robinson, 2015). More specifically researchers have indicated that teacher agency is a key capability of teachers for advancing student learning, and for their continuous professional development and school development (Toom, Pyhältö & O'Connell Rust, 2015). Although the importance of the concept of agency is acknowledged, we lack empirical studies about (the development of) professional agency. Only quite recently have empirical studies focused on teacher agency and the journal *Teachers and Teaching* had a special issue on agency in 2015. (e.g. Toom, Pyhältö, O'Connell Rust, 2015; Van der Heijden, Geldens & Beijaard, 2015).

The basic concept of agency in general, or of teacher agency in particular, is based on an understanding that people do not merely react to and repeat given practices. Rather, people exhibit capacity for autonomous action, a process through which they intentionally transform and refine their worlds and thereby take control of their lives. Thus, agency can be defined as the capacity to initiate purposeful action that implies will, autonomy, freedom and, choice

(Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Engeström, 2005; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Priestley et al., 2015). When applied to teachers' professional practice, agency denotes the ability of teachers to step out of the contextual rules and regulations, and to act upon their own goals. Employing agency is a dynamic process that is personally constructed through many forms of interactions with the constraints of a given context (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). We claim that one major contextual characteristic through which agency is negotiated, is a teacher's perception of his/her professional space.

Biesta, Priestley and colleagues introduced an ecological view on agency and thereby expanded the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998). In their view ‘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). This interplay between personal and contextual factors is an essential feature of the ecological model on (teacher) agency in which both the importance of ‘agentic capacity’ and ‘agentic spaces’ are stressed, and agency is viewed as a temporal process (Priestley, Biesta, Philippou & Robinson, 2015).

The ecological model of agency consists of three dimensions, taking into account both the past or iterative dimensions, the present or practical evaluative dimension and the future or projective dimension (see Fig. 1).

The *iterational dimension* shows that past achievements, understandings and actions are important and are selectively reactivated. Iterational aspects that contribute to teacher agency are personal values, personal capacity and beliefs rooted in past experiences but also in the day to day interactions with colleagues in schools. The *projective dimension* points at teachers' intentions to bring about a future that is different from the past and the present. The *practical-evaluative dimension* is concerned with the present where agency can be acted out, influenced by both past and future. Both structural, cultural and material conditions play a role in ‘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, p. 971). Teachers, in other words, evaluate their agentic space and decide how to act within that space. In this study, we refer to the evaluation of space as teachers' perceived space and to teachers' achievement of agency as the exploitation of space. In this sense, we use the model posited by Priestley et al. (2015) to develop an understanding of the experienced and exploited space of independent teachers in secondary education in three different countries: Israel; Norway; and, the Netherlands. We aim to gain more insight in teachers' agentic behaviour and its relation with professional space over time by studying teachers' practice in-depth. While research attention to teacher agency is on the rise, the literature lacks consideration to the notion of professional space and the part that teacher perceived professional space plays in promoting their agentic behaviour. Our study fills this gap by exploring whether and how teachers' perceived space shapes their agentic behaviour.

## 3. Method

In our attempt to understand teachers' agency, in this paper we explore the interaction between teachers' perceived space and exploited space in three different professional contexts.

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