



Chinese inclusive education teachers' agency within temporal-relational contexts

Yan Wang^a, Guanglun Michael Mu^{b, *}, Lili Zhang^{a, c}

^a Beijing Normal University, 19 Xijiekouwai Street, Beijing, 100875, China

^b Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove, 4059, Australia

^c Heilongjiang Jiamusi Association of People with Disabilities, 101 Baoweiluzhongduan, Yonghong, Jiamusi, Heilongjiang, 154002, China

HIGHLIGHTS

- Discuss inclusive education teachers' agency in the everyday work context.
- Investigate teacher agency through a temporal-relational perspective.
- Examine the relationship between teacher agency and professional skills.
- Test the moderation and mediation effects on the above relationship.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 August 2016

Accepted 12 October 2016

Keywords:

Teacher agency
Temporal-relational perspective
Inclusive education
Learning in Regular Classrooms
Professional skills
Ecological support

ABSTRACT

Teacher agency is a well debated concept in the literature, whereas little is known about the agency work of inclusive education teachers. This study quantitatively investigates the relationship between Chinese inclusive education teachers' agency work and their professional skills through the temporal-relational perspective on agency. Using a sample of 2549 Chinese inclusive education teachers, the study discusses the ways in which the relationship between teacher agency and professional skills can be moderated by teachers' professional experiences and mediated by ecological support. Findings from the study have implications for inclusive education practice and policy in China and elsewhere.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the increasing complexity of schooling has brought multifarious changes to the role of teachers. Educational reform and curriculum redesign in many parts of the world once overemphasised teachers' obligations and performances but resultantly eroded teachers' authority and autonomy (Priestley, Beista, & Robinson, 2012; Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). The loss of authority and autonomy has de-professionalised teachers by taking agency away from them and replacing it with prescriptive curricula, oppressive regimes of testing and inspection, and scripted, performative arts (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015; Connors & Bengtson, 2014). More recently, however, there has been an

emerging tendency in educational discourse to reconstruct teachers as practitioners of change (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2014). This discourse calls for a significant shift back to teacher agency by encouraging teachers to wield high(er) degrees of freedom and power within their professional worlds.

The importance of teacher agency in time of change merits empirical research and theoretical development (Pantić, 2015; Priestley, et al., 2012; Toom, Pyhältö, & Rust, 2015). Equally important is the work of teacher agency in the everyday context. As Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998, p. 5) argue, it is the human agency that “happens daily and mundanely” that deserves more scholarly attention. Although there is a steady stream of literature concerning teacher agency in the contexts of change and everyday work, few studies have debated teacher agency in the face of educational inequality (Anderson, 2010). Research about the agency of inclusive education teachers is even

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: michael_mu_0404@hotmail.com, m.mu@qut.edu.au (G.M. Mu).

limited. This prompts us to analyse the agency of Chinese inclusive education teachers engaging in the national programme of 'Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC)'. To clarify, LRC is an indigenised form of inclusive education initiated by the Chinese government in the 1980s. It endeavours to provide special needs children with equal opportunities and rights to participate in regular schooling.

Since the inception of LRC, students with autism, visual and hearing impairments, as well as learning and physical disabilities have become increasingly visible in regular classrooms. Although the development of LRC over the past decades has largely ensured the access of special needs children to regular schooling, many problems remain. Some problems have continuously challenged the everyday work of LRC teachers, who are subject teachers or classroom coordinators/advisors having special needs students in their class. Two problems are of particular relevance to our study: (1) The professional development of LRC teachers is not yet satisfactory (Wang & Mu, 2014); (2) The support system for LRC is still shaky and hence there is a paucity of resources available to LRC teachers (Wang et al., 2015). Against this backdrop, we investigate the relationships among LRC teachers' agency, their professional skills, and LRC support.

We develop our paper in the following way. First, we revisit extant work on teacher agency and frame teacher agency within temporal-relational contexts (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Next, we quantitatively examine three questions: (1) What is the relationship between LRC teachers' agency and their professional skills? (2) In what ways is this relationship moderated by LRC teachers' professional experiences? (3) In what ways is this relationship mediated by LRC support? Building on the knowledge built and lessons learnt from these questions, we conclude our paper with some implications for inclusive education research and practice.

2. Literature review: what do we know about teacher agency?

Teacher agency denotes teachers' capacity and power to actively make choices, intentionally take actions, and strategically initiate changes (Anderson, 2010; Toom et al., 2015) to "direct their own working lives within structurally determined limits" (Hilferty, 2008, p. 167). In line with this definition, US literacy teachers were found to draw on their agency to (re)design the curriculum within policy contexts (Pennington, 2007; Rogers & Wetzel, 2013; Stillman & Anderson, 2015). These teachers either taught beyond the required scripted curriculum to reconcile the tensions between the resource-scarce situations and the assumptions and prescriptions of the No Child Left Behind Act (Pennington, 2007); or used problems and narratives to extend learning and created multiple storylines for self and others (Rogers & Wetzel, 2013); or used policy as a tool to adapt classroom instructions within a context with high-stakes accountability and standardisation (Stillman & Anderson, 2015). Similarly, Schweisfurth (2006) found that agentic teachers in Canada used the expectations of the curriculum to justify their approaches to prioritising teaching global citizen issues through innovative classroom-based and extracurricular activities. These teachers purposefully and skilfully draw on their agency to shape curriculum, take control of their work, and strategically transform and refine their teaching worlds. As Campbell (2012) summarises, teacher agency in different educational and policy contexts can interpret, implement, create, adapt, and/or even subvert curriculum.

Although the role of teacher agency in educational innovation and transformation is widely recognised, it does not necessarily mean that teacher agency always works in tandem with change. In different contexts, teacher agency can also lead to reluctance and rejection (Ball, 2012). Agentic teachers can become resistant to

policy requirements that are inconsistent with their school ethos (Robinson, 2012), and sensitive to the constraints brought by their school and unwilling to collaborate when their beliefs conflict with school innovations (Sannino, 2010). Despite the absence of change in these cases, teachers intend to exert influence on their teaching worlds by reflectively using power and autonomy to reject the new and maintain the old. Therefore, teacher agency neither necessarily facilitates nor arbitrarily inhibits change. Whether teacher agency works to stifle or advance change depends on the structures, cultures, and fabrics of the complicated context in which they work (Biesta & Tedder, 2006; Datnow, 2012).

In some contexts, teacher agency seems to be fraught with freedom and initiative, autonomously responsive to contextual dynamics. For example, teachers manoeuvre their agency to either go above and beyond the perceived expectations of their role when their work experiences match the school and district policy, or to operate the 'pushing back' strategy when they disagree with particular school or district policy (Buchanan, 2015). In other contexts, teacher agency tends to be more heteronomous of institutional cultures. For example, strong teacher agency was found in educational organisations with horizontal ties, reciprocal communications, and limited control over teachers' work; whereas hierarchical structures and bureaucratic management were found to constrain teacher agency in time of change (Hökkä & Vähäsantanen, 2013; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2012). Based upon certain constraints and opportunities, the extent to which teachers achieve agency varies from context to context (Priestley, et al., 2012).

Extant work has unravelled the varied patterns and dynamics within the entanglement between teacher agency and contextual structures. Although teacher agency is more easily recognised in situations where teachers criticise, challenge, or resist dominant discourses, norms, and practices, or external demands, regulations, and policies, it is also manifested in actions in line with them (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015; Buchanan, 2015; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2012; Pyhältö et al., 2014; Robinson, 2012). As human agency theorists Emirbayer and Mische (1998) contend, "the structural environments of action are both dynamically sustained by and also altered through human agency" (p. 964). They continue to argue that actors can alter, shift, and dialogically reconstruct "their agentic orientations ... in relation to the situational contexts within which they act" (p. 1003). Their arguments indicate the mutually constitutive effect between agency and context and lay a strong foundation for the ecological conceptualisation of teacher agency as a process of achievement rather than a possession of capacity within the contexts-for-action (Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta & Tedder, 2006, 2007).

Although teacher agency is well debated in the literature, little is known about the agency of inclusive education teachers. Recently, however, Naraian (2014) and Mu et al. (2015) analysed how inclusive education teachers in the US and China respectively drew on their agency to interact with the local contexts, politics, and discourses to enable inclusivity in practice. Following these colleagues, we delve into LRC teachers' agency work that not only navigates teachers to existing and potential LRC support but also improves teachers' LRC professional skills. We use the term 'agency work' to grapple with the quality of teachers' LRC practices rather than the quality of teachers themselves. In other words, LRC teachers reflectively perform their agency work by means of contextual resources and constraints rather than possess their agency "as a property, capacity or competence" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626). Our quantitative analysis complements the bulk of qualitative work in the literature. Before reporting on our quantitative analysis, we construct the conceptual basis of our study.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/4941735>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/4941735>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)