



## A dialogue about teacher agency: Australian and Chinese perspectives

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Ecological concepts of agency provide impetus for debates on teacher professionalism.
- Comparative studies of professional standards reveal international policy drift.
- Tension arises in the dynamic interplay of individual empowerment and systemised controls in teaching.
- Agency is an epistemological stance on which teachers' work could be built.

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### ABSTRACT

Agency is emerging as a key concept, as part of increased debates about rigid accountability in measures of teacher effectiveness. However, the construct is elusive. Combining scholarship from Australian and Chinese scholars this research review undertook to create a dialogic space within which a geo-political position could be argued. Given recently introduced professional standards in China that shadow existing governance of teacher education in Australia, the findings indicate commonality in disparate contexts. We investigated how agency played out in the dynamic interplay of technologies of power and discovered the importance of exploring and representing teachers' work in an ecological framework.

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### 1. Introduction

A call for teachers to be agentic professionals has emerged in literature as a strategic response to policy agendas promoting rigid accountability (Edwards, 2015; Gelfuso, 2017). Recommendations in recent reports state the need for teachers to shape and lead educational change by developing the “capacity to engage fully with the complexities of education” (Donaldson, 2011, p. 4). Yet research also recognises the challenge inherent to education systems where teachers' actions may be intentionally dynamic yet institutionally constrained (Schwarz & de Groot, 2011, p. 276). This paper examines the term agency, therefore, in the spirit of an ecological approach to epistemological enquiry exploring how it might inform understanding of teachers' work in Australia and China. Accounting for disparate bureaucratic systems, learning

contexts, student needs as well as personal experiences our definition of professional agency balances subject-centered and socio-cultural perspectives (Etelapelto, Vahasantanen, Hokka, & Paloniemi, 2013, p. 45). We support the view that agency can be defined as an “emergent phenomenon - something that is achieved by individuals, through the interplay of personal capacities and the resources, affordances and constraints of the environment by means of which individuals act” (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015, p. 19).

This paper explores the concept of agency as a construct that recognises the critical importance of building capacity in contextualised decision making spurred by teachers' professional reflection on “what might be” (Edwards, in Ludvigsen, 2011, p.28). In some contexts, teachers are afforded high levels of teacher autonomy, for example, in curriculum design where they are called on to be “agents of change” (Priestley et al., 2015, p.127). However, when this apparent freedom is contrasted with regimens of control that regulate teacher behaviours based on performative measures,

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an obvious tension arises. Teachers do not have control over the systemic environments within which they operate. For example, mandated standards enshrine expectations of teacher professionalism. Therefore, we feel it is important not to conceive of teacher agency merely in terms of individual capacity or personal attribute; nor should we take up the sociological view of agency merely as social action. Rather, we propose agency should be viewed as relational, bound as it is in dynamic relationships by cultural and structural conditions and emerging when teachers take action based on “deliberative knowledge work” (Markauskaite & Goodyear, 2017, p. 246). It is what teachers “do or achieve” (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 22) within the constraints and possibilities of local education systems.

Our key goal in this paper is to examine how the construct of agency plays out in research into teacher professionalism. However, before we examine how this may appear in Chinese and Australian contexts in particular, other constructs frequently associated with agency, which will appear in our discussion such as classroom readiness (TEMAG, 2014) and teacher effectiveness, need to be interrogated for the discursive influences they have in shaping dominant political agendas. For example, the plurality of approaches to assessing effectiveness (Brabeck, Dwyer, Geisinger, & Worrell, 2016) needs to be acknowledged because any discussion of teacher professionalism is “unavoidably political” (Cochran-Smith, Piazza, & Power, 2013(p.7). It is for this reason that the following section of the paper provides a mini-retrospective overview of attempts to benchmark and monitor teacher performance. This section will provide a background to the development of competing attempts to fix fluid pedagogic relations into sets of stable paradigms that reference systems of measurement. For example, driven by neo-liberal policies the emergence of discussion around Value Added Models (VAMs) (Boyd, Lankford, Grossman, Loeb & Wyckoff, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2015; Fuller, 2014) reveals a chain of reasoning viewing teachers' work as the production of good results from students. As Connell (2009) argued some years ago, the idea that teachers should have their effectiveness indexed to student test outcomes could draw teachers on to ‘dangerous ground’. Nearly twenty years ago a drift towards an audit culture was predicted (Power, 1994). The move to tie teacher's effectiveness to proxy measures such as standardised test scores is now well established. Yet researchers are unconvinced “whether the use of value added will improve or undermine the teaching force in the long run” (Darling-Hammond, 2015, p.133).

The discursive influence of this view of effective teacher preparation has been well reviewed by authors such as Allard, Mayer, and Moss (2014) in Australia and Zhou (2014) in China. Neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005) has been the dominant political-economic paradigm for two or three decades in most Western societies, and correspondingly in teacher education. Critiqued most cogently from researchers working in the sociology of education (Connell, 2009), it is associated with epistemological stances that skew debates about what counts as ‘good teaching’ to what can be easily counted. Prior to this phase, the history of research into the effectiveness of teaching and teacher education can be roughly categorised into periods revealing shifts of emphasis conceptualising teachers as: transmitters of knowledge with a focus on teacher characteristics in the 20's–40's facilitators of knowledge transfer with a focus on routine teacher behaviour in the classroom correlated with learning outcomes in the 50's–80's (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005; Zeichner, 2005); and eventually, in more recent times, teachers as professionals supporting learning as an active social process with a focus on critical views of education (Buchanan, 2015; Burns & McIntyre, 2017; Edwards, 2015).

Though the latest period is associated with agentic concepts of professionalism where proactive teachers translate knowledge into

contextually relevant teaching, evaluation of teacher quality has remained closely related to the ‘policy turn’ in teacher education. This is characterised by outcomes-based accountability measures couched in standards that “tend to evaluate and control teachers rather than support them as professionals” (Cochran-Smith, 2016, p.97). Illustrations of politically driven action exist in both Australian and Chinese educational settings where top-down reforms of teacher education have been conducted in attempts to improve teacher effectiveness (Day & Gu, 2014). For example, when reform was introduced by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in China, despite the power of the state, researchers note “the teacher education process did not change significantly” (Zhou, 2014, p. 520). In response, in 2017 the MOE launched a policy designed to monitor the quality of teacher education through a system of accreditation measures (MOE, 2017). Parallel systems of policy and regulation encouraging compliance, now exist in the two countries. The potential of these systems to act as constraints on teacher agency will be discussed later in the paper.

The authors of this paper address a gap in the literature by attempting a geo-political examination of the structuring of knowledge about teacher agency in two countries shaped by different historical and contextually bound approaches to teacher education. The literature on teacher agency, like many debates within education and social science, is heavily dominated by North American material. Yet, as Edwards notes, “agency cannot be discussed without reference to culture” (2015, p.779). Therefore, this paper is an attempt to enrich the conversation with voices from Australia and China to resist the implicit assumption of universality expressed in previous accounts. We aim to avoid a false universalism by adopting theoretical work from one dominant (Northern hegemonic) view and seek to contribute to Connell's account of ‘southern theory’ (Connell, 2007). Therefore, the concept of agency is explored through a scholarly discussion of Australian and Chinese literature read through a comparative lens that is sensitised to socio-cultural variation. We are not attempting to come to a comfortable resolution. Rather we are aiming to broaden the discussion by interrogating agency enacted in disparate research contexts. We acknowledge specific conversations, educational debates and reform agendas take place within the context of national systems, each with its own peculiarities and histories. This is not an argument for localism rather for explicit recognition of how globalised comparisons can contribute to differentiated understandings of shared discursive constructs. We hope to make visible the epistemic constructs through which we interpret what constitutes teacher agency.

## 2. Towards a comparative understanding of agency

This section of the paper argues the need for a nuanced reading of agency and situates our comparison in debates around definitional complexity. As a starting point for our comparative understanding we need to problematize the semantic overlap between agency and autonomy. Agency and autonomy are two key terms that are common in discussions of teacher effectiveness in Australia and China. Their frequent occurrence is not problematic, however, the elision of the two concepts blurs their meaning. We agree the words are closely related, however treating them as equivalent is unhelpful in terms of specifying contextualised influences on teacher professionalism. We argue that agency and autonomy should have different connotations. Conflating agency with autonomy promotes the idea that teachers can rarely act completely independently of others because they are in a network of relations (with other staff, pupils, parents etc.) and institutional practices (curricula, timetables, exams, national educational agendas etc.). We favour the promotion of agency as something broader

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