



# Teacher agency and professional learning in cross-cultural teaching contexts: Accounts of Chinese teachers from international schools in Hong Kong



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Professional learning in cross-cultural teaching contexts is examined.
- Teacher agency shapes professional learning in cross-cultural teaching contexts.
- The nature of teacher agency varies in different dimensions of professional learning.
- Teacher agency is shaped by teachers' professional and social positioning.
- Teacher agency is shaped by the imposed identity and social roles.

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined how teacher agency shaped professional learning in cross-cultural teaching contexts. Interviews with 14 Chinese language teachers showed that teacher agency varied in different dimensions of professional learning. Social suggestions, power relations, teachers' professional and social positioning and the imposed identity and social roles in the school contexts interacted to shape teacher agency. The findings suggest both creating school cultures and structures that value and share diverse discursive and pedagogical practices and managing teachers' professional identity and self-positioning to enhance teachers' agency to engage in mutual learning and remaking of their work practices.

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## 1. The research issue

Globalization has brought with it an increase in the internationalization of education, which is reflected in the fast expansion of transnational education, namely educational provision across national and regional borders, and the burgeoning of international schools worldwide (Starr, 2014). These teaching contexts are characterized by the cultural plurality of the teaching staff. The rich cultural heritages and diversities the staff bring with them afford great potentials for teacher professional learning. Scholars have applauded the teaching experience in such contexts for its promise in stimulating and supporting teacher professional growth

(Clifford, Henderson & Montgomery, 2013; Hoare, 2013). For one thing, interactions with different cultural norms of being and knowing are likely to generate dissonances that would stimulate the identification, critical reflection and questioning of (unconscious) assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning and taken-for-granted practices, which in turn promotes transformational learning (Montgomery, 2014; Smith, 2009). For another, the co-existence of the multitude of cultural beings are conducive to the development of new, transcultural pedagogies and hybridized educational and cultural discursive practices that surpass the originals (Feng, 2013; Keevers et al., 2014) and may facilitate mutual understanding across cultural boundaries (Knight, 2011). However, all these affordances are conditioned upon teachers' critical awareness of the ontological and epistemological foundations of their own views and the views of the cultural others as well as upon their acknowledgment that no one way of being and knowing is superior to another (Andreotti, 2009; Djerasimovic,

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2014). Thus, to realize the promises that the internationalization of education brings to teacher professional learning, promoting the “mutual responsibility for, as well as mutual benefit from, collective sharing and contribution of expertise and resources among teachers” (Bovill, Jordan, & Watters, 2015, p. 19) on the premise of “cultural pluralism without hierarchy” (Gay, 1995, p. 103), is essential (Howe & Xu, 2013; Keay, May, & O’Mahony, 2014).

Unfortunately, findings on the hegemony of Western knowledge systems and practices and one-sided learning abound in the existing literature on transnational education (Keay et al., 2014; Montgomery, 2014). Researchers have found that interactions in transnational education programmes are often characterized by unequal power relations among, and disproportionate contributions from, teachers of different cultural backgrounds (Djerasimovic, 2014; Pyvis, 2011). These programmes are fraught with a predominant one-way transmission of the pedagogical practices of the “developed”, with the local ways of being and knowing being marginalized and subdued (Kanu, 2011; Lee, 2012), which leads to either blind and uncritical one-sided learning or stereotypical attitudes towards different practices (Keay et al., 2014; Montgomery, 2014). For instance, Zhang (2015) found that, in a hybrid Sino-Canadian dual-diploma curriculum, Chinese-related subjects and teachers were marginalized, and the Chinese-related literacies and their heritage teaching methods succumbed to the English-related literacies and teaching practices. The lack of reciprocal, two-way exchanges and mutual respect among the multicultural teaching staff have led to transnational education programs being criticized for being ‘knowledge capitalism’, ‘linguistic and cultural imperialism’ or ‘ideological imperialism’ (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Pyvis, 2011; Zhang, 2015). Researchers are hence calling for more research into how an important professional development source in the internationalization of education—mutual and reciprocal learning among teachers of diverse cultural backgrounds—could be maximized (Keevers et al., 2014).

Scholars have proposed various measures to promote reciprocal learning in transnational education. The measures include advocating pluralistic approaches that celebrate or hybridize the diverse ways of knowing and being (Djerasimovic, 2014; Feng, 2013; Zhang, 2015), building communities of practice that enhance interactions among staff of different cultural backgrounds and fosters collegial relationships and a sense of connectedness and belonging among them (Keay et al., 2014; Keevers et al., 2014), and encouraging a critical and questioning stance among the dominant groups towards their own practices (Bovill et al., 2015; Howe & Xu, 2013). These measures primarily focus on nurturing school cultures and creating structures to encourage and support mutual learning. However, mutual learning is premised upon teachers’ being agentive actors. Whether teachers could contribute to and benefit from mutual learning and thus maximize the professional learning opportunities in transnational education contexts depends not only on the empowerment mechanisms but also on the agency of the teaching staff, especially the under-privileged teaching staff (Djerasimovic, 2014). An investigation into how teachers exert agency to utilize their funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and the diverse ways of knowing and being in their surroundings to influence their own and others’ practices would shed new insights into our current understanding of mutual learning in cross-cultural teaching contexts (Djerasimovic, 2014). Thus, this study aimed to unravel the relationship between teachers’ professional agency and professional learning in the cross-cultural teaching contexts of Hong Kong international schools.

## 1.1. Research background

Professional learning is critical to schools’ sustainable improvement. Individual teachers’ capacities and funds of knowledge are significant sources for professional learning.

Pooling teachers’ expertise and strength through both formal and informal structures helps capitalize on the human capital within schools and maximize opportunities for teacher professional learning (Hargreaves, 2001; Harris, 2003). Current professional learning literature has attested to the power of co-learning for teacher professional growth (Avalos, 2011; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Co-learning is found to be an important condition for effective professional development in that it promotes the deprivatization of practices and fosters collaborative critical reflection over daily teaching practices and collaborative sharing, which facilitates the grasp of professional knowledge (Levine & Marcus, 2010; Postholm, 2012). Thus, nurturing school cultures that promote mutual learning are beneficial to teacher individual and collective capacity building.

Co-learning could take place via formal structures, such as professional learning communities and lesson study, and via informal venues, such as collegial informal exchanges and interactions (Avalos, 2011; Jurasaitė-Harbisson & Rex, 2010). Frost (2012) proposed the concept of non-positional teacher leadership to maximize both venues of co-learning. Non-positional teacher leadership refers to the process where individual teachers, regardless of formal positions and designations, contribute to, individually and collectively, the remaking of school practices through influencing others (Frost, 2012; Harris, 2003; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Thus, it could marshal resources and mobilize the intellectual capital throughout the schools, to the maximum, for teacher individual and collective growth (Hargreaves, 2001; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). In the context of cross-cultural teaching, the reciprocity of non-positional teacher leadership across different cultural groups is particularly needed to help mobilize the cultural capital at schools (Bovill et al., 2015). As non-positional teacher leadership requests active involvement of individual teachers, empowerment and agency are the two pillars (Harris, 2003). Whether teachers’ intellectual and cultural capitals could be maximally harnessed to benefit professional learning depends critically on the school cultures, structures and capacity building mechanisms that could empower teachers to exert agency to lead and to learn (Frost, 2012; Jurasaitė-Harbisson & Rex, 2010; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

## 1.2. Theoretical framework

Agency is an important concept in the academic discussion of professional learning in the workplace. Professional learning is a constructive process, and agency is needed to drive the construction and reconstruction of one’s professional knowledge, competencies and identities and to influence and transform work practices (Billett, 2011; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2014; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, and Paloniemi (2013) defined professional agency as the practices where “professional subjects and/or communities exert influence, make choices and take stances in ways that affect their work and/or their professional identities” (p. 61).

Unlike the individualistic views that define agency as a set of context-free individual capacities and efficacies to act upon the world or the social deterministic views that define agency as totally bounded and constrained by the cultural systems and social structures (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012), current conceptualizations of agency highlight the interdependency between agency and structure. Human agency is

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