

AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO TEACHER AGENCY; A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

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Abstract

This paper introduces an ecological approach to teacher agency which facilitates a nuanced understanding of teacher agency, critical in an era where teachers are positioned as playing a central and crucial role in educational improvement. This is a timely matter as such a conceptualisation of teachers is a marked difference to the previous thirty years whereby a heavy-handed, top-down approach to educational improvement contributed to their deprofessionalisation. As agents of change, teachers are now expected to exert power, take action and effect change.

The ecological approach to teacher agency sees agency as an emergent phenomenon; the extent to which it is achieved is dependent upon the interplay of teachers' contexts and their individual capacities. As such, it distances itself from a position whereby the teacher is the sole factor affecting the achievement of agency and affords significance to their professional contexts. This paper explores the ecological approach, its roots and reviews its application within one recent research project.

Key words: teacher agency, ecological approach, teacher capacity, professional context

Introduction

Within the current English education context, there is much to suggest that teachers are being positioned as agents of change by the Department of Education (DfE). DfE rhetoric focuses on trusting teachers with greater levels of power and freedom (DfE, 2010; Gove, 2013b) and the introduction of

academy status has delivered autonomy into teachers' hands through its integral disapplication of the National Curriculum (Academies Act, 2010). Similarly in Scotland, curriculum reforms are predicated on a model whereby teachers play a central and crucial role in educational improvement (Priestly et al., 2015). In general, such policy intentions imply permission for teachers to exert higher degrees of professional judgment than in recent years and position their agency as a key element of their professionalism (Priestly et al., 2015).

For teachers however, capitalising on their newly granted autonomy and achieving agency in their work is far from guaranteed and it is not a simple case of demarcating teachers' abilities as the defining factor, not least because doing so tends to limit rather than enhance teacher agency (Priestly et al., 2015). Instead, it is important to consider the context within which they work and whether policy intentions are supported in practice in ways which enable the achievement of agency. For example, sustained deprofessionalisation of the teaching cohort over recent years through both stringent input regulation (Abbott et al., 2013; McCulloch et al., 2000) and oppressive regimes of testing (Biesta, 2004) has detrimentally affected teachers' capacity to exercise agency, despite the current freedoms. Understanding the combination of both the structures and cultures of teachers' working environments, and their individual and collective capacities is facilitated by a recent ecological approach to teacher agency (Priestly et al., 2013).

This literature review seeks to explore this approach as nuanced, intricate understandings of teacher agency are important in current times if teachers are to be supported to capitalise on their renewed status as agents of change. An important caveat to include is that the question of teacher agency is a normative one as achieving agency per se is not the aim; it is superseded by the aim of achieving agency 'that is meaningful in the light of wider questions about the direction and purpose of education' (Priestly et al., 2015:133).

To begin with, this paper addresses the concept of agency before exploring the roots of the ecological approach to teacher agency offered by Priestly et al. (2013) by examining Archer's (1982) morphogenetic approach (MA), Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) chordal triad and Biesta and Tedder's

(2006) ecological agency. It culminates in a summary of the findings of the application of Priestly et al.'s (2013) approach in Scottish schools, and the conclusion the research drew regarding future progress.

Agency

Agency is broadly considered to be the 'socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (Ahearn, 2001:130) and its conceptualisation is largely dependent upon two important issues. Firstly, the nature of relationships between individuals and social/contextual elements, ranging from analytical inseparability to separateness (Etelapelto et al., 2013). Secondly, the varying emphasis given to social and economic structures and their influence on human activity, and the degree of individual agency within the structures (Hitlin and Elder, 2007; Biesta et al., 2015). Essentially, the structure–agency problematisation (Biesta and Tedder, 2006; Biesta et al., 2015) is the influential factor and three distinct positions can be identified within the literature; an internal view, a centrist position and determinism (Archer, 2010).

The Spectrum of Agency

The internal view of agency posits that there is capacity for autonomous action that is unaffected by any potential constraints effected by the social structure (Calhoun, 2002). Essentially, it holds that humans are 'self-motivated, self-directing, rational subjects, capable of exercising individual agency' (Usher and Edwards, 1994). However, it is argued that this is an overly individualistic view of agency which under-emphasises the influence of societal structures and human culture and discourses, consequently often conflating autonomy with agency (Priestly et al., 2012b). Such voluntarism (Archer, 2010) reduces human existence to purely social action by failing to recognise the analytical separation between the individual and the social (Evans, 2007; Goldthorpe, 1998). It is argued that this results in a 'lack of conceptual tools to address working contexts and professional discourses and consider how these limit or resource an individual professional's agentic action' (Etelapelto et al., 2013:49). Specifically, it can result in a blurring of the line between individual and collective agency (Etelapelto, 2013) and renders irrelevant the important temporal dimension which differentiates between the 'historical continuum of an

individual person's life course and their socio-cultural conditions' (Etelapelto, 2013:49), thus providing space for the agentic orientations of people to differ in different contexts and times (Priestly et al., 2012b). This is particularly limiting for a number of reasons. Firstly, the 'projective aspirations of agents', linked to the future, which should form part of the analysis of agency (Priestly et al., 2012b:198) are unaccounted for which is problematic as they may inform the practice of agency whereby individuals choose the problems with which they engage. Secondly, the iterational (past) aspect is important because as experiences are accumulated and material/social conditions evolve, potential for agency changes and ultimately, it is clear that agency is an on-going process which has its roots in practical-evaluative (present) activity (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, downwards conflation, or determinism (Archer, 2010), ascribes much decision making to the influences of structural and historical conditions of our institutions (Popkewitz, 1984). Such an approach is grounded in the influence of society over the individual and seeks to supplant agency with structure (Priestly et al., 2012a) which, it could be argued, is an over-socialised view of someone who is 'shaped and moulded by his social context' and little more than an epiphenomenon of society (Archer, 2000). This could be considered a 'form of social determinism' (Archer, 2000) which prevents analysis sensitive to different levels of impact on agency e.g. internal and external features (Priestly et al., 2012a).

The middle ground which purports a centrist view of agency has emerged as a reaction to perceived shortcomings of the two aforementioned models. It is a rejection of the idea that agency is an individual capacity able to transform and resist dominant power relations (Lipponen and Kumpulainen, 2011), but instead positions it as a variable, as a driver for social action. Because it positions structure and agency as analytically separately, problems with seeing agency as a capacity to be possessed and disregarding of the context are overcome. Archer's (1982) morphogenetic approach represents this position and considers that 'courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of agents who subjectively determine their practical projects in relation to their objective circumstances' (Archer, 2003: 201). Such mediation

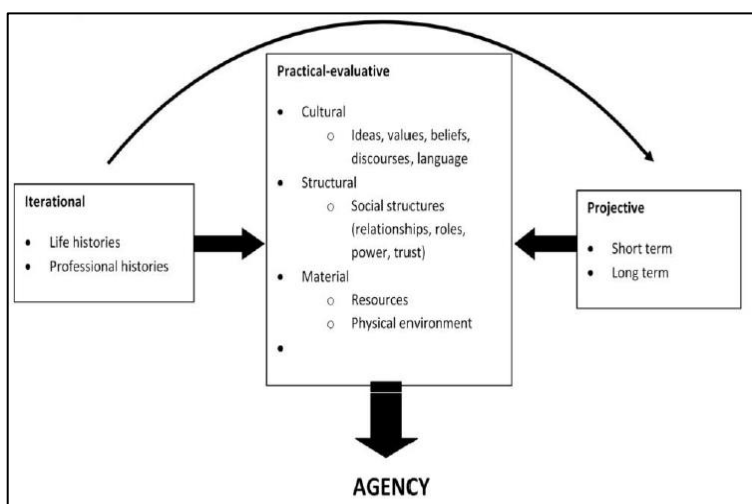
between structure and agency situates people as reflexive and influenced, rather than determined, by society and individuals are understood as being embedded in and imbued by their socio-cultural contexts, and capable of transforming conditions rather than passive carriers of their contextual conditions (Etelapelto et al., 2013). The ecological approach to teacher agency (Priestly et al., 2013) which is the focus of this literature review builds upon Archer's work and is an exemplification of this centrist view.

An ecological approach to teacher agency

Priestly et al. (2015) offer:

an ecological conceptualisation of agency that emphasizes the importance of both agentic capacity and contextual conditions in shaping agency, and in which the achievement of agency is seen as a temporal process

Figure 1 exemplifies how, through analytical separation, Priestly et al. (2013) perceive the interplay of individuals' capacities and their ecological conditions, across the temporal dimensions, as leading to the achievement of agency.



Priestly et al., 2013

Figure 1

This ecological approach positions teacher agency as an emergent phenomenon, rather than an innate capacity possessed by an individual and synthesises three main concepts which are explored in the following sections;

- analytical dualism
- the chordal triad
- ecological agency

Analytical separation

The analytical separation of different components affecting the achievement of agency allows the impact of each to be explored, whilst acknowledging that neat separation is not always possible empirically (Priestly et al., 2015). This analytical dualism is the key facet of Margaret Archer's morphogenetic model (Archer, 1982) and the foundation of the ecological approach to teacher agency. The morphogenetic approach sees agency and structure as 'different emergent strata of social reality' (Herepath, 2014:861), ultimately resulting in morphostasis (structural reproduction) or morphogenesis (structural elaboration). This is helpful when trying to account for the structuring and restructuring of the social order (Archer, 2010b) and provides the means for a methodological approach which facilitates attempts to specify the causal mechanisms of variations in agency (Archer, 2010).

It is made possible by two reasons, illustrated by Figure 2. Firstly, structure and agency are 'different kinds of emergent entities' (Archer, 2010b: 275) as demonstrated by the differences in properties and powers. Despite this they presuppose each other as Bhaskar (1989: 92) argues, structure and agency are 'existentially interdependent but essentially distinct. Society is both an ever-present *condition* and continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency.' Second is the fundamental premise that 'structure and agency operate diachronically over different tracts of time' (Archer, 2010b: 275) as demonstrated by the way in which structure necessarily predates transformative action, and the way in which structural elaboration necessarily follows such action.

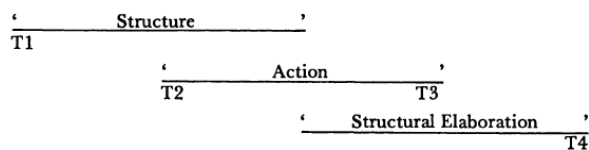


Figure 2

The Chordal Triad

Figure 1 shows how the ecological approach to teacher agency sees the interplay between three temporal dimensions as fundamental to the achievement of agency. The roots of this lie in Embirmayer and Mische's (1998) 'chordal triad' which accounts for how 'temporally constructed engagement with different structural environments' (Embirmayer and Mische, 1998:970) affects the achievement of agency.

The iterational dimension frames how teachers might respond to dilemmas and choose to manoeuvre between repertoires. It comprises of life/professional histories, professional and personal knowledge/skills/attitudes/values/beliefs and habit and expectation maintenance (Priestly et al., 2015). Selective reactivation of past patterns of thought and action are 'routinely incorporated in practical activity' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998:971) which links the iterational dimension to that of the practical-evaluative (PE). The PE dimension is the day to day navigation of present contexts for action based upon practical and evaluative considerations i.e. judgements of risk. It has a 'major influence on agency, powerfully shaping (and often distorting) decision making and action, offering both possibilities for agency and inhibiting it' (Priestly et al., 2015:33). The projective dimension encompasses the visualisation of other futures and the development of aspirations and which affect the achievement of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Eichner (2014) describes the iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions as habit, judgement and imagination respectively which I consider to be helpful labels.

The temporal dimensions constitute analytical distinctions and all three, in varying degrees, will be found within any concrete empirical instance of action, for example the iterational dimension is the genesis of a drive towards the future which makes a clear difference in the here and now (Priestly, 2015). They constitute a 'chordal triad' which resonates, although not always in harmony (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). As such, the achievement of agency may be stymied by the influence of one temporal dimension for example, whilst teachers may have substantial capacity as a result of their iterational experiences, as well as strong educational aspirations which form their projective dimension, innovation within the P-E dimension may be too problematic or risky to enact, rendering agency impossible (Priestly et al., 2015). Furthermore, each can ultimately have a defining impact on the others as today's P-E contexts will both be the iterational domain of the future, as well as help define the projective dimension of tomorrow (Priestly et al., 2015). It is therefore important to consider the impact of current contexts on the years to come as those which inhibit agency today also hinder the development of the sorts of experiences that enhance agency in the future and might lead to a truncated development of future aspirations and expertise which cyclically affects achievement of agency within the P-E dimension. Conversely, rich iterational experiences may equip people better to 'develop more expansive orientations towards the future' and thus projective aspirations which enable greater levels of agency (Priestly et al., 2015).

Ecological Agency (EA)

A fundamental premise of the ecological approach to teacher agency is that agency is a situated achievement whereby actors act by means of their environment, rather than simply in it (Biesta and Tedder, 2006); their agency is achieved through 'the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors' (Biesta and Tedder, 2007:137). This idea of ecological agency, as first promoted through research into learning, identity and agency (Biesta and Tedder, 2006), promotes the importance of the questions 'how is agency possible?' and 'how is agency achieved?'

(Biesta & Tedder, 2007), requiring a shift away from the typical sociological perception of agency as a variable in social action to a view of it as an emergent phenomenon (Priestly et al., 2015).

Ecological agency is positioned as transactional and relational (Priestly et al., 2012b) and the necessary product of a focus on ‘actors acting by-means-of-an-environment’ (Biesta and Tedder, 2006:18) as opposed to simply in their environment. It highlights the importance of looking at individuals and what they are able or not able to do, alongside cultures, structures and relationships that shape their particular ecologies. Further, Biesta and Tedder’s (2006) concept of the ability to ‘manoeuvre between repertoires’ aligns with Archer’s idea of reflexivity in that individuals are seen as influenced, but not determined, by society and are able to make choices.

Application in Scottish Schools

This section draws upon an Economic and Social Research Council funded project which uses the ecological approach to teacher agency as its theoretical framework (Priestly et al., 2015). The research was carried out in Scotland and focusses on six teachers across three schools as they work on the implementation of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). This is an apposite context for employing the ecological approach to teacher agency as the CfE is a new open curricular framework from the Scottish Government which renews the conceptualisation of teachers as curriculum developers at school level, whilst other features of the working environment, such as strict accountability practices, potentially constrain the space for agentic practices. This section’s focus is on the findings regarding the factors influencing the teachers’ agential responses to CfE, namely, relationships, beliefs and aspirations, and vocabularies and discourse and the resources which they provide as teachers enact their daily practice.

The research found that teachers’ beliefs and aspirations adversely affect the achievement of agency within the iterational and projective temporal dimensions respectively. Essentially, they combine to result in limited resources for teachers to deal with the practical evaluative dimension and to enact their practice agentially. For example, beliefs about the role of the teacher manifest in a deference to authority, coupled

with nervousness about autonomy. Their aspirations are short term and instrumental as opposed to expansive and focussed on long term educational aims.

A more specific type of resources identified as also having an impact on the level of agency teachers can achieve are discursive resources which the research links to teachers' vocabularies and discourses, themselves a result of both teachers' biographies and, to varying degrees, current policies. Discursive resources similarly affect the achievement of agency by providing a window on the practical-evaluative dimension through which judgements are made, and by providing a reference point to the future. They are the material with and through which teachers think, so constitute the raw materials upon which the quality of thought, and subsequently action, are dependent. Fundamentally, the research found that as the quality of the discourse improves, as does teachers' levels of agency. Those with elaborate, sophisticated discourses have a more nuanced judgment about events as opposed to typically less experienced teachers whose discourses are more basic, more heavily influenced by current policy and are one-dimensional which provides them less opportunities to navigate the practical-evaluative dimension.

The research also found that the quality and scope of teachers' professional relationships has a significant impact upon the achievement of agency due to their power as relational resources which provide support, access to new ideas and a protective shield when undertaking innovation. Those relationships which are horizontal, symmetrical, reciprocal and focussed upon generative dialogue tend to lead to a collaborative culture which supports the achievement of agency. In contrast, those which are hierarchical, asymmetric, non-reciprocal and whose communication is largely limited to the dissemination of information tend to limit it. The importance of professional relationships is revealed by the support of the 'institution of collegial working as an essential pre-requisite for enhancing teacher agency' (Priestly et al., 2015:163).

In conclusion, the empirical data from the research supports the model of Figure 1 in seeing the achievement of agency as influenced by both contextual features, cultural and structural, and the capacity of teachers. It suggests that it is important to diversify the focus upon teacher and ensure that 'systematic

action addressing the cultural and structural dimensions of the contexts for professional work' (Priestly et al., 2015:136) accompanies it to facilitate an impact on the levels of agency teachers are able to achieve.

Conclusion

Despite a noticeable trend of affording teachers greater professional autonomy, it is clear that policy intentions and practices are not wholly in alignment and these muddied waters must be accounted for when considering the actions of the teacher. As Priestly et al. (2015) put it, it is problematic to focus on the quality of the individual teacher without taking into account the conditions by means of which they work. The analytical separation of teachers' capacities and ecologies afforded by the ecological approach to teacher agency (Priestly et al., 2013) allows for the influence of each on the achievement of agency to be explored, therefore, it seems as if to be a fruitful theoretical approach for modern times. Providing a theoretical framework which can support the work of better understanding how good teacher agency can be achieved is important as the enhancement of teacher agency is 'the only sustainable way towards the maintenance of everything that is good in education and the improvement of that which needs improvement' (Priestly et al. 2015:149).

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