Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change
Working papers
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The *Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change* project began in March 2011, and will run until May 2012. The project is conducted at the University of Stirling, in partnership with a Scottish Local Authority. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The research team is:

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- Professor Gert Biesta (Co-Investigator)
- Dr Sarah Robinson (Research Fellow)

The project comprises a number of in-depth ethnographic case studies in three Scottish schools (primary and secondary). The immediate context for the research is the implementation of Scotland's new *Curriculum for Excellence*, a policy that aims to change the structure, content and method of Scottish education, and which is an example of modern curricular reform in which teachers are explicitly positioned as agents of change. The project focuses on the ways in which and the extent to which experienced teachers achieve agency in their day to day working contexts, against the background of the introduction of the new curriculum, and on the factors that promote or inhibit such agency. The project has two key aims:

- to trial a set of methodologies for identifying the factors that impact upon teacher agency
- to develop an understanding of key factors that impact upon such agency in contexts of educational change.

This paper is one of a series of working papers being produced as part of the research. This, along with other working papers (as they become available) may be downloaded from the project website at http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/events/tacc.php.

A working paper from the Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change Project
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Teachers as agents of change: An exploration of the concept of teacher agency
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Introduction

There is an emerging tendency in curriculum policy in the UK and elsewhere to construct teachers explicitly as agents of change (e.g. Goodson, 2003; Priestley, 2011; Nieveen, 2011). This is a significant shift given several decades of policies that worked to de-professionalise teachers by taking agency away from them and replacing it with prescriptive curricula and oppressive regimes of testing and inspection. This [re]turn to teacher agency not only gives explicit permission to teachers to exert high[er] degrees of professional agency within the contexts in which they work, but actually sees agency as an important dimension of teachers' professionalism. The renewed emphasis on teacher agency raises a number of questions. These are partly questions about definition and theory, such as the question what we mean by agency and, more specifically with teacher agency, and what it would mean for teachers to be agents of change. And these are partly empirical questions about the factors that promote or hinder teacher agency. In this paper we focus on the former set of questions, setting out how in the Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change Project we define and theorise agency and exploring what this means for understanding and researching the factors that contribute to teacher agency. First we provide an overview of the concept of agency, which has been heavily theorised in sociological and other literature. In doing so, we present our own view of agency, as an emergent phenomenon, rather than as a capacity residing in individuals. Second, we offer a view of what teacher agency might look like in the context of this theoretical viewpoint. At this stage we make no empirical claims – these will follow in subsequent working papers. Our intention is to explore the forms of agency that are possible for teachers, and – in broad terms – the factors which help shape these. We conclude by offering some thoughts as to how such a view of agency might have implications for policy and practice in education.

Defining and Theorising Agency

Teacher agency – in other words, agency that is theorised specifically in respect of the activities of teachers in schools – has been subject to little explicit research or theory development (see Vongalis-Macrow, 2007). While there is some literature that locates the concept in relation to wider theoretical discussions of agency (e.g. Pignatelli, 1993; Priestley *et al.,* 2012; Pyhältö, *et al.,* in press), existing change models tend to both underplay and misconstrue the role of teacher agency in educational innovation (Leander & Osborne, 2008), and it is often utilised as a slogan to support school-based reform. Unlike *teacher* agency, agency *per se* has been extensively theorised, particularly in the sociological literature. Fuchs (2001) has argued that there is a tendency in social theory and research to either focus on an over-socialised, macro view of agency – thus ignoring the local and specific – or to concentrate on overly individualised notions of agency – thus ignoring questions of structure, context and resources. In recent years, a number of sociologists have made systematic attempts to find a middle ground on this position, or indeed to reframe the debate altogether. These include Bourdieu's (1977) notion of 'habitus,' Giddens's (1984) theory of 'structuration,' and Archer's (1995) realist social theory. While such work has done a great deal in refining our understanding of the factors that pertain on social action, it is important to see that this discussion is predominantly located within a sociological problematic where the main ambition is to explain or understand social action (see Hollis, 1994). In the so-called 'structure-agency' debate 'agency' thus tends to appear as an independent variable in the explanation of social actor, rather than as a phenomenon in its own right.

Our interest lies in the phenomenon of agency itself and in how agency is 'achieved' in concrete settings and under particular 'ecological' conditions and circumstances (see Biesta & Tedder, 2006).

Our perspective on agency is therefore not sociological but has its roots in the theory of action, particularly as it has been developed in pragmatist philosophy (John Dewey and George Herbert Mead). Agency is viewed here as the capacity of actors to 'critically shape their responses to problematic situations' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11), as autonomy and causal efficacy (Archer, 2000). Rather than seeing agency as residing in individuals as a property or capacity, the ecological view of agency sees agency as an emergent phenomenon of the ecological conditions through which it is enacted.

> [T]his concept of agency highlights that 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; emphasis added)

Agency, in other words, is not something that people can *have*; it is something that people *do*. It denotes a 'quality' of the *engagement* of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves. Viewing agency in such terms helps us to understand how humans are able to be reflexive and creative, acting counter to societal constraints, but also how individuals are enabled and constrained by their social and material environments.
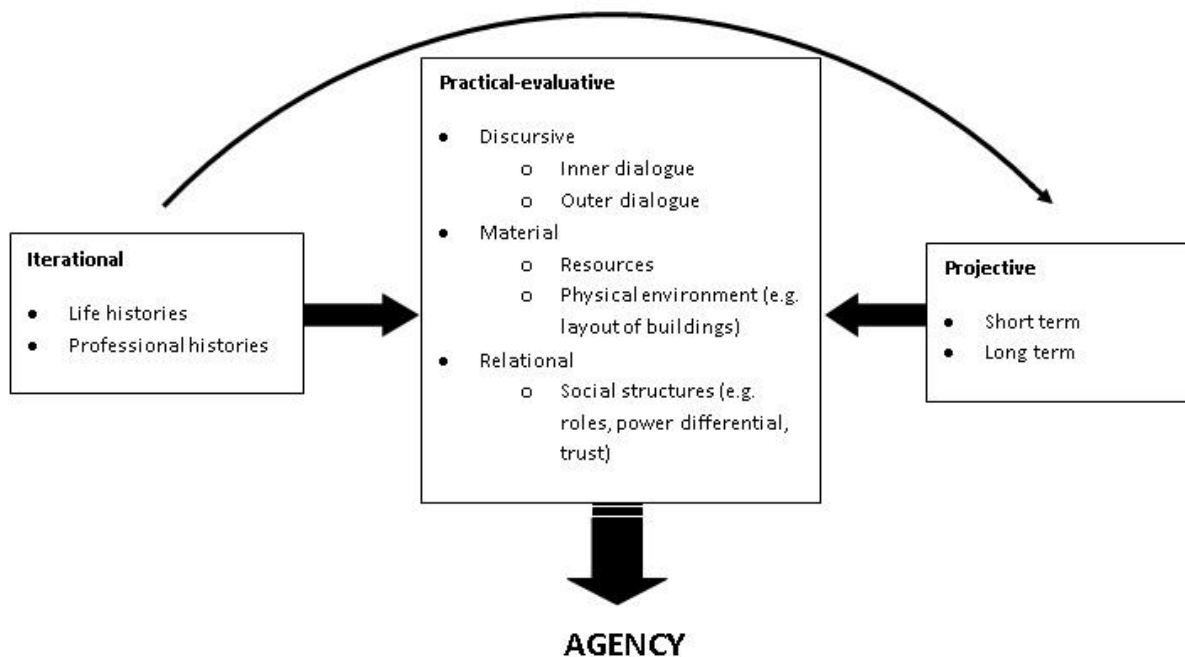
Building on pragmatism, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) have argued for a conception of agency that aims to overcome the one-sidedness of existing theories of agency which, in their view, tend to focus either on routine, or on purpose or on judgement. They make a case for a conception of agency which encompasses the dynamic interplay between these three dimensions and which takes into consideration 'how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action' (ibid., p.963). For this reason they suggest that agency should be understood as a configuration of influences from the *past*, orientations towards the *future* and engagement with the *present*. They refer to these three dimensions as the *iterational*, the *projective* and the *practical-evaluative* dimension respectively. In concrete actions all three dimensions play a role, but the degree to which they contribute varies. This is why Emirbayer and Mische speak of a '*chordal triad* of agency within which all three dimensions resonate as separate but not always harmonious tones' (ibid., p.972; emphasis in original). Thus they suggest that agency should be understood as a 'temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and 'acted out' in the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment)' (ibid., p.963). This, in turn, leads them to define agency as '*the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations*' (ibid., p.970; emph. in original).

Emirbayer's and Mische's ideas are helpful because they first of all show that agency doesn't come from nowhere but builds upon past achievements, understandings and patterns of action. This is expressed in the <u>iterational</u> element of agency which has to do with '*the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time*' (ibid., p.971; emph. in original). Their approach also acknowledges, however, that agency is in some way 'motivated,' i.e., that it is linked to the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past. This is encapsulated in the <u>projective</u> element of agency which encompasses '*the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation*

to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future' (ibid., emph. in original). Although agency is involved with the past and the future, it can only ever be 'acted out' in the present, which is precisely what is expressed in the <u>practical-evaluative</u> dimension, which entails '*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*' (ibid., emph. in original). Emirbayer's and Mische's analysis emphasises the importance of context and structure in that agency is seen as the 'temporally constructed *engagement* with different structural environments' (ibid., p.970; emph. added). The combination of context and time highlights that it is not only important to understand agency in terms of the individual's lifecourse. It is at the very same time important to understand transformations of contexts-for-action over time. According to Emirbayer and Mische, such contexts are primarily to be understood as *social* contexts in that agency is 'always a dialogical process by and through which actors immersed in temporal passage engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action' (ibid., p.974).

Understanding Teacher Agency
This three-dimensional perspective on agency makes it possible to generate rich understandings of how agency is achieved by concrete individuals in concrete situations, and of the different factors that promote or inhibit the achievement of agency. Based on the assumption of agency as a situated achievement, and informed by Emirbayer's and Mische's suggestion that the achievement of agency is the outcome of the interplay of iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions, we have developed the following model to guide data-collection and assist data-analysis. Within each dimension we have identified a number of further aspects that are likely to contribute to the achievement on agency. With regard to the iterational dimension we distinguish between the influence of the more general life histories of teachers and their more specific professional histories (which includes both their own education as a teacher and the accumulated experience of being a teacher). With regard to the projective dimension we distinguish between short term and long(er) term orientations of action. And with regard to the practical-evaluative dimension we make a distinction between discursive, material and relational aspects. Discursive aspects have to do with ways of speaking and thinking, and encompass both the role of inner and outer dialogue. Material aspects have to do with the resources that promote or hinder agency and the wider physical environment in and through which agency is achieved. Relational aspects have to do with the social structures and cultures that contribute to the achievement of agency.

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                        │ Practical-evaluative   │
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                        │ • Discursive           │
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│                     │ │    o  Physical environ │ │                     │
│ • Life histories    │═▶│       ment (e.g.       │◀═│ • Short term        │
│ • Professional      │ │       layout of        │ │ • Long term         │
│   histories         │ │       buildings)       │ │                     │
│                     │ │ • Relational           │ │                     │
└─────────────────────┘ │    o  Social structures│ └─────────────────────┘
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                        │       power differenti │
                        │       al, trust)       │
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                              AGENCY
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The model thus highlights that the achievement of agency is always informed by past experience – and in the particular case of teacher agency this concerns both professional and personal experience. The model also highlights that the achievement of agency is always orientated towards the future in some combination of short[er] term and long[er] term objectives and values. And it emphasises that agency is always enacted in a concrete situation, therefore both being constrained and supported by discursive, material and relational resources available to actors.

The Iterational, Practical-Evaluative and Projective Aspects of Teacher's Work
The above discussion is abstract, and it is necessary to relate it in more concrete terms to the practical worlds of teachers. In addressing these questions, we relate the three dimensions of Emirbayer's and Mische's chordal triad to specific dimensions of teachers and their working lives. We do so with the caveat that this is not an empirical discussion. Analysis formed by research findings will emerge from the findings of our project, and will be subject to discussion in future publications. In this paper we simply seek to frame the iterational, projective and practical-evaluative dimensions of teacher's work.

The iterational dimension of teachers' work
While we would dissent from those voices that frame teacher agency as personal capacity, we would not disagree with the notion that such capacity is important in enabling agency to emerge. Agency, if seen as the capacity to act, will indeed be enriched if people have a broad repertoire of responses, upon which they may draw. In respect of teachers, we would point to a number of iterational aspects which contribute to teacher agency. These include personal capacity (skills and knowledge), beliefs (professional and personal) and values. What these have in common is their rooting in past experiences. Clearly, for the teachers of tomorrow, it is important to attend to the nature of what will become those past experiences in the present, which is where the importance of teacher education lies. Such education (both initial education and continuing professional development) should focus on capacity building – and if the focus is to be on developing agents of change and professional developers of the curriculum, then programmes of professional development should focus on developing this capacity, to interrupt habitual ways of thinking about schooling and to

encourage an innovative and questioning mind set. Arguably, this should include a thorough engagement with educational purposes and with the principles of curriculum development.

Professional education forms only a small part of the formation of teachers' professional experience. Day to day experience in schools – dialogue with colleagues, exposure to school culture, and other professional engagement would seem to be significant too. It might be argued that teachers working in less innovative schools are less likely to experience a wide repertoire of responses to problematic situations than colleagues in schools where innovation is encouraged and supported. In turn, professional experience is perhaps less significant than personal experience in shaping teacher agency. Moreover, such experience largely lies beyond the control of policymakers. However, it is interesting to reflect upon the sorts of experiences that might contribute to the development of the sorts of qualities and capacities required by teachers as they become agents of change. Teachers' own schooling must be significant in the development of the capacity to question and innovate. Professional experience outwith education is another significant and interesting pointer to the sorts of agency achieved by teachers. For instance, recent research (Priestley *et al.*, 2012) suggests that teachers with significant experience of working in other professions might have a wider repertoire for manoeuvre when faced with the challenges and ambiguities of the teacher's day to day work.

The projective dimension of teachers' work
The projective dimension of teacher agency concerns their aspirations in respect of their work – both long term and short term. Such aspirations may be entirely positive, relating to the development and welfare of students (Lasky, 2005), and lead to agency that is protective of students' interests. Such agency may support policy intentions, or it may run counter to them (Osborn *et al.,* 1997; Ladwig, 2010). In both cases it is driven by sincerely held, often long term aspirations rooted strongly in teachers' values and beliefs. Or aspirations may be more narrowly instrumental, for example maintaining a 'normal desirable state' in the classroom (Brown & McIntyre, 1992) or 'playing the game' (Gleeson & Gunter, 2001). This game can take the form of fabrication of the school's image – careful impression management and discourses of excellence (Keddie *et al.*, 2011) and the concealing of 'dirty laundry' (Cowie *et al.,* 2007), as well as more serious corruption and cheating (Ball, 2003; Sahlberg, 2010). The forms of agency evident in these latter cases are clearly quite different to those in the former example, and motivated by quite different aspirations.

Whatever the form these aspirations take, and whatever the motivation for them, we suggest that they are invariably largely rooted in teachers' prior experiences. Thus we must not under-estimate the importance of strongly held beliefs about subject identity, for example, or teachers' motivations to do their best for their students, as these are important in shaping the form aspirations will take. Teachers' prior professional experiences will help form such experiences. Thus, for example, a previously experience of a negative school inspection may make teachers risk averse in their work, and hence agency is circumscribed. Many writers have pointed to the ways in which teacher agency is eroded by heavy-duty accountability mechanisms and the culture of performativity that they encourage (e.g. Smyth & Shacklock, 1998; Helsby, 1999, Sahlberg, 2011), and it is our view that the type of teacher agency emerging in schools today has been significantly shaped by the past two decades of managerialism in education (see Priestley, Robinson & Biesta, in press, for further details).

The practical-evaluative dimension of teachers' work
The above discussion leads naturally into the practical-evaluative dimension of teachers' work. This relates to the day to day working environment within which teachers work. Teaching has been characterised as a profession which is rife with ambiguity (e.g. Helsby, 1999), laden with emotional politics (Hargreaves, 1998), context dependent and contestable in terms of its aims. Teachers make

daily decisions that are difficult, involving compromise and at times conflict with their aspirations, feeling coerced by what they might see as arbitrary and unnecessary intrusions into their work. Moreover they do so often on the basis of insufficient time to reflect, and to engage in professional dialogue with colleagues. Thus, the practical-evaluative forms a major influence on agency, powerfully shaping (and often distorting) decision making and action, both offering possibilities for agency (for example by making available resources) and inhibiting it (for example by creating perceptions of unacceptable risk). For the purposes of this paper, we offer the following two themes to illustrate the sorts of factors that act as part of the practical-evaluative dimension of teacher agency. These will be explored empirically in later papers; for now we simply offer them as possible areas for inquiry into teacher agency.

The first concerns conflicting pressures in teachers' work. In Scotland, for example, Reeves (2008) has documented tensions between a new curriculum that opens up possibilities for teacher agency, and quality improvement initiative (based around inspections, self evaluation and attainment) that have been shown to corrode it (Helsby, 1999; see also Priestley, Robinson & Biesta, in press). The second theme relates to relationships in schools. In Scotland, for example, many secondary schools are organised hierarchically, with strong vertical structures, but more limited horizontal relationships. Research (e.g. Coburn & Russell, 2008) suggests that schools which develop effective structures to encourage such relationships cope more effectively with new policy, enabling teachers to engage dialogically with, and make sense of new policy. Coburn and Russell point to two aspects of such relationships: 1] tie strength (engendering trust); and 2] tie span – relationships that extend beyond the school breaking cycles of inward looking practice, and allowing access to external, expert knowledge. The point here is that while teachers may come to a situation equipped with substantial capacity (e.g. skills and knowledge) and strong educational aspirations, innovation may simply prove to be too difficult, or too risky to enact.

Conclusions and Implications

In this paper we have outlined how we define and theorise agency and how this shapes our approach to understanding the factors that are likely to promote or inhibit teacher agency. We have argued that teacher agency should not be understood as an individual capacity – as something that individuals have or don't have – but as something that is achieved in and through concrete contexts for action. We have also argued that the achievement of agency is the outcome of the interplay of iterational, practical-evaluative and projective dimensions and that within these dimensions further potentially relevant aspects can be distinguished. The iterational and projective dimensions highlight how the achievement of agency is influenced both by past experience (in the widest sense of the world, including formal education and training and informal professional and personal experience) and by the aims and ends that inform educational action, both those that are relevant in the particular context and wider personal and professional values, aims and ambitions. Agency is, however, always achieved in concrete and specific situations, and this is what the focus of the practical-evaluative dimension is. This dimension of the achievement of agency highlights on the one hand the practical – that is, what is practically possible and feasible in this concrete situation – and on the other hand the evaluative – that is the way in which the actor evaluates both the 'issues' at hand and the possibilities for action in the concrete situation. The achievement of agency in a particular concrete situation is not only dependent on the actor but also on a number of resources that can be deployed in the situation. We have distinguished between discursive, material and relational resources, in order to highlight the importance of: (1) ways of thinking, understanding and talking about the issues and the situation – and this concerns both 'inner' dialogue (one's own thinking) and 'outer' dialogue (one's conversations with others in the situation); (2) the material aspects of the situation (the built environment, the physical resources, etcetera); and (3) social relationships (both the way in which particular relationships can support the achievement of agency and the way in which such relationships can hinder this achievement).

In all this it remains important to highlight the idea of agency as an achievement rather than as an (individual) capacity. While the capacities and capabilities of individuals are important and might be seen as a necessary condition for the achievement of agency, it is never a sufficient condition, as agency always has to be achieved in concrete situations. This means that the achievement of agency also depends on existing cultures of thinking, working and doing (see also James & Biesta 2007; Biesta 2011), and on wider structural issues. To promote teacher agency is therefore not only a matter of teacher education and professional development in order to increase teachers' capacity and capability, but also requires attention to cultures and structures. Without attention to the latter two levels as well, it is unlikely that the call for teachers to become agents of change will effect a real transformation of educational processes and practices (see also Priestley, Robinson & Biesta, in press).

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