

Understanding Teacher Agency in Practice: An Ecological Approach

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Abstract—This paper introduces concepts of teacher agency in the ecological approach which emphasized an interplay between teachers' capacity and their engagement with the professional environment. The ecological approach provides a model of understanding the ecological contexts of teachers' actions, how the agency is shaped and achieved. This is a timely matter as the agency has been conceptualized variedly in literature. Considering the heavy-pressured of the top-down policy in the Indonesian educational system, teachers as agents of change are expected to exercise their agentive role in educational improvement. The ecological approach enables an examination of not only the teachers' capacity but also their thorough ecological dimensions, thus it would better inform educational institutions and teacher educators about ways to support the achievement of teacher agency.

Keywords—Teacher Agency, Ecological approach, Agency achievement

I. INTRODUCTION

The term agency has been extensively discussed and debated for many years due to its multiple interpretations, resulting in a range of theorizations and conceptualizations. The seminal article on agency written by Emirbayer and Mische [1] described the concept of agency as 'slippery', and it has become a source of increasing confusion due to its multiple interpretations. This has implications for research on teacher agency, where researchers are required to have a clear definition of the agency they are employing and which aspects of agency they are exploring [2].

Studying teachers' perceptions of the District Assistance and Intervention Team (DAIT) and how the agency was influenced in an urban fringe pre-kindergarten through grade 8 in California, Ruggles [3] employed the definition of agency as teachers' power, autonomy, or capacity in decision makings by individual teachers to make a real difference, to exercise leadership and to experience professional practice which could impact students' outcomes. In a similar vein, Frost and Durrant [4] and Asikin-Garmarger [5] also highlighted that power, autonomy and capacity are principles to examine the teachers' independent decision on what action to perform in a given situation [6]. Meanwhile, Ross and Gray's study [7] of 218 Canadian elementary schools employed social cognitive theory on the agency where teachers' beliefs and efficacy about personal agency are the foundation of actions [8].

The varied definitions of agency from the aforementioned studies reveal that the agents, either teachers or school principals, exercised their capacity, power, autonomy, and efficacy when triggered by particular emerging situations in

their environment which foreground the significant effect of environment in the achievement of the agency in educational settings [9]. However, those studies seemed to overlook the teachers' capacity to contribute a change and under-emphasized how teachers' professional environment shaped agency; the structures and culture of the immediate society, and the discourses [10]. This paper emphasizes that the influence of the professional environment as the root of the ecological approach to teacher agency is foundational in understanding how individual teachers achieved their agentive role [11] because the agency is about actions that conflate with autonomy, capacity, and social influence [10],[11],[12]. Approaching agency in such a way would better recognize teachers as social actors without separation between the individual and the social [13],[14],[15].

Specifically, this literature review seeks to explore the ecological approach as a nuanced way of understanding teachers' achievement of the agency. An interesting caveat to include is that the inquiry of teacher agency is a normative one as agency achievement per se is not the initial objective, yet it is preceded by aims of affecting change in educational settings [9],[12]. Before exploring the derivation of the ecological approach offered by Priestly et al. [9], this paper commences with addressing the concept of agency by examining Emirbayer and Mische's triadic nature of agency [1], Bandura's efficacy beliefs [8], and Biesta and Tedder's ecological agency [16]. This paper concludes in a summary of an application of the ecological approach in research conducted in an Indonesian school, and the conclusion the research drew regarding future studies of teacher agency.

II. METHODS

A literature review involves "the selection of available documents, both published and unpublished, containing information, ideas, data and evidence from a particular standpoint to fulfill particular objectives or views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated" [17], and the effective evaluation of these documents concerning the research being proposed [18]. In reviewing works on teacher agency, I adapted approaches to literature reviewing from Grant and Booth [17] and Hart [18] to inform the methodological decision-making for the literature review protocol as visualized in Figure 1 below. I modified the literature review protocol proposed by Hart [18], and included five stages into this literature review: (1) background information and ideas search, (2) formulating specific research questions, (3) detailing search and sources, (4) selecting and critically appraising the quality of the included studies, finally (5) interpreting and presenting findings.

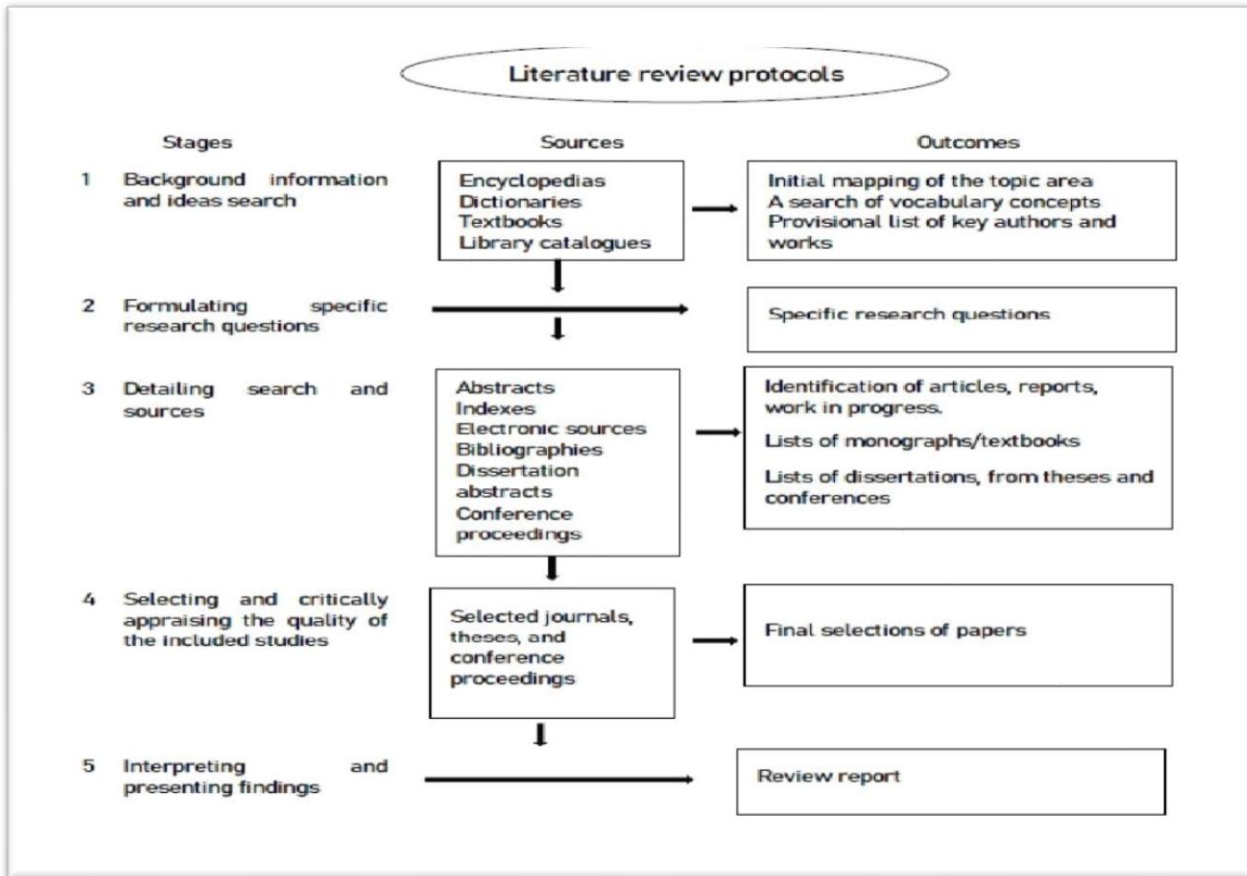


Fig. 1 Literature review protocol

Having framed the background information and ideas search about teacher agency (stage 1), two research questions were formulated (stage 2): (1) what are the theories and frameworks used to research teacher agency and its achievement in literature; and (2) how does the ecological approach differ from other agency frameworks. In detailing search and sources (stage 3), I narrowed down the search in EBSCOhost, ProQuest searches, Google Scholar, and JSTOR by limiting searches within the years when the agency concept was first introduced (the late 1970s) until the present year to collect as much information about the derivation and development of agency concepts and frameworks. The particular searches were undertaken by identifying the theories and approaches employed to research teacher agency and adding the following to the search of “teacher agency”: AND (theory) which yielded 57 papers, “teacher agency”: AND ((framework OR approach OR approaches)) which yielded 31 papers, and “teacher agency”: AND (achievement) which yielded 13 papers. I further refined the search by eliminating duplicates and focusing on the ecological approach which resulted in 16 papers. I used the inclusion and exclusion criteria to select and critically select the studies (stage 4). The selected studies should inform the definition of agency and its approaches, and how teacher agency was achieved as presented in the following sections (stage 5).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Agency and its approach

As stated earlier, research literature shows that the words “capacity, power, autonomy, and efficacy” are predominantly

used as keywords to define agency. Agency was originally theorized as a human capacity or possession of individuals as “self-motivated and self-directing” [19]. Bandura [20] associated agency with perceived efficacy within individuals which was impacted by aspirations, opportunities, and commitment to achieve their goals within their social environment. In his theorization of agency, Bandura described the agency as something that individuals possess based on their ability to engage with information or condition in their environment and engage in actions which shape the environment. He writes:

Perceived efficacy plays a key role in human functioning not only directly, but by its impact on other determinants such as goals and aspirations, outcome expectations, affective proclivities, and perception of impediments or opportunities in the social environment. Efficacy beliefs influence whether people think erratically or strategically; optimistically or pessimistically; what courses of action they choose to pursue; the goals they set for themselves and their commitment to them; how much effort they put forth in given endeavors; the outcomes they expect their efforts to produce; how long they persevere in the face of obstacles; their resilience to adversity; how much stress and depression they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands; and the accomplishments they realize. (Bandura, 2000, p. 75).

This concept of agency confirms the capacity of human beings to affect their social environment and the enabling of agency depends greatly on how people strategically pursue their goals in their environment. The choices of strategy made by individuals are heavily shaped by their efficacy beliefs [21],

their interpretations about the emerging situations in their environment [22], as well as by what means their agency is supported [11].

Some scholars also approached agency from a sociological perspective. In the late nineteenth and twentieth century, sociologists theorized agency as habitual actions [23] and viewed the agency as related to network theory [24]. It is mostly viewed as an individual capacity where individuals execute power and authority to achieve their goals [25]. In these views, the agency is seen as an innate capacity of a person; something that people possess which then can be used to judge an individual as more agentive or less agentive [9][11]. However, recent literature on agency has acknowledged agency as not the only individual capacity to act in their environment, but also something that people achieve through the mediation of sociocultural aspects such as through the demands of school systems and communities, and students' expectations [2][26] which was derived from Emirbayer and Miche's [1] seminal article on the agency.

Emirbayer and Miche [1] conceptualized agency as "temporally embedded in a process of social engagement, informed by the past or habitual, oriented toward the future capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment". In this vein, the individuals' capacity to learn from their past habits orients their future projections and directs their current actions to achieve their aspirations or goals. Emirbayer and Miche's approach emphasizes the critical role of social context and structure in the achievement of agency as the agency is "always a dialogical process by and through which actors immersed in

temporal passage engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action". This conception of agency is foundational to the theorization of agency in which they view the achievement of agency amongst teachers in educational contexts as ecological [9].

Priestley et al. [9] viewed the agency as an ecological process where the relationship between "personal capacities, resources, affordances and constraints of the environment" occurs employing individual acts and it "denotes a quality of engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts...". Further, they argued that agency is also shaped by material aspects within an environment such as the availability of resources, both physical and natural materials. Teacher agency should be seen as a phenomenon of teachers' engagement when they "make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations" [1]. Within a school context, agency amongst teachers in ecological approach is triadic as visualized in Figure 2:

- i. It is informed by the teachers' past habitual personal and professional experiences known as the iteration element;
- ii. It is oriented toward the future as *projective* actions, and;
- iii. It is grounded in the engagement and interpretation of the current practice or the *practical-evaluative* aspects within the teachers' environment, i.e. the cultural, structural, and material contexts of the school

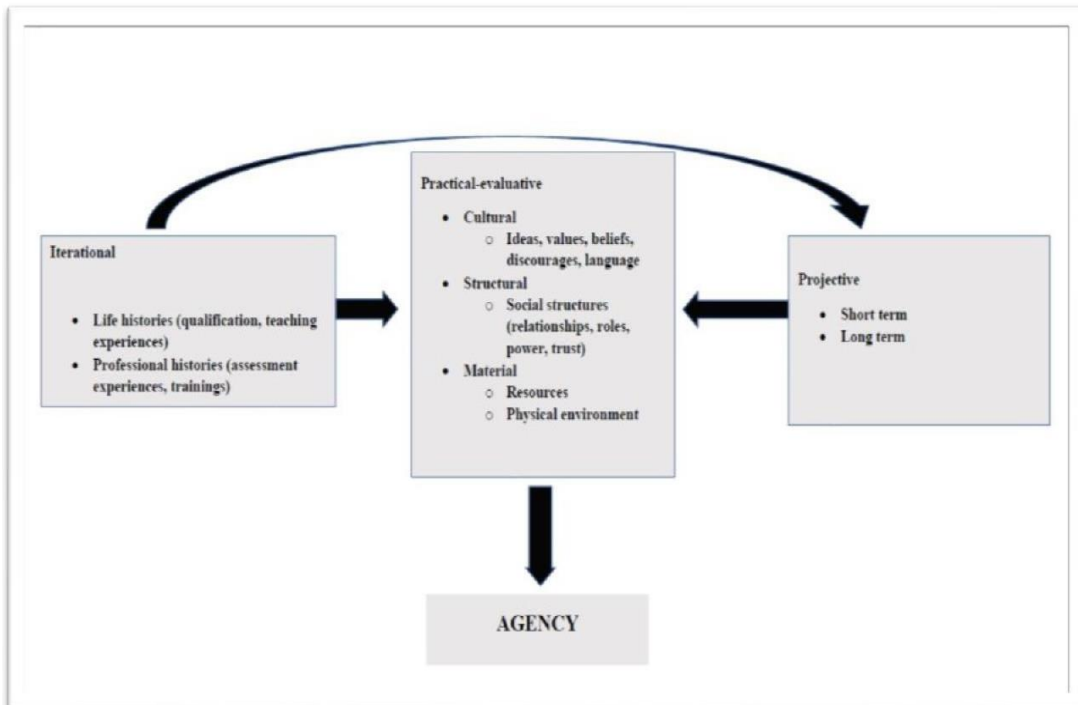


Figure 2. Teacher agency model in ecological approach [9]

Teachers, in this view, can be seen as social actors, with, at any given time, capacities embedded within some temporalities, oriented toward the past, the future, and the current situation. In one emergent situation, they may be

primarily oriented toward one of these – past, present, or future [8]. Teachers as actors may switch between their temporal orientations to a possibility of changing their relationship to the social structure they belong to [1][11]. Within the change

of agentic orientation, social actors may experience a moment of critical reflection and reconstruction of the constraining circumstances before contextualized actions take place. Achievement of agency within an educational setting was enabled, as well as constrained by the three ecological aspects: iteration, projective, and practical-evaluative [12][16] as presented in the following.

B. Achievement of agency

As social actors who “critically shape their responses to problematic situations” [16], teachers’ agency is not seen as an innate capacity within an individual, but rather as something shaped or achieved through engagement in specific (social) contextual conditions. The degree to which teachers can exhibit their agentic capacity depends at least on two aspects within teachers’ ecological environment, firstly, the degree to which the teachers can identify themselves within their school environment, and secondly, the amount of trust and facilitation provided by the school leaders [3]. However, some teachers in Ruggles’ study [3] appeared to be less agentic as they could not articulate their identity formation and were not able to exhibit their agentic capacity which may be affected by mastery experiences – teachers’ experience success or failure; interpretation of experiences [27][28]– how teachers view models of success or failure; facilities for professional development; and external organizations – such as Department of Education.

Additionally, to positively affect agency achievement towards the goals of the school and students, teachers need to position themselves by interpreting their contextual dimensions in the school and identifying the enabling and the constraining factors for their achievement of agency [9][11]. Previously, Gooddard et al. [21] attested that the achievement of the agency may also be associated with teachers’ perceptions about the collective efficacy amongst colleagues as they can affect how teachers initiate and collaborate actions with colleagues to achieve their collective goals. Nevertheless, to achieve agency through this way, the effective leadership of the school is significantly required as only the leadership which executes transformational facilitation will enable the achievement of agency [7].

Concerning school leadership, Ross and Gray [7] emphasized that there were three requirements for school leaders to affect agency achievement. Firstly, school leaders should influence teachers’ interpretations of the expected learning outcomes and assist teachers’ understanding of which of their strategies contribute to the expected outcomes. Secondly, school leaders needed to assist teachers set their goals to improve their students’ outcomes; and third, school leaders need to facilitate teachers with professional development programs to upgrade their knowledge and skills. However, to support agency achievement, professional development requires constructive feedback from teachers on their practice either through professional development programs or routine evaluation [4]. As the foremost driver of agency in educational settings, school leaders are enablers of teacher agency as they are, “enzymes or proteins that increase the production of a gene product in DNA transcription” [29]. Teacher agency will be achievable in the condition that teachers are given the power to act, exercise choice, be active in affecting change, and become confident in their ability to make a difference [4].

Another important lens through which agency can be achieved in educational settings is to account for the beliefs and views of teachers involved in policy interpretation and enactment in schools [30]. Essential to this understanding is the extent to which teachers position themselves politically about changed policy affecting their educational institutions and position themselves to colleagues and students and the wider community [26]. Teachers may exercise their agency in ways that might counter the policy change rather than be affected by the policy. To achieve this, teachers need to employ their beliefs, values and personal attributes to respond strategically to the challenging situations generated by the changed policy [16]. Findings from all studies presented in this particular section are evidence of how the three dimensions of teacher agency in the ecological model [9] existed, informed, and shaped agency amongst teachers. Therefore, to further exemplify how teachers exercised and achieved their agentic roles with challenges, the following section presents an application of the ecological approach in research about teacher agency in an English language school-based assessment (SBA) in an Indonesian primary school through an ecological point of view.

C. Application of the ecological approach

The study was conducted in a former International Standard School (ISS) in a south-eastern province of Indonesia that used an international English curriculum, Cambridge Primary, in the past (2010-2017). Following the abolition of ISS in Indonesia and the exclusion of English in the latest 2013 Primary School National Curriculum (PSNC), the only available national curriculum of English was from the previous 2006 PSNC. However, this curriculum was not suitable for the school context as a former ISS where the Cambridge Primary curriculum had been followed and the student’s English proficiency level was higher than that of students in regular public primary schools. Thus, the English teachers in the school were required to develop a contextually sensitive English curriculum and SBA to address the school’s and the students’ contexts [31]. The responsibility for developing and implementing SBA of English provided a context in which teachers could exercise agency as they were required to respond to the changed national policies.

In this study, teacher agency is viewed from an ecological approach with an interplay between teachers’ capacity to act based on their individual and professional histories, and the cultural, structural, and material conditions of the school where teachers are employed [9]. This concept of agency confirms the capacity of teachers to contribute a change to their professional environment and the achievement of agency depends greatly on how teachers strategically pursue their goals through their environment. The choices of strategy made by teachers in this study were heavily shaped by their efficacy beliefs [21], their interpretations about the emerging situations in their environment [12], and by what means their agency was supported [11]. The study focused the analysis whether the agentic actions of the teachers were innately brought into their professional environment [16] or was achieved through engagement in the environment [12]. The three dimensions of the ecological approach: iteration, projective and practical-evaluative were identified through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, stimulated-verbal interviews, and related documents and artifacts.

The study's findings identified that the present practical-evaluative elements of the English language SBA in the school particularly the unalignment of the available assessment materials of the school [32],[33] and the students [34],[35], [36],[37] and the limitation of supports for the SBA practices in the school provoked the exercises of agency amongst the participant teachers. This study revealed that the changed policies have resulted in a context where teachers projected strategies to solve the challenges they encountered through collaborative work with colleagues. The teachers' iteration background with the Cambridge curriculum and assessment, the professional development, and their past role during the ISS period, had, to some extent, informed the strategies they took to respond to the challenging situations. However, the teachers also admitted that they required more support from school leaders to endorse their agentive roles, so that they could affect more positively to students' outcomes.

The study found that the teachers' agentive roles were manifested in forms of (1) contextualized compliance with the national policies, and (2) collaborative work to design a more contextually sensitive curriculum and assessment of English in the school. The study also revealed that the teachers' cultural element, i.e. their agentive perspectives influenced the development of the SBA in ways the teachers (1) developed a local English curriculum and assessment by combining the previous Cambridge curriculum and assessment with the 2006 PSNC and assessment, (2) accommodated students' proficiency level, characteristics and their past learning experience in the SBA design, and (3) responded to the limitation of the national test specification format.

Even though the study revealed agency conflicted with quality assessment, the study provided significant insights about the practical manifestations of agency when the three ecological dimensions conflated and influenced one another. Through an ecological approach, this study enabled an analysis of the thorough phenomenon and contexts of the teachers' assessment practices and confirmed when the professional engagement and school leaders' facilities were absent, their agentive roles were unlikely to be shaped and achieved, even though the teachers possessed agentive capacities within themselves.

IV. CONCLUSION

Agency in ecological approach is defined as "...quality of engagement of actors with temporal-relational contexts..." [11]. As it is problematic to overlook the quality of individual teachers and underemphasize the conditions of the professional environment the teachers belong to [9], the ecological approach enables a better understanding of how teachers' capacity interplay with their ecological contexts. Therefore, it would support research about how teacher agency can be achieved. The enhancement of teacher agency is "the only sustainable way towards the maintenance of everything good in education and the improvement of that which needs improvement" [12].

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper was developed from a section of the literature review of my doctorate thesis. Therefore, I would like to acknowledge the Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) which funds my study and living in Australia.

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