Mapping teacher agency: an ecological approach to understanding teachers’ work

Mark Priestley, Sarah Robinson and Gert Biesta
School of Education, University of Stirling

Introduction

The last ten years have witnessed the development of a new breed of national curriculum in a range of countries. Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, the New Zealand Curriculum and recent changes to England’s National Curriculum provide telling examples of the emergence of a set of common trends in curriculum prescription (Young 2008; Priestley, in press). Such curricula seek to combine what are claimed to be the best features of top-down and bottom-up approaches to curriculum planning and development, providing both central guidance for schools (thus ensuring the maintenance of national standards) and sufficient flexibility for practitioners to take account of local needs. Intrinsic to these developments is a renewed vision of teachers as developers of curriculum and as agents of change (Fullan, 2003).

The concept of teacher agency thus lies at the centre of these initiatives. There has, however, been little explicit research or theory development in this area (Vongalis-Macrow, 2007; Priestley et al., in press). Existing change models both underplay and misconstrue the role of teacher agency in innovation and, where the term agency is utilised, it is more often than not used as a slogan with little reference to theory. This suggests that a more sophisticated understanding is needed of two aspects of the dynamics of change: firstly, the institutional logics of the ecologies or settings in which change occurs (Young, 1998); and secondly, the ways in which teachers do in fact exercise agency, mediating policy to fit local contexts (Osborn et al., 1997), often in ways that reflect their biographies (Goodson, 2003), their belief systems (Wallace & Kang, 2004) and the contexts within which they work (Helsby, 1999).

This paper discusses an ongoing ethnographic study which explores teacher agency. Taking as its starting point an ecological view of agency, the Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change project is undertaking research in schools to explore teacher agency in the context of a major national curriculum reform, Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence. The study takes place in three schools, two secondary and one primary, divided into three phases over a period of a school year. Methods include observations, interviews and event mapping. Feedback from participating teachers in each phase of the research informs the design of each subsequent phase.

The project has two key aims:

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

In our paper, we will focus on the methodological issues that arise when undertaking a study of teachers’ agency as they enact Curriculum for Excellence. A central problem in this type of research lies in working out how we map/track agency – in other words, how do we get to the underpinning factors that influence and shape the conditions under which agency is achieved, given that many of these are not immediately apparent. The paper will therefore first provide an overview of some of

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the key concepts involved in the theorisation of agency, as this will provide a context for the methodological issues subsequently discussed. Our discussion draws heavily on Archer’s realist social theory (e.g. 2000a) and pragmatist writers such as Emirbayer and Mische (1998). We then outline some of the methods utilised to date in both the generation and analysis of data that have emerged from the first empirical phase of the project, showing how these approaches may be used to ‘get under the surface’ of agency. In the paper, we explore the advantages offered by this approach to event mapping, as well as the challenges encountered by the research team.

Agency

Before undertaking our analysis, we provide an overview of some of the existing theory relating to agency. While agency per se has been extensively theorised, Fuchs (2001) suggests that there has been a tendency in social 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. In recent years, systematic attempts have been made 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. A limitation of this kind of work is that it is located in a sociological problematic where the main ambition is to explain social action, either through what Hollis (1994) helpfully identifies as individualistic or holistic strategies. In the so-called ‘structure-agency’ debate ‘agency’ thus tends to appear as an independent variable/factor, while our interest is in the phenomenon of agency itself and how it is achieved in particular settings and under particular ‘ecological’ circumstances (Biesta & Tedder 2006).

Agency has been described as the capacity of actors to ‘critically shape their responses to problematic situations’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11), or the ‘capacity for autonomous action … [independent] of the determining constraints of social structure’ (Calhoun, cited in Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 5). According to Archer (2000a), agency has been seen as autonomy and causal efficacy, which she has characterised as an ‘undersocialised view of man [sic]’ (Archer 1998, p. 11), where people operate relatively unimpeded by social constraints, and society is epiphenomenal to the individual or group. An alternative view of agency is grounded in the influence of society over the individual, seeking to supplant agency with structure. For example, according to Popkewitz, ‘many of the wants, values and priorities of decision making are determined by the structural and historical conditions of our institutions’ (cited by Paechter 1995, p. 47). Archer has criticised what she sees as an oversocialised view of someone who is ‘shaped and moulded by his social context’ (Archer, 2000b, p. 11), an individual who is little more than an epiphenomenon of society.

In response to this sort of debate, Archer (1988, 1995, 2000a) posits a centrist notion of agency, which seeks to reframe the structure/agency dichotomy. She also provides a methodology for analysis – analytical dualism – which she claims provides a solution to a major criticism of earlier centrist approaches (notably structuration theory). Archer suggests that structuration theory provides no easily discernible distinction between conditions and actions. For example, she states that the duality of structure and agency in structuration theory ‘effectively precludes a specification of when there will be more voluntarism and more determinism’ (Archer, 1988, p. 86). It assumes that all actors enjoy an equal measure of transformative freedom. In contradistinction to this, Archer believes that social acts are not equally fettered by the system, and, in turn, that they do not each have the same degree of effect on the cultural and structural systems. Although she cautions that it is not always possible to specify the causal mechanisms that lead to variations in agency, particularly in complex social organisations such as schools, she suggests that analytical dualism allows us to at least attempt such analysis, allowing judgements, for example, to be made about the relative
causative weight of social and individual factors on human action. We will demonstrate how analytical dualism has influenced our interpretation of data in our later section on data analysis.

Taking inspiration from pragmatism and focusing on agency on a phenomenon rather than an explanatory device, Biesta and Tedder (2007) have outlined an ecological view of agency in which it is suggested that even if actors have some capacities, whether they can achieve agency depends on the interaction of the capacities and the ecological conditions of their actions. Rather than agency residing in individuals as a property or capacity, it is regarded 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 ... the achievement of agency will always result in 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)

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. Thus, human agents are reflexive and creative and can act counter to societal constraints as well as with societal possibilities. As reflexive people, agents are influenced by, but not determined by society (Archer, 2000a). Through inner dialogue (Archer, 2000a) and ‘manoeuvre amongst repertoires’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2006: 11) they may act to change their relationships to society and the world in general, contributing to a continually emergent process of societal reproduction and transformation. In a sense, this renders the question ‘What is agency?’ sterile, replacing it with questions of ‘How is agency possible?’ and ‘How is agency achieved?’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2007).

Such a line of thought is evident in the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 963) who add a temporal dimension to understanding agency, seeing it as:

  a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and towards the present (as a capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment).

Utilising this triad of the iterative (past), projective (future imaginings) and the practical-evaluative (present) elements makes it possible to characterise the particular ‘tone’ of people’s engagement with events in their lives. On an empirical level, the conception of agency espoused by Emirbayer and Mische requires not only the ‘composition’ of agency to be explored, but simultaneously ‘it requires a characterisation of the different temporal-relational contexts within which individuals act’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137). This way of understanding agency provides space for the agentic orientations of people to differ in different contexts and times.

In this formulation, agency is something that can potentially develop over time through a continual process of engagement and emergence. According to Archer (2000a), the capacity for agency emerges as individuals interact with the social (which contains both cultural and structural forms and other people), practical and natural worlds. Thus people’s potential for agency changes in both positive and negative ways as they accumulate experience and as their material and social conditions evolve. In line with the insights provided by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), such development is an ongoing process and has its roots in practical-evaluative activity. In Archer’s view,
‘our sense of self is prior and primitive to our sociality’ (Archer 2000b, p. 13), but the emerging sense of self is heavily influenced by social interaction and by other experiences.

We are utilising the insights provided by this literature on agency to inform the generation and analysis of data within the Teacher Agency and Curriculum Change project. In particular, the following key ideas are informing our work:

1. Agency can be understood in an ecological way, i.e. strongly connected to the contextual conditions within which it is achieved and not as merely a capacity or possession of the individual. Agency is achieved in particular situations and through particular actor-environment transactions.
2. Agency can be understood temporally as well as spatially; thus analysis of agency should include insights into the past experiences and the projective aspirations and views of agents, as well as the possibilities of the present.
3. Analytical dualism provides a methodology whereby the various components of each setting can be disentangled for the purpose of analysis. For example, one might investigate the causative influence of the capacity of individuals on a particular instance of agency, as well as the influence of contextual or ecological factors (including social structure, cultural forms and the material environment).

Overview of our research design

Our research is being undertaken within a single education authority in Scotland in one primary school and two secondary schools (two experienced teachers in each setting). This focus on experienced teachers, who are already actively engaged with the new curriculum and who might be expected to exercise considerable agency in their day to day work, is providing insights into the factors that facilitate or inhibit such agency. Case studies highlight the biographies of teachers, the nature of the culture in each setting, social relationships which impact on the decision making of each teacher and the incidence of significant events. The construction of these case studies allows us to infer how the ecology of each setting (existing cultural forms, social structures and personal capacity) impacts on the subsequent teacher practices. The research extends to consideration of how connections with key personnel and policies within each school and the relevant sections of the education authority and other agencies impact on the work of each teacher. For example, we are researching the micropolitics of each setting (Blase, 1998), school systems and teacher networks (de Lima, 2004) and the occurrence of significant major events (including inspections and the provision of Continuing Professional Development).

Analysis of socio-cultural interactions and social practices, including an interpretivist approach to the study of participants’ meanings (Corbin & Holt, 2005), provides the methodological point of entry to the research. The study generates data within the settings where actors engage with one another in response to the new curriculum, allowing us to construct detailed case studies for each setting, mapping the ecology within which the curriculum is to be enacted in each case. The project covers a full school year, undertaken over three distinct phases following an iterative design, where each phase is partially determined by the findings of the previous phase.

Data generation

The project employs a multi-method approach to the generation of data, to maximise the generation of rich case studies.
1. **Observation.** Researchers spend 3 blocks of time (1-2 days on each occasion) within each setting, taking extensive field notes.

2. **Semi-structured interviews.** Individual interviews and group interviews are undertaken in each setting. At the start of the project, each teacher was interviewed to: 1) construct a detailed biography and background for each setting; 2) to focus more directly on the teachers’ understanding of their decision making processes and work practices. Subsequent interviews explore emerging data in respect of the enactment of the curriculum.

3. **Analysis of key texts.** This allows analysis to focus on identifying local curricular policies, underlying philosophies and patterns, and significant events and milestones as they apply to each case study.

4. **Event mapping.** Drawing upon the above sources, the research team is collating data about the incidence of significant instances of agency. These will be used to map outwards from such instances to analyse the factors that impact upon such agency.

The first phase of the project took place in the summer of 2011 over a period of three months. The researcher, in collaboration with the participants, organised an initial period in the field during which participant observation would be carried out and a follow-up period when interviews would be carried out with the teachers individually and in the groups at each school. In the initial period the researcher spent 3-4 days in participant observation in each school. She shadowed each teacher, making notes of the interactions and situations that each teacher encountered. During this period the researcher was able to observe teaching, the interactions between the teacher and students, other staff members and the senior management. Following this first period of field visits, each teacher was asked to keep a record of instances of agency occurring in their professional lives (we will say more about this in due course). During the follow-up field study period, the researcher conducted individual life history interviews with each participant. The researcher then met collectively with the teachers from each school to discuss their records of agency. Each member of the group was asked in turn to describe a recorded event. The others were asked to make comments to stimulate a conversation about factors that inhibit or facilitate agency in their work situations. All interviews were recorded.

In terms of generating data, researching agency faces two major methodological challenges. The first of these concerns the difficulties of engaging practitioners with the technical language of agency in ways that do not bowdlerise the concept. The second difficulty is more technical and concerns the challenge of generating data that allow for meaningful analysis of the underlying ecological and biographical dimensions of agency. Getting this right was important in terms of allowing us to make warranted inferences about agency when conducting our analysis. We have sought to address these challenges by working with specific instances of agency (or agential episodes) identified by the participating teachers. Figure one (below) illustrates how this was approached. First, agency was conceptualised with the teachers as being about degrees of control experienced in such episodes. Rather than this being construed as a dichotomy of polar opposites (either in control or not) we encouraged teachers to think about agency along a continuum. Second, we asked them to think about factors that impacted upon their achievement of agency in each specific situation. These invariably included both positive and negative factors – catalysts and inhibitors. Using an evaluation sheet which explicitly identified specific episodes, we asked them to place their agency at an appropriate place on the continuum, and then to consider the degree to which their actions achieved their goals, or whether such goals were modified or were simply not possible. This sort of record then formed the basis, through a form of stimulated recall, for follow-up conversations within a group, when thinking processes (including the nature of inner dialogue [Archer 2000a] accompanying decision-making and action) were explored, and judgments made about the type and extent of agency achieved in each situation.
Data analysis

The first stage of data analysis comprises open coding of all forms of data to identify key themes for each case. Detailed case studies constructed for each setting are then subjected to a comparative analysis to generate concepts, themes and meanings inductively from each social setting. Analytical separation, a methodology partially derived from Archer’s (1995) realist social theory of the data provides an explanatory framework for interpreting agential episodes within the case studies. Archer posits an analytical dualism which separates, for the purposes of analysis of social interactions, the relative causative influence on such actions. According to Archer, systemic (social, cultural and material) and individual factors interact to influence social action, and one can attempt analysis of which factors are more or less significant in any given situation. We have also drawn upon the Emirbayer and Mische (1998) temporal triad to further enhance this analysis. We work from the premise that agency is a phenomenon that emerges from particular transactions between the actor and his/her environment. The agential episodes previously discussed are analysed in respect of the trajectories that emanate inwards and outwards from such points, thus allowing comprehensive mapping of the ecologies (including personal biographies) relating to key instances of agency. Figure two overleaf represents this analysis. Thus, we seek in each agential episode to map the prior experiences of individuals that have led to their possession of particular capacities, beliefs and values (the iterational dimension of agency). We examine the short and long term aspirations of the teachers (the projective dimension), linking these to the iterational dimension. We conduct an analysis of the practical/evaluative dimension of agency in each case, showing how teachers are able to bring to bear their iterational capacities on the practical realities of the present, and how their aspirations for action are tempered by such realities. Within the practical/evaluative dimension, we
apply a further analytical separation, mirroring to some extent Archer’s (2000a) separation of the social (cultural and structural), practical and natural domains. Thus we analyse the systemic influences on agency in terms of the following:

- **Discursive.** This broadly corresponds with Archer’s (1988) category ‘cultural’. It relates to knowledge and to ideas, and refers to both inner knowledge (possessed by individuals) and social forms of knowledge (for example, as represented in key policy documents).
- **Relational.** This refers to social structures, particularly the ways in which actors are positioned in relation to other actors, and the emergent properties of such relationships (e.g. power) which may affect the form that agency takes.
- **Material.** This concerns the material resources upon which actors can draw, and the physical environments within which they operate (for example the spatial characteristics of school buildings that make possible certain forms of agency).

*Figure two: dimensions of agency*

It is intended that this analysis proceeds iteratively through the life of the research project: data will be interpreted and re-interpreted in the light of emerging findings, and re-presented to participants in the second and third phase interviews. We anticipate that this process will allow for the development of a more comprehensive understanding of teacher agency than that currently available. The use of the heuristic described above is the key to developing a good understanding of the processes that occur when agency is achieved. We anticipate that this heuristic will allow us to interrogate the self reported data offered by participants and frame this against our own inferences about the settings in which they work and their professional and personal biographies. Such an approach will enable us to get beneath the surface of agency, to theorise the underlying mechanisms that make agency possible.

**Further challenges**

A major challenge for the researcher in understanding the conditions under which agency is achieved has been to understand what happens inside the teacher’s head. The life history interviews help to provide an understanding of the individual’s background and experience. The social structures and cultural forms that impinge on the individual were often part of the conversations...
about the degree of influence and control that teachers articulated in various situations. Observations too are significant in the researcher’s understanding of the work of the teacher in each situation. However the area most difficult to access is the inner dialogue and, according to Archer (2000a), this is a crucial dimension of agency.

To some extent the writing of journals and completion of evaluation sheets allows us to get to some of the inner dialogue. However, such instruments act mainly for the purposes of stimulated recall, and are still subject to the vagaries of faulty memory, and hindsight. Moreover, the effectiveness of such instruments are highly dependent on the extent to which the teachers are engaged with and motivated towards the research project, as well as the available time they have to complete time-consuming paperwork. At busy times, or during periods of stress, even the most motivated participant may de-prioritise such activity. To capture the more spontaneous, spur of the moment thoughts and reflections, we will trial the use of digital voice recorders during the next phase of the project. Each teacher will be given a voice recorder, the purpose of which is to capture some of the inner dialogue that accompanies agency. This raises some interesting ethical and methodological questions. Will teachers feel comfortable recording their thoughts in this manner? Will they be able to find safe spaces in which to do this? Will their reflections make sense in a different space and time when analysed by a researcher? Who owns the recording? Will they be listened to only by the researcher and then used to stimulate discussions later or will they only be used by the participant themselves to stimulate participant-led discussions? Mapping agency is proving challenging not just theoretically, but also in practical terms.

References