

Teacher agency development within the dynamics of a dual learning context

Navigating aspirations and practices

Dissertation Anita Emans

Summary (English)

Educational practices are complex, value-laden, and continuously shaped through interaction. They emerge in the interplay of societal expectations, pedagogical commitments, organisational arrangements, and everyday encounters between teachers, pupils, and colleagues. Teachers do not occupy a neutral position within these practices; rather, they continuously exercise judgement, attribute meaning to their actions, and contribute to the shaping and renewal of educational practice (Biesta, 2022). This dissertation therefore approaches teachers as critically reflective professionals who, together with others, actively co-construct educational practices.

Central to this study is teacher agency, understood as the capacity to purposefully and meaningfully shape one's actions, make professional judgements, and contribute to the development of practice, while professional identity is simultaneously formed and renegotiated (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). From a subject-centred sociocultural perspective, agency is not conceptualised as an individual trait or capacity, but as a situated, relational, and normatively charged process that develops through participation in professional practices and interaction with others (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Edwards, 2020).

Focus of the study

The empirical context of this dissertation consists of dual learning environments, in which participation in a professional master's programme is deliberately intertwined with teachers' everyday workplace practices. These environments connect off-the-job and on-the-job learning and can be understood as constellations of practices that are purposeful, value-laden, and historically situated (Biesta, 2022; Bouw et al., 2019). Through their interweaving, a

dynamic learning context emerges in which acting, learning, and meaning-making are closely intertwined.

Such contexts offer affordances—action possibilities that arise in the interaction between the environment and the teacher. These affordances do not have intrinsic educational value; they become meaningful only when teachers recognise, interpret, and mobilise them in relation to their own aspirations and contextual conditions (Billett, 2001; 2024). In this process, teachers act as connective agents, bringing together insights, values, and experiences from both programme and workplace practices, thereby shaping their professional development.

Although teacher agency is widely recognised as essential for educational quality, professional development, and teacher wellbeing, relatively little is known about how agency develops longitudinally in professional practice, and how teachers themselves experience and interpret this development. This dissertation addresses this gap by tracing teacher agency as it unfolds over time within and across dual learning contexts.

Research questions

The study is guided by two main research questions:

1. Which processes underpin the development of teacher agency across different domains of professional practice?
2. How does teacher agency develop over time, and how do teachers themselves understand the contribution of their participation in a dual learning context to this development?

These questions are explored through four sub-questions:

- Which processes through which agency is enacted can be identified in the literature on teachers' professional functioning?
- How does agency development manifest for one teacher within intertwined professional practices in the context of a master's programme?
- In what ways does agency shape how teachers navigate tensions and realise professional aspirations in their practice over time?
- How does engagement in a dual learning context contribute to the development of agency in professional practices?

Research design and analytical framework

This dissertation adopts a longitudinal, embedded case study design. Six experienced teachers from different educational sectors were followed over a period of two years as they participated in a professional master's programme alongside their work in school. Data collection consisted of repeated in-depth interviews with teachers, supplemented by interviews with colleagues, school leaders, and teacher educators, as well as document analysis.

The analytical framework is developed in a theoretical synthesis that integrates insights from multiple strands of literature within a subject-centred sociocultural perspective. This synthesis specifies teacher agency across four interconnected domains of professional practice: meaning-making, professional identity, organisational work, and collaboration. Within these domains, twelve agentic qualities were identified that make agency analytically traceable as a dynamic, relational, and developmental phenomenon. These qualities do not function as fixed categories, but as 'sensitising concepts' guiding the empirical analyses.

Overview of the studies

The dissertation consists of four interconnected studies.

- Study 1 presents the theoretical synthesis and establishes the conceptual framework that underpins the empirical work.
- Study 2 reports a longitudinal single-case study, offering an in-depth narrative analysis of how one teacher's agency develops through intertwined processes within the master's programme and workplace practice.
- Study 3 presents a multiple-case study examining how teacher agency develops in relation to experienced tensions in professional practice, particularly tensions between personal aspirations, collegial dynamics, and organisational routines.
- Study 4 explores how engagement in a dual learning context affords agency development, focusing on how teachers recognise, connect, and mobilise affordances across programme and workplace practices.

Main findings

Across the studies, teacher agency emerges as a gradual, uneven, and non-linear developmental process rather than a linear trajectory. Agency development is closely

connected to how teachers engage with tensions in their work, such as tensions between pedagogical ideals and established routines, or between taking initiative and fostering shared ownership. Rather than merely constraining action, such tensions often function as catalysts for reflection, repositioning, and professional learning (Stetsenko, 2019).

Agency is most visibly developed within relationally strong contexts, such as sub-teams characterised by trust, dialogue, and shared responsibility. Individual insights and initiatives gain significance when they are recognised and taken up collectively, while broader organisational conditions, such as leadership, time, and institutional routines, shape the extent to which agency can be sustained and expanded. School-wide uptake of individual initiatives proved fragile and often constrained by hierarchical structures and established routines.

Engagement in a dual learning context contributes to agency development when teachers are able to meaningfully connect programme-related activities—such as assignments, literature, and dialogue—to their own practice-based questions and aspirations. The findings show that dual learning contexts do not automatically foster agency. Their educational potential depends on how teachers actively engage with available affordances and on whether organisational and relational conditions allow for reflection, experimentation, and collective learning over time.

Conclusion

This dissertation conceptualises teacher agency as a situated, relational, and normatively charged process of development that unfolds through teachers' participation in professional practices. Agency develops where teachers connect personal aspirations and experienced tensions with conceptual resources, collaborative relationships, and organisational conditions across both programme and workplace contexts.

By foregrounding teachers' perspectives and tracing agency development longitudinally, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of professional learning as a collective, meaning-oriented, and identity-related endeavour. It highlights the importance of designing dual learning environments that create space for reflection, identity development, collaboration, and shared responsibility, and that recognise teachers as active co-constructors of educational practice.