

Researching teacher agency from Vygotsky's developmental perspective

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Outline

I. Teacher Agency: A Brief Overview

II. Vygotsky's Developmental Approach

III. An illustration from my PhD Project

IV. Conclusions

Teacher Agency: A Brief Overview

1. What is teacher agency?
2. What have we known about teacher agency [its characteristics]?
3. Why should we examine agency in its historical development?



What is teacher agency?

- “Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act.” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112)
- “To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one’s actions.” (Bandura, 2001, p. 2)
- “something that is *achieved*, rather than possessed, through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their contexts-for-action” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 132)
- “a capacity to work with other practitioners and draw on resources that may be distributed across systems to support one’s actions” (Edwards, 2005)
- “the subject’s attempt to exert influence in order to shape his or her life trajectory in the long term within the extended temporal horizon” (Eteläpelto et al, 2013, p. 58)

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- The background of the slide is dark grey with several large, semi-transparent circles in shades of grey and brown. One prominent brown circle is located in the upper right quadrant, while several grey circles of varying sizes are scattered across the lower half and left side.
- What is a non-agentic action?
 - How does it differ from an agentic one?

a capacity, an attempt, an intention, achievement?

Again, what is agency or teacher agency?

“It is fair to say that the structure/agency debate is far from settled and indeed may be irresolvable.”

Priestley et al, 2012, p. 195

“In a sense, this renders the question ‘What is agency?’ sterile, supplanting it with questions of ‘How is agency possible?’ and ‘How is agency achieved?’”

(Priestley et al, 2012, p. 196)

What is agency? => Unresolvable, unproductive & unaddressed

The confusion:

- All teacher actions are agentic?
- Inconsistent findings among studies
- Weakening the validity and reliability of research findings, and the value of the research

Characteristics of Teacher Agency

Teacher agency as being:

- **Self-reflexive** (Pantic, 2015, 2017)
- **Proactive (voluntary, intentional, goal-oriented)** (Bandura, 2001; Edwards, 2005)
- **Self-regulated** (Bandura, 2001)
- **Situated** (e.g., Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta et al, 2015)
- **Developmental** process (e.g., Martin & Carter, 2015)

A propositional definition of teacher agency: Teacher agency refers to the extent to which teachers proactively influence their environment in a self-regulated manner to make intentional changes.

Why a developmental approach to teacher agency?

- “Any fundamentally new approach to a scientific problem inevitably leads to new methods of investigation and analysis.”
(Vygotsky, 1978, p. 58)
- Teacher agency is a historical and developmental phenomenon.
- By utilizing a developmental approach , we can reveal the nature of a teacher ‘agentic’ practice

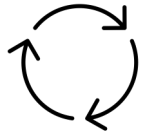
II. Vygotsky's Developmental Approach to Higher Mental Functions



Three principles from a developmental approach from Vygotsky:

1. Process analysis as opposed to object analysis
2. Explanatory not descriptive; analysis that reveals real, causal or dynamic relationship as opposed to enumeration of a process's outer features
3. Developmental analysis that return to the source and reconstruct all points in the development

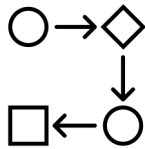
(Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65)



Process



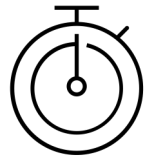
Object



Explanatory



Descriptive



Historical



Current

III. An illustration from my PhD Project

- Purposes: *examine language teacher agency in classroom context*
- Participants: *a group of tertiary English teachers at a Vietnamese university*
- Data collection methods: *interviews, observations, journals and documents*
- An illustration of teacher practice from my doctoral project:

Teachers' observable behaviors: Teachers call their students by names.

Developmental question: Can you tell me why you decided to call your students by names?

Situation 1: Calling students by names

- Teacher 1:

Not really trying that hard...um...but if I remember, I will call them by names....Our name is the most beautiful word that we want to hear, right? So normally, people prefer to be called by name, so I do that. (Interview 2)

- Teacher 2:

In my class, I normally try to remember my students' names. I mean, I didn't use to do it in the past...but later I realized that it is an interesting practice. For example, during a test, I can call their names or when they're doing something, I can call them by their names...I mean, it made the teacher-student relationship closer, [and] more intimate. (Interview 2)



Compared to Teacher 1, Teacher 2 demonstrated her action was performed in a proactive (“normally try to remember”) and self-regulated/reflective manner (i.e., “realized”) and that it is goal-oriented, “made the teacher-student relationship closer”.

IV. Conclusions

- Teacher agency should be examined as a proactive, self-regulated and developmental phenomenon.
- Vygotsky's developmental approach has been found to be useful and effective in revealing the true agentic actions.
- Qualitative researchers are encouraged to consider this methodological approach in data collection and analysis.

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Thank you for
your attention!



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