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# Repositioning teachers as assessors: Compromised aspirations and contested agency

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*The global trend to emphasise assessment for learning brings up the issue of repositioning teachers in assessment. The contemporary curricular policy reforms encourage teachers to take an agentic role in assessment, but multiple dimensions of the environment affect its realisation. Drawing on an ecological approach to teacher agency, this empirical study investigated how Korean secondary English teachers (KSETs) perceive and enact their own teacher agency in assessment within the ecosystem of Korean education. The dataset for the study comprises semi-structured interviews with 15 KSETs. The interview questions involved the main themes such as personal experiences over the life course regarding assessment and professional practice in assessment. The findings from the thematic analysis indicate that past environment like the excessive emphasis on high-stakes standardised testing still affected teacher perception and teacher agency in the present assessment practices directed by a curricular reform, and the incongruence the teachers experienced between past and present environment significantly influenced the enactment of teacher agency. The findings suggest teachers aspire to enact teacher agency regarding assessment through the critical interpretation of their iterative experiences, present affordances, and projective orientation. Aspirations can be compromised, however, through negotiations with the environmental conditions in assessment practice, and teachers struggle to enact teacher agency leading to ecological transformation. This study concludes with practical implications to enhance teacher agency in assessment, theoretical implications regarding the conceptual expansion of the ecological perspective and suggestions for future research.*

**Keywords:** teacher agency; assessment; ecological approach; aspiration; Korean secondary English teachers

## 1 Introduction

In many countries the goal of assessment is shifting from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning (Davison, 2004; Davison & Leung, 2009; Spencer & Hayward, 2016; van der Nest et al., 2018). This shift highlights the crucial purpose of all assessment for individual learners, formative and summative, and suggests that the evaluation of educational provision is to provide evidence and to contribute to the improvement of learning (Brown & Remesal, 2017; Remesal, 2011;

Spencer & Hayward, 2016). From the perspective of assessment for learning, the learner takes a pivotal role because it is the learner who does the learning, and the assessment helps teachers not only verify the extent of learning but also select what to teach in the next lesson. This new concept of assessment has the potential to increase equal educational opportunities for all learners, since assessment is not any more constructed as classification of learners, but as a mutual pedagogical tool for teachers and learners. (Davison & Leung, 2009; Remesal, 2011). The role of the teacher is central in this change since the teachers are responsible for making the decisions about the forms of assessment and implementing new student-centred and more equity-oriented assessment practices in schools. Their possibilities to do so are, however, also tightly connected to socio-political contexts. The global trend to emphasise the interconnectedness between assessment and learning, therefore, brings up the issue of repositioning teachers in assessment (Ayala et al., 2008). Placing teachers at the centre of assessment means that they are involved in the entire assessment process based on the professional judgment in students' learning and that assessment is carried out in ordinary classrooms rather than relying exclusively on external examinations (Davison & Leung, 2009). Whilst assessment *of* learning easily ends up stratifying students with the assessment results, assessment *for* learning contributes to the increase of equal educational opportunities by supporting every student's learning and encouraging the continuation of learning. Contemporary Korean education policies regarding assessment are in line with this global educational trend. The recent Korean national curriculum issued by the Korean Ministry of Education presents a new orientation to assessment which highlights assessment as process-oriented and strengthens the coherence between curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and student records (Kim & Kim, 2020; Lee, 2019).

However, the deeply entrenched sociocultural demand to stratify students for eligibility to progress to higher levels of learning such as university still exerts enormous influence on the implementation of high-stakes standardised testing (Jang, 2017). The Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation annually administers a national standardised test, the Korean Scholastic Aptitude Test (KSAT) to meet this social expectation in South Korea. Despite the introduction of criterion-referenced assessment in the English subject with the 2018 KSAT (Korean Ministry of Education, 2014), the strong influence of the high-stakes standardised test in the pedagogy and assessment of upper secondary classrooms remains evident (Choi & Choi, 2018). Arguably, the social drives for standardisation and performativity in Korea go against the recent revisions of the Korean national curriculum which promote process-oriented assessment.

The discrepancy between the assessment orientation directed by the new national curriculum and conventional assessment characterised by standardisation and performativity appears to confuse Korean secondary English teachers (KSETs) when implementing actual classroom-based assessment (Kim & Yun, 2015). Moreover, the discrepancy between English textbooks based on curricular requirements and the high-stakes tests, such as KSAT, makes the situation worse (Kim, 2015). Working under these conditions, teachers face a significant dilemma as they seek to agree with the policy orientation of the coherence between curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and student records but can hardly ignore the demands of standardised testing.

Although a number of educational systems promote teacher agency in relation to assessment (Davison & Leung, 2009) and recent research highlights how

teachers continue to face the discourses and expectations of standardisation and performativity (Buchanan, 2015; Cloonan et al., 2019; Tao & Gao, 2017; Liyanage et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015; van der Nest et al., 2018), teacher experiences of assessment within the Korean educational context have received scant attention (Kim & Yun, 2015). Theoretical notions and research findings regarding teacher agency in one context cannot be immediately applied into another context. Moreover, as the research on teacher agency has been dominated by the scholars in western context, this example of teacher agency in Korean context can provide a richer and more comprehensive perspective in understanding teacher agency, which can contribute to the international research conversation on teacher agency. This study also adds to the limited literature on teacher agency in assessment and seeks to suggest the appropriate directions to enhance teacher agency in assessment. Using an ecological approach to teacher agency, this study examines the interrelations between teachers and the environment that inform their professional practice of assessment.

## 2 Theoretical framework

Agency, a concept that has received considerable attention in educational research, can be roughly defined as ‘the capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world’ (Rogers and Wetzel, 2013: PAGE). Whereas initial sociological accounts of agency debated whether individual efforts or social structures crucially inform agency (e.g. Giddens, 1984), agency was later reframed as a dualistic concept recognising that humans form society through their activities and are shaped by it (Archer, 2000). More recent conceptualisations of agency continue to redress this balance, for example, by highlighting the mediational role of human reflexivity as part of the structure-agency dialectic and giving more dignity to an individualistic view of agency (Akram, 2013).

An ecological approach to agency, however, highlights the totality of relationships between individuals and the environment underlining the context-specific, emergent and relational attributes of agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Larsen-Freeman, 2019; van Lier, 2004). From an ecological perspective, individuals and environment are not ontologically independent or separate, rather they are interrelated in complex ways. Agency is shaped through the constant interplay between individuals and the environment as an organism grows in its relations with the environment in an ecosystem (Priestley et al., 2015; van Lier, 2004).

In terms of the professional agency of teachers, a specific occupational group, the ecological perspective recognises agency as achieved between the dynamic interplay of teachers and their environment (Priestley et al., 2015). In this perspective, context does not surround the matter of investigation, but is the heart of the ecosystem (van Lier, 2004). The significance of context is highlighted in research that demonstrates how teacher agency can be achieved at collective levels through collegiality as a crucial relational environment as well as at an individual level (Hökkä et al., 2017; Lieberman, 2009; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). Furthermore, agency can be achieved when an agent chooses whether to act and how to use the resources, or affordances, of the environment (van Lier, 2004). During the process of achieving teacher agency, the multiple dimensions of the environment affect teachers and teachers conversely contribute to shaping the professional

contexts. This study adopts an ecological approach to agency as a lens to investigate how different environments, including habitual assessment culture, curricular reforms, and collegiality, interrelate and inform teachers' professional practices.

This ecological understanding of teacher agency draws on three temporal dimensions from the life-course perspective: past influences, future orientations and present engagement (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Underlining the temporal dimensions of agency, the ecological notion of teacher agency recognises agency as an emergent phenomenon generated through the interplay of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors (Priestley & Drew, 2019; Priestley et al., 2015). Moreover, an ecological perspective also acknowledges the development of teacher agency through professional development and collegial collaborative practices. Teachers' subjective past experiences and future orientations can reform an educational ecosystem through interactions with objective present environment such as collegiality, policy expectations and material resources, which can strengthen and reform teacher agency (Namgung et al., 2020; Molla & Nolan, 2020; Stetsenko, 2019).

However, the domain of assessment has received little attention in research on teacher agency despite its crucial aspect in teachers' professional practice. One study in this area, however, highlights that although assessment policy reforms might be in line with the global trend of recognising the importance of teacher agency in classroom practice, teachers can be discouraged from implementing the curricular and assessment reforms because of the conflict with traditional pedagogy and assessment mediated by deeply entrenched test-oriented cultures (Liyanage et al., 2015). This finding demonstrates that the implementation of assessment initiatives encouraging teacher agency does not guarantee its achievement as complex individual and sociocultural factors are involved. A study from Van der Nest et al. (2018), however, suggests that formative assessment activities in classrooms can have a positive impact on the development of teacher agency. If teachers reflect on and take control of the assessment process, their agency can be strengthened despite the diverse constraints of the context.

Research on teacher-based assessment (TBA) also provides insights into teacher agency in relation to assessment supporting the paradigm shift from assessment of learning to assessment for learning. As TBA emphasises teachers' involvement in the whole process of assessment from the beginning to the end (Davison, 2007; Davison & Leung, 2009), it also allows students to be actively involved in the assessment process without ignoring students' crucial position in assessment. Whereas students can conduct self- and/or peer-assessment, teachers can provide immediate and constructive feedback to students through continuous formative assessment embedded in the curriculum (Ayala et al., 2008). Although TBA was intended to complement external high-stakes standardised testing, its introduction has been hampered due to pedagogical and sociocultural constraints (Cheng et al., 2010; Chim, 2015). These studies highlight the need to carefully consider the validity and reliability of different forms of assessment, the perceptions of educational stakeholders regarding the value of different approaches, and whether sufficient resources and professional development are provided for teachers before or during the implementation of TBA.

The relationship between teachers' beliefs or conceptions on assessment and their professional practices in assessment has been highlighted in other previous

studies (Brown & Remesal, 2017; Remesal, 2011; Remesal & Brown, 2014). Remesal (2011), for example, explicated teacher beliefs on assessment using a continuum between pedagogical and societal pole. The study addressed the effect of teachers' beliefs on assessment practice in relation to four dimensions: learning, teaching, accreditation of learning and teachers' accountability. From the ecological perspective, however, teacher beliefs cannot be regarded as something isolated from the environment as teachers themselves are a significant part of the environment from an ecological perspective (Heikkinen, 2020). This study pays substantial attention to the crucial role of teacher aspiration as a directive and oriented teacher belief in assessment practice.

Existing research suggests that a holistic approach is needed to address the diverse and complex dimensions of assessment regarding teacher agency. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate the complex and dynamic interplay between teachers and their environment in assessment practices by employing an ecological perspective. This perspective recognises the totality of relationships between individuals and the environment underlining the context-specific, emergent and relational attributes of agency (Larsen-Freeman, 2019; Priestley et al., 2015; van Lier, 2004).

### 3 Research questions

This empirical study explores how KSETs perceive and enact their own teacher agency in assessment within the ecosystem of Korean education. The particular research questions are:

- 1) In what ways do KSETs perceive the effect of the environment on their teacher agency in assessment?
- 2) In what ways do KSETs interact with their environment to enact their teacher agency in assessment?

### 4 Methodology

The current study adopted an interpretive qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2007) to address KSETs' lived experiences and perceptions of assessment. The first author, an experienced KSET, collected the qualitative data by interviewing 15 KSETs, purposively selected from lower (n=8) and upper secondary schools (n=7) in the Chungnam Province, South Korea. The eight male and seven female participants had a wide range of careers from 1 to 30 years. All of the participants worked in public secondary schools, with fourteen of the participants having worked in different schools as Korean public school teachers are obliged to rotate their working place within a certain period of years (i.e. generally 5 years at maximum) (Choi, 1996). The first author works in the same municipality and the participants were invited through local teacher networks (Tracy, 2012). This intense sharing, trust and mutuality between a researcher and those being researched can contribute to enhancing the quality of the interpretive or qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). More details on the participating teachers are provided in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Information on participants.

Teacher	Sex	Level of Present School	Career trajectory(yrs)	Years of teaching (yrs)	Tenure
1	F	Lower	Lower: 6 Upper: 7	13	Permanent
2	F	Lower	Lower: 2.5 Upper: 0.5	3	Contract
3	M	Lower	Lower: 5	5	Permanent
4	M	Lower	Lower: 4 Upper: 7	11	Permanent
5	F	Lower	Lower: 30	30	Permanent
6	F	Lower	Lower: 30	30	Permanent
7	M	Lower	Lower: 4.5 Upper: 5	9.5	Contract
8	F	Lower	Lower: 6	6	Permanent
9	M	Upper	Upper: 13	13	Permanent
10	M	Upper	Upper: 10	10	Permanent
11	M	Upper	Upper: 1	1	Permanent
12	F	Upper	Upper: 22.5	22.5	Permanent
13	M	Upper	Lower: 1 Upper: 6	7	Permanent
14	M	Upper	Upper: 30	30	Permanent
15	F	Upper	Upper: 3	3	Permanent

#### 4.1 Research design and data collection

Exploring how KSETs perceive and enact their teacher agency in assessment by means of the environment requires that the voices of participants are part of the study (Creswell, 2007). The semi-structured interviews were designed to provide space for the participants to share their experiences regarding the professional practice of assessment without imposing a structure on the narrative and allowing the participants to expand on their experiences within a shared frame (Hollway & Jefferson 2000). The questions were open-ended and encompassed a wide spectrum of questions: personal experiences over the life course (how they decided to become an English teacher, what types of English teacher they want to be and why), professional practice in assessment (how they undertake assessment in the curriculum, what types of environments afford or constrain the enactment of teacher agency in assessment in their professional practice) as well as other issues such as their English curriculum design and practice.

The interviews were conducted between July and August 2018. Participants were informed about the methods, purpose of the study and ethical commitments prior to the interviews, and an informed consent form was signed. The interviews were conducted in Korean to enable the maximum participation for interviewees, transcribed and translated into English by the first author. The second and third authors have been involved in the design of the study, as well as the analytical process and interpretation of the findings. The pseudonymised dataset was securely stored on a computer and a password-protected external hard-drive.

## 4.2 Data analysis

The interviews approximately lasted between 60 and 100 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Being a useful method for a qualitative research for identifying, analysing and reporting experiences, meanings and reality of participants within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), an iterative form of thematic analysis elicited the critical points in the data regarding the interplay between KSETs and their environment in undertaking assessment (Tracy, 2012). Through multiple re-readings of the transcripts in relation to KSETs' assessment, initial descriptive codes were generated, and the codes were collated into potential themes based on the recurrent identified patterns of the codes. After checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, the authors defined and named the key themes for this study (incongruence between environments, aspiration as the quintessence of agency, aspiration compromised, and emergence of transformative agency). An example of how the data were analysed is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Steps of data analysis.

Steps	Actions taken	Examples
1 <sup>st</sup>	Coding the raw data with descriptive codes	Collegial support in designing and implementing assessment Daily and informal communication between English colleagues
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Grouping codes and naming potential themes by identifying patterns	Developing aspiration through collegiality in present environment
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Identifying illustrative extracts	I have tremendous support [from my colleagues]. In terms of an English colleague, I receive so much help. When designing my class and undergoing trials and errors, I have abundant help from him. ... it is helpful to listen to other teachers' experiences and ideas ... I can see a different perspective that I couldn't have seen otherwise. (Teacher 15)
4 <sup>th</sup>	Identifying key themes	'Collegiality in present environment' under 'Aspiration as the quintessence of agency'

## 5 Findings

The analysis identified four important themes typical of the participants' perceptions and experiences of their teacher agency in assessment practices: (1) incongruence between environments, (2) aspiration as the quintessence of agency, (3) aspiration compromised, and (4) emergence of transformative agency. Each of these themes is elaborated on to address the KSETs' experience of agency in assessment. These findings are discussed in relation to literature on teacher agency and assessment in the following section of the paper.



### 5.1 Incongruence between environments

Although the new curriculum ostensibly encouraged KSETs to implement innovative and individualised assessment purporting an agentic position for teachers, almost all participants (14/15) shared that their surrounding environment limited their teacher agency in assessment. A notable factor that constrained teacher agency, particularly at the upper secondary level of education, was the presence of KSAT, the high-stakes national test. As indicated in the following extract, teachers perceived the KSAT as one of the most critical conditions that they cannot ignore in the assessment practice.

#### Excerpt 1

I personally think that the national curriculum and KSAT are a paradox. The national curriculum suggests the final level students should reach through a course. It suggests doing something with practical texts or talking about various topics using the four language skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. But the gap between the curricular suggestions and KSAT assessment criteria is tremendous... the main goal of recent KSAT is a kind of selection, student selection for university entrance... Since KSAT has more influence on the class, the national curriculum tends to be ignored or distorted. (Teacher 9: Male, Upper Sec., 13y teaching exp)

나는 개인적으로 국가수준의 교육과정과 수능, 이 2 가지는 역설이라고 생각하는데. 국가수준의 교육과정은 어떠한 교육과정을 통해서 최종적으로 어떤 수준에 도달해야 한다는 걸 제시해주고 있는데, 거기서 제시해주는 것은 읽기, 쓰기, 말하기, 듣기라는 4 가지 언어기능에 따라서 실용문을 보고 뭘 할 수 있다든지, 다양한 주제에 대해서, 실생활에 관해서 말할 수 있다든지, 들을 수 있다든지, 근데 그 내용하고 실제로 수능에서 평가하는 항목하고는 괴리감 자체가 어마어마하거든... 요즘의 수능은 어떤 선별, 대학입시를 위한 학생 선별에 목적이 크지... 수능이 미치는 수업에 영향이 더 크기 때문에 교육과정이 무시되고 왜곡되는 경향이 있지. (교사 9: 남, 고, 13 년차)

Even though the recent implementation of criterion-referenced assessment reduced the stake of KSAT, the participants still perceived it as dominating assessment practices especially in upper secondary schools. This finding implies that teachers' past assessment practices that involved narrow preparation for KSAT continued to inform their present assessment practices despite the gradual change of the environment. In other words, teachers' past environment regarding KSAT had a steady and strong impact on their perception in assessment practices and constrained teacher agency whilst the supportive assessment policy change in the present environment had a weaker impact on teacher agency.

The incongruence between the curriculum-ideal and the KSAT-real was further exacerbated by the use of standardised materials that maintain adherence to the standardised test. The participants teaching senior students in upper secondary schools, although not in vocational schools (2/2), adopted teaching materials issued by the Korea Educational Broadcasting System as they are included in the coverage of the KSAT and provide an equivalent level of difficulty to the test. As the participants put it, even though regular textbooks were based on the national curriculum, they were not in the coverage of KSAT and much easier than it, so they were easily marginalised in the assessment practice. The pedagogical culture foregrounding the teaching materials related with KSAT was identified in the following extract.

**Excerpt 2**

As English is taught according to KSAT English, I thought this is not the English class. KSAT questions in the listening part are stereotypical so we teach to the test types. In other words, I teach with those teaching materials, which include stereotypical questions. Reading comprehension is also taught with stereotypical questions. Students should read various materials but the KSAT questions tend to restrict the English class. (Teacher 14: Male, Upper Sec., 30y teaching exp)

영어 수업을 수능영어에 맞춰서 하다 보니까 이게 참 이게 아닌데 영어수업이. 그런 생각이 들었어요. 듣기 말하기 같은 경우도 수능 문제 자체가 유형이 정형화되어 있잖아요. 그렇게 맞게 하는 거예요. 쉽게 말해서 그런 문제집을 가지고 하고, 정형화된 문제집을 가지고 하고, 읽기도 정형화된 문제로 하고, 읽기도 다양한 것을 읽어야 하는데 그러다 보니까 수능의 문제 자체가 영어 수업을 제한한 측면이 있다고 생각합니다. (교사 14: 남, 고, 30 년차)

As described in the extract above, an inevitable outcome of high stakes testing, or 'teaching to the test' narrowed down or even neglected the national curriculum depending on upper secondary schools. The strong impact of KSAT created an environment that could limit teachers' options for contents and methods of the assessment. As Teacher 12 and 15 put it, it is ironic that the national curriculum is carried out in the schools with low-achieving students who do not need a good score of KSAT for university admission whilst it is often ignored in the schools with high-achieving students who need a good score from KSAT. The well-established past of using KSAT-friendly materials and activities seems to exert a much stronger influence in the present than the more recently introduced changes in the national curriculum, even with the introduction of criterion-referenced assessment as part of KSAT.

The incongruence between the environments could be also found in lower secondary schools where KSAT did not have a strong influence. Even though the national English curriculum specified that the main goal of lower secondary English education is to develop students' communicative competence in English (Korean Ministry of Education, 2015), participants indicated that the assessment tended to focus on grammar and reading comprehension tests. The tests were based predominantly on English textbooks. A teacher's agency in assessment was constrained due to the limit of teaching materials as highlighted in the following extract.

**Excerpt 3**

The biggest constraint is the assessment structure. The curriculum for the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade is heavily based on paper tests and they must take the paper tests. So, I cannot help depending on the textbooks... I choose one English textbook and follow it so there is a time limit on the activities I would like to implement. (Teacher 8: Female, Lower Sec., 6y teaching exp)

일단 제일 큰 거는 평가의 구조인데, 이제 모든 교육과정이 중학교 2 학년이나 3 학년의 경우 지필평가에 많이 집중되어 있고 지필평가를 반드시 봐야하기 때문에 어쨌든 교과서 진도에 굉장히 의존하게 되고... 교과서 하나를 선정해서 그 교과서를 따라가는 방식이다 보니까 제가 하고 싶은 활동을 하는 데 시간적으로 내용적으로 많이 제한이 돼요. (교사 8: 여, 중, 6 년차)

The summative paper tests in lower secondary schools played a parallel role with KSAT in upper secondary schools. Likewise, English textbooks in lower secondary schools replaced the KSAT-friendly materials in the upper secondary

counterpart in terms of standardised learning materials. In sum, the new curricular policy in the present environment challenged teachers to trial individualised and diversified assessment, whilst past environment still extant in the present environment, such as the standardised testing and pedagogical culture, forced teachers to follow conventional assessment practices. Participants felt confused with incongruent messages from different environments and became tentative in enacting their teacher agency. How teachers felt and managed this incongruence between environments through teacher aspiration is addressed in the following sections.

## 5.2 *Aspiration as the quintessence of agency*

Despite the incongruent environmental influences that inform teachers' assessment practice, almost all participants (13/15) shared the aspiration to exert their teacher agency in assessment. This aspiration was expressed in various ways. First of all, participants' aspiration was based on iterative experiences of their career and even their entire life, such as their role model teachers from school days and positive or negative experiences of English learning and assessment. By critically interpreting the iterative experiences, teachers developed their aspirations regarding assessment in the present environment through reinforcing their positive experiences and reacting against negative ones, as illustrated here:

### Excerpt 4

[I hope to be] a teacher who relieves students' resistance to English and makes them feel English is accessible and burden-free. ... A teacher who gives them confidence that they can do it... The reason why I aspire to become this kind of teacher is that after I started teaching English at school, I felt that students consider English too difficult, study grammar predominantly and study English for the sake of the entrance exam at the academy, which made me feel pity for them. ... As I experience students' situation year by year, I guess that kind of thought has developed. (Teacher 8: Female, Lower Sec., 6y teaching exp)

영어에 대해서 심리적으로 조금 거부감을 줄여주고 영어가 가까이 있고, 부담이 없는 것이라 하는 느낌을 갖게 해주는 그런 선생님?... 나도 할 수 있겠다는 자신감을 심어주는 그런 선생님이 되고 싶어서... 이런 방향으로 아이들을 가르치고, 이런 선생님이 되어야겠다고 생각한 것은 실제 가르쳐보니까 애들이 영어를 너무 어렵게 느끼고 문법 위주로만 공부하고, 학원에서 입시위주로만 공부하고, 그런 것들이 안타깝고 느껴지고... 교사가 돼서 한 해 한 해 경험하면서, 애들을 겪으면서 그렇게 된 거 같아요. (교사 8: 여, 중, 6년차)

Teacher 8 had been an autonomous, able English learner who really had fun learning English from her early childhood. However, through her career she realised that her students studied English only for assessment. These iterative experiences in her life course led to the aspiration to implement more formative assessments for learning embedded in her curriculum to build up students' confidence and positive emotion toward English rather than depending predominantly on summative assessments.

Secondly, the KSETs' aspiration in assessment was developed through collegiality and professional development available in their present environment. Teachers' aspirations do not form in a vacuum but seem to be incubated in a positive collegial environment. Particularly, early career teachers such as Teacher 15 developed aspiration in assessment as well as pedagogy through interaction with more experienced colleagues as highlighted in the following extract:

**Excerpt 5**

I have tremendous support [from my colleagues]. In terms of an English colleague, I receive so much help. When designing my class and undergoing trials and errors, I have abundant help from him. ... it is helpful to listen to other teachers' experiences and ideas ... I can see a different perspective that I couldn't have seen otherwise. (Teacher 15: Female, Upper Sec., 3y teaching exp)

굉장히 많이 도움을 많이 받고 있는 거 같아요. 가까운 영어선생님 같은 경우에는 정말 많은 도움을 받고 있구요. 수업 하나 하나의 구성을 할 때도 시행착오를 겪을 때도 도움을 많이 받고 있구요... 다른 선생님들의 말씀을 듣고 생각을 듣는 게 도움이 많이 되는 것 같아요... 제가 보지 못했던 관점을 보게 되는 것 같아요... (교사 15: 여, 고, 3년차)

This collegiality played a crucial role in achieving teacher agency in that it helped her find the assessment instruments appropriate in her working context and contributed to her aspiration to enact teacher agency in assessment. Moreover, the professional development with colleagues was perceived to help the development of aspiration in assessment. Teacher 13 shared his experience of working at an innovative school, where he learned a variety of teaching and assessment methods through in-service teacher education funded at school and municipality levels and those experiences helped him develop his own assessment methods. The strong aspiration of an individual teacher was developed through the beneficial interaction with the present environmental affordances such as collegiality and professional development.

Finally, teachers' projective orientation toward ideal assessment was another significant aspect of teachers' aspiration in assessment practice. The participants pointed out the importance of inner beliefs for ideal assessment. Findings from this study suggest that present environmental affordances, such as policy change and collegiality, do not work as effectively without teachers' projective aspiration for agentic action, as described in the following extract:

**Excerpt 6**

When I reflect my inner self rather than external things, it seems that my inner beliefs about the values I'd like to seek help me keep them and nothing external helps that much. I can think of the curriculum or lesson hours as constraints ... but what really makes me do it is my inner beliefs to make my class like this. (Teacher 8: Female, Lower Sec., 6y teaching exp)

외부적인 것 보다는 내부적으로 저의 내면을 성찰해봤을 때, 또는 수업을 설계할 때, 수업 계획을 세울 때 제가 추구하고자 하는 가치에 대한 제 내면의 확신이 그걸 지켜가도록 해주는 것 같고, 외부적으로는 별로 없는 것 같아요. 딱히 방해되는 요소가 있다면 그런 것들을 더 추구할 수 없게 만드는 교육과정이나 부족한 수업 시수 이런 게 있겠지만... 제가 그것을 할 수 있게 하는 것은 이렇게 수업을 만들고 싶다는 저의 내면의 동기 같아요. (교사 8: 여, 중, 6년차)

In the above extract, Teacher 8 projected her inner beliefs regarding ideal assessment practices on the aspired future environment. Even though her projective orientation was not clearly visible in the present environment, she could imagine the future environment based on her valued inner beliefs regarding assessment and reproject the future orientation on present assessment practices. In other words, she believed that the imagined future environment could play a critical role in enacting teacher agency regarding assessment.

### 5.3 Aspiration compromised

Each participant (15/15) perceived that teachers' aspiration could be not achieved without responding to the considerations of the educational environment such as the validity and reliability of assessment. When they implemented assessment based on their aspiration, they often faced the issue of 'whether it is fair or reliable', an issue usually raised by other educational stakeholders such as students and parents. To meet the sociocultural demand on 'fairness', the KSETs had to ensure reliability at the expense of validity by making it accountable and quantifiable. For example, some English skills, such as speaking and writing, required very reliable and accountable instruments to avoid student or parent complaints. Meanwhile, their agency became compromised as validity and reliability of assessment were hardly compatible with the participants' assessment practices but emphasised by the sociocultural environment. As teachers were affected by their past assessment practices in the previous finding, they had to interact with the sociocultural environment of parents and students who were also familiar with past experiences of traditional assessment.

#### Excerpt 7

How can teachers be trusted? ... Though there is no problem with reliability of a test, they will complain once they get low scores. The more reliable assessment we try to make, the farther it is from process-oriented assessment. ... How do we assess students' speaking? So, I removed the validity from the test to reassure students. I couldn't check enough. Your speaking score is this because of this and that. It's subjective. ... Mid-term and final exams are the most important. (Teacher 10: Male, Upper Sec., 10y teaching exp)

교사 신뢰를 어떻게 할 것인가?... 신뢰도에 문제제기가 안 될 수도 있겠지만, 지가 점수 못 받으면 complain 걸겠지. 신뢰도를 높이려는 쪽으로 짜면 짤수록 과정중심평가에는 멀어지게 되어 있어... 말하기 태도를 어떻게 평가해? 그래서 애들한테 안심시켜주려고 타당도를 빼버린 거야. 제대로 점검을 못했어. 영어 말하기를 어떻게 했는데 너는 이것 때문에 이 점수야. 주관적이잖아... 중간고사 기말고사가 제일 중요하지. (교사 10: 남, 고, 10년차)

The issue of fairness also affected the reading comprehension in English assessment. Participants preferred making questions regarding grammar points rather than requiring students' reflexive answers to descriptive questions as grammar is more easily quantified and less controversial. In other words, they valued accuracy over fluency in assessment since it can be measured in a more reliable, less disputable manner. Arguably, the dilemmas and compromises of the KSETs also resulted from the sociocultural environment incubated in a highly competitive examination-driven school system in South Korea.

#### Excerpt 8

In terms of a paper test, if it focuses on accuracy, the assessment criteria can be rigorously presented. Whoever sees it, it is certain whether it is right or wrong, which is easily acceptable to students. However, fluency encompasses a wide range of answers. An expression makes sense in this situation, so does another. ... I guess when it comes to assessment, I would rather value accuracy than fluency since the former can be measured more obviously. (Teacher 2: Female, Lower Sec., 3y teaching exp)

지필고사같은 경우, Accuracy 로 하면, 평가 기준이 정확하게 딱 재단되어 나오잖아요. 누가봐도 이건 맞고 이건 그르다라고 확실하니까 학생들에게도 어떻게 보면 받아들이기 편하구요. “아 난 이래서 틀렸고 이래서 맞았구나”가 쉬운데, Fluency 같은 경우에는 정말

커버할 수 있는 범위가 크잖아요. 아 이렇게 말해도 이 상황에서는 말이 돼. 이렇게 말해도 오케이 돼... 평가할 때, 확실하게 재단할 수 있는 요소가 fluency 쪽에서는 없으니깐 Accuracy 쪽으로 가는게 아닌가 하는 생각이 드네요. (교사 2: 여, 중, 3 년차)

Excessive lesson hours and class size somehow prevented KSETs from implementing their aspired assessment as pointed out in a different context (van der Nest et al., 2018). For instance, although teachers aspired to adopt portfolio as a process-oriented assessment and give individualised feedback on it, they could hardly implement it under the structural constraints of numerous lesson hours and a large number of students. They compromised to reconsider the realistic assessment type to avoid burnout as indicated in the following extract:

#### Excerpt 9

I'm satisfied with assessment contents but dissatisfied with the portfolio. I just check the number of hand-outs for the portfolio. ... But it's realistically difficult to check them immediately. I can't do it immediately for 140 students. ... When students participate in an activity and I try to give feedback to every student, it's really difficult although using peer-evaluation or teacher's feedback. ... The different student levels make it challenging to give feedback and reflect them into teaching, so do time and realistic matters. (Teacher 4: Male, Lower Sec., 11y teaching exp)

평가내용에 대해 만족은 해요. 한 가지 불만족스러운 건 포트폴리오. 그런데 포트폴리오를 프린트 매수로 그냥 체크를 하고 있거든요... 근데 이것 즉각적으로 확인하기가 어렵거든요 현실적으로. 140 명 정도 되는 학생들을 일일이 바로 바로 할 수 없거든요... 애들이 활동할 때 피드백을 다 주려면 물론 동료평가도 할 수 있고 교사가 보고 평가를 할 수 있지만 현실적으로 좀 어렵거든요... 피드백을 주고 학습에 반영하기에는 학생들의 수준차, 그런 걸 어렵게 하는 요인 중의 하나이고, 시간적인 문제, 현실적인 문제도 있고. (교사 4: 남, 중, 11 년차)

The administrative work was another consideration that KSETs took in undertaking assessment. Administration work is assigned to all teachers in Korean secondary schools and they spend an average of six hours a week on it (OECD, 2014). Almost all participants (14/15) addressed that this inevitable workload affected KSETs' teacher agency in assessment as this took up a significant amount of time and considerably deprived them of the time for designing assessment or checking its results although it depended on the level of difficulty of the assigned work. Furthermore, this study identified a collective perception in Korean school culture that doing the administrative work well was an accountable and significant scale for a competent teacher, so KSETs tended to spend more time doing it than devising or checking assessment which is less accountable as indicated in the following extract.

#### Excerpt 10

Anyway, it is important to do visible administrative work, at least I don't make a mistake in assessment or get involved with such a strange behaviour. I'd better spend my energy in what people evaluate and get a good reputation. Do I have to spend my energy to design innovative class or game for students? ... It's challenging and invisible. Nobody recognises me (for doing it). Rather, I unconsciously spend my energy doing such a thing (administrative work). It seems to be more important for teachers to do administrative or computer work than to teach. (Teacher 11: Male, Upper Sec., 1y teaching exp)

어찌 됐건 눈에 보이는 일처리가 중요하죠. 시험 문제 잘못 내지 않고, 애들 이상한 그런 거만 아니면 문제만 안 일으키면, 그러다 보니까 내 에너지를 평가받는 여기에 쏟아서 좋은 평가 받아야지, 수업, 게임 만들고 애들 좋아하게 혁신적으로 하는 데 에너지를 쏟아야 되나?...

힘도 들고, 눈에 보이지도 않고, 내가 그런다고 누가 나한테. 그거보다는 눈에 보이는 그런 거에 저도 모르게. 교사는 수업보다 일 잘 하는 거 컴퓨터 잘 하는 게 더 중요한 거 같아요. (교사 11: 남, 고, 1 년차)

Finally, collegial consensus was a crucial factor that KSETs took into account in assessment. In South Korea, English teachers that are assigned to teach in the same grade at a secondary school should reach collegial consensus regarding what is assessed (Namgung et al., 2020). Under the structure of collegial consensus, KSETs often had to compromise their aspired assessment ways with those of the colleagues in case what a KSET wanted to teach and assess conflicted with what a colleague did.

#### Excerpt 11

I don't do the assessment as I want. When a test question is controversial, even if I think it's right but my colleague disagrees, that's the problem. Teaching with another English teacher in a same grade is sometimes helpful but surely constraining. (Teacher 11: Male, Upper Sec., 1y teaching exp)

제가 원하는 대로 평가를 못 하고 있어서. 왜냐하면 시험문제 시비가 걸려서 싸우는 데 나는 맞는 것 같아도 다른 쌤이 아닌 것 같다고 하면, 그것도 문제죠. 동학년 동교과 쌤들이 한 학년에 들어가는게 도움도 되지만 방해도 되는 것 같아요. (교사 11: 남, 고, 1 년차)

The current study found that most participants (13/15) referred to this issue of collegial consensus in assessment because it tended to even restrict teachers' autonomous selection of teaching materials as well as learning activities, although it might enhance the reliability of assessment. This environment of obligatory reciprocal supervision and control between teachers significantly affected the compromise of an individual teacher's idiosyncratic aspiration regarding assessment and constrained teacher agency.

### 5.4 Emergence of transformative agency

In the participants' responses, more than half (8/15) addressed that they not only adjusted themselves to respond to the environment regarding assessment but also put their assessment aspiration into practice and transformed the assessment ecosystem by means of the environment. This transformative agency was not created in a vacuum but the teachers' aspirations emerged through the interplay of the teachers' continuous action directed by their aspiration and other environmental affordances. Participant responses suggest that an important source of this transformative teacher agency was their beliefs:

#### Excerpt 12

Perseverance. When students do [a performance assessment] and say to me, "Teacher, I don't wanna do it. Is it okay that we don't do it?", I respond patiently to them, "Just do it and something will come out." I need to push them, otherwise they might think, "What is this worth?" But when they finish it, they often say to me, "Something happened." ... The problem is that students don't know such a future. I expected such a future and assigned them the project [a performance assessment]. Perseverance to say to them, "Sorry but keep calm and just do it." is a supporting factor. Moreover, I'm grateful for collegial support. I really feel supported when they encourage me by saying "Try it. It sounds great." (Teacher 2: Female, Lower Sec., 3y teaching exp)

뚝심이요. 애들이 하면서 쌤, 그거 하기 싫어요. 안하면 안되요? 얘기할 때 뚝심있게 일단 해봐 뭐가 나올거야. 애들을 밀어줘야 되니까 제가. 아니면 애들이 이거 해서 뭐가 돼? 라고

생각할텐데, 막상 다 끝나고 나면 뭐가 됐어요. 하는 경우가 많아요... 문제는 애들은 그런 미래를 모르잖아요. 저는 그런 미래를 그리고서 한 건데. 그 때 미안하지만 닥치고 해라. 라고 할 수 있는 욕심이 도와주는 요소이고, 또 주변 쌤들이 지지해주시는 것도 감사하죠. 한번 해봐라 괜찮을 것 같다. 하면서 좋은 의견을 주실 때. 힘이 되죠. (교사 2: 여, 중, 3 년차)

Even though Teacher 2 faced student resistance to accept a new type of assessment because of its laborious process, she managed to implement it since she had a strong belief that it would finally work through the discipline and students would recognise the educational value throughout the inevitable learning process required by the process-oriented assessment. Meanwhile, her personal belief significantly affected the formation of new environment such as the change of students' perception and her teacher agency was achieved.

On the other hand, some participants had an awareness of a variety of environmental affordances which were available and appropriate in their context and utilised them to exercise teacher agency. Based on the contextual understanding of KSETs, the transformative agency emerged from the harmonious combination of the individual teacher's beliefs and the environmental affordances.

### Excerpt 13

I think we should teach appropriately suited to the school where we move. I might have my own ideal class but if the ideal class doesn't suit to the reality of the school, it's inappropriate and unsuccessful. You know it's like "appropriate technology" ... Considering the context of my school, there are many but the most important thing is the student factor: what their level is, how their attitude is, how many student punishments are in a year and how students' attendance record is. Then, the second is the collegial atmosphere. ... The third is school leadership's attitude... Even though they're unsupportive, it doesn't mean I don't teach well but I teach somehow adjusting to the school atmosphere. (Teacher 9: Male, Upper Sec., 13y teaching exp)

학교를 옮길 때마다 그 학교의 적절한 수업을 해야 된다고 생각해. 내가 생각하는 이상적인 수업이 있겠지만 그 이상적인 수업이 그 학교의 현실에 맞지 않는다면 그것은 부적절한 거고 그거는 성공하지 못할 수업이라고 생각해. 마치 우리가 적정기술이라는 게 있잖아... 내가 근무하는 학교의 context 라고 하는 것은 여러 가지가 있겠지만, 가장 중요한 것은 학생요소가 있겠지. 학생들의 수준이 어떠한, 태도면에서 어떠한, 일년의 징계건수가 어떠한, 출결 상황은 어떠한, 그 다음에 두 번째로는 동료들과의 분위기가 있겠지... 세 번째 중요한 건 관리자들과의 마음이짐인 것 같아... 반지원적 환경이라고 할지라도 내가 제대로 안 가르친다는 게 아니고 그 분위기 맞게 어느 정도 조절해서 가르친다는 거지. (교사 9: 남, 고, 13 년차)

Teacher 9 compared the achievement of teacher agency with the concept of 'appropriate technology'. As appropriate technology makes use of the skills and knowledge available in the local community considering its cultural, political and environmental aspects, he contended that teacher agency was also achieved by taking advantage of the environmental affordances on the basis of contextual understanding.

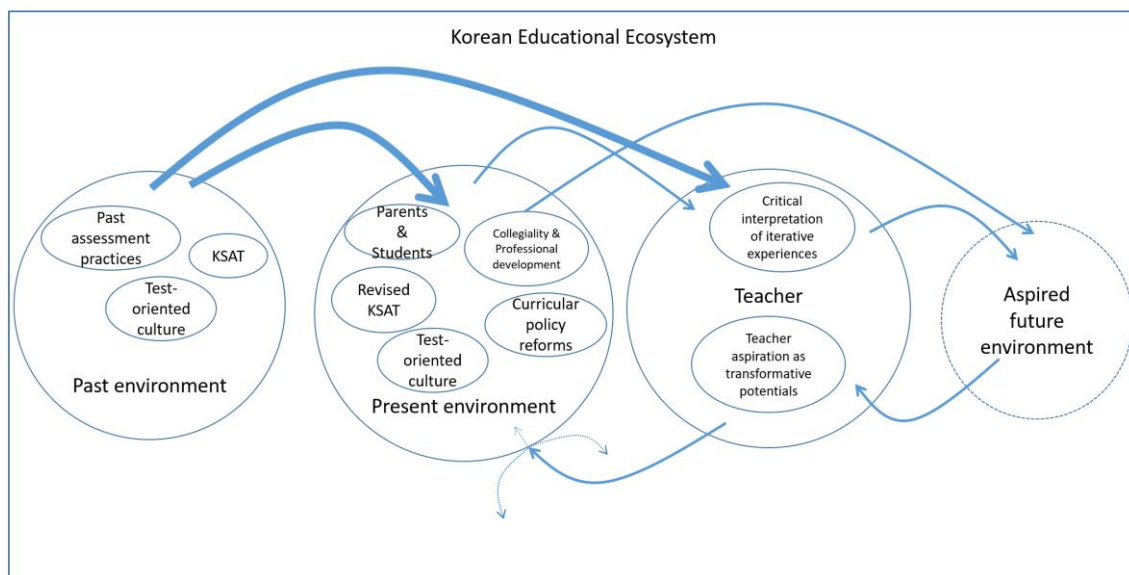
## 6 Discussion

This study investigated the ways in which the KSETs perceived and enacted their agency in the environments that put contradictory demands on them. The findings suggest that the teachers and environment maintained a dynamic interplay within the Korean educational ecosystem. Despite the curricular policy reforms and the revised KSAT in the present environment, past environment such as traditional



assessment practices, test-oriented culture and high-stakes KSAT significantly influenced teacher perceptions and teacher agency in their assessment practices. The incongruent messages teachers perceived were exacerbated by other constraints of the school environment and the pressure of parents and students who valued traditional assessment over innovative assessment. Nevertheless, KSETs developed their aspiration to enact teacher agency in their assessment practices through the critical interpretation of their iterative experiences, present affordances, and projective orientation regarding assessment.

Figure 1 depicts the complex and dynamic interplay between teachers and temporal environments as well as inter-environmental influence within the Korean educational ecosystem found in this study. The arrows are indicative of the strength of influence, the greater the influence, the thicker the arrow. KSETs perceived incongruent influence from past and present environment. However, they developed the aspiration of assessment through critical interpretation of iterative experiences, current collegiality and professional development, and projective orientation of ideal assessment. Teacher agency was enacted out of teacher aspiration, but it was compromised, indicated by the divided arrows in Figure 1, as teachers negotiated with the environmental conditions. However, as the teachers worked to reform the present environment, the transformative agency of teachers develops, although it is weaker in practice than they had aspired. The findings imply that there is a temporal and situational critical point where teachers' aspiration on assessment turns into practice and the whole assessment ecosystem can be transformed. To reach this critical point requires teachers' continuous attempts of teacher agency sustained by their aspiration and fostered by other ecological affordances to support it.



**Figure 1.** The interplay between KSETs and temporal environments within Korean educational ecosystem.

The incongruence between the curricular policy reforms and the actual assessment revealed in this study resulted from a variety of environments within the Korean educational ecosystem. This study demonstrates how features of the present environment, such as high-stakes testing and collegial consensus in assessment, standardised assessment in a neoliberal manner that has been identified as

characteristic of the performative and accountable sociocultural environment prevalent in Korean education (Son, 2010). If assessment is not objectified through standardisation, teachers struggle to satisfy social demands to stratify students for selection and placement. In this sociocultural environment, the new assessment orientation to support all learners' development does not obtain its legitimacy from either inside or outside schools.

The findings from this study similarly suggest that the standardisation of learning materials is derived from the sociocultural demands of the environment for 'fair' assessment (Davison, 2007). The standardisation of materials and testing easily falls into step with the market mode of neoliberalism exacerbating the process of turning schools into commodities, rather than the professional mode of education (Apple, 2004; Biesta, 2004). Standardisation is also vital in the perpetuation and prosperity of private education market, a prevalent and extravagant part in Korean education (Statistics Korea, 2020). These complex sociocultural conditions indicate the need to restructure the complex environment and to be aware of the interplay of individual-environment in Korean education in order to create an ecosystem that supports the development of all learners.

In contrast with the dualistic separation between individuals and environment in the traditional approach to agency (Ahearn, 2001; Archer, 2007; Eteläpelto et al, 2013), an ecological approach foregrounds the complex and dynamic interplay between them in a more integrative way (Priestley et al, 2015). By adopting an ecological lens for the analysis, this study recognised the critical interrelationship between teachers and the environment but also pays attention to the aspiration in assessment that teachers have as a significant entity of the whole educational ecosystem. The inseparability between teachers and environment is supported by the finding of this study that teacher aspiration in assessment has been formed under the influence of the complex environmental conditions in their life trajectory and it can conversely affect the environment in positive as well as negative ways. This finding supported the complexity of teacher beliefs (Remesal, 2011; Ruohotie-Lyhty et al., 2016) but teacher aspiration is differentiated from teacher beliefs in that the former has more oriented and transformative nature than the latter. It also confirmed van Lier's (2004) argument that the educational ecosystem does not go through gradual or linear transformation but is ongoing and emergent through the complex and dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment.

The social perception of the teachers' agentic position in assessment seems to vary considerably across contexts (Davison, 2004). Indeed, this study indicates that teacher-based assessment faced sociocultural resistance in South Korea as in other East Asian societies, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, which have traditionally assessed English language development in high-stakes contexts (Cheng et al., 2010; Mee, 1998). The finding implies that enhancing teacher agency in assessment requires a careful and significant consideration on how to make validity and reliability in assessment compatible and how to reconceptualise the established sociocultural conceptions of 'fairness' (Davison, 2004). This extremely important task should be carried out in collaboration with teachers, assessment specialists and curriculum developers. Furthermore, it is necessary to involve two major stakeholders, students and parents, in the dialogue on assessment orientations and practice (Cheng et al., 2010). It is hoped that a more acceptable and nuanced assessment orientation for enhancing teacher agency in assessment can be developed through democratic deliberation between educational stakeholders.

## 7 Conclusion

This study explored the ecological relationship between KSETs and their environment in terms of teacher agency in assessment. As an ecological approach seeks to take account of the full complexity and interrelatedness between organisms and environment (van Lier, 2004), this study explicated the complex and dynamic interplay between KSETs and the environment regarding teacher agency in assessment. Fostering a new ecosystem should help bring about the practical improvement of teacher agency in assessment (van der Nest et al., 2018). The findings suggest that ecological reformation requires the deliberative discussions between educational stakeholders on multi-dimensional measures, including assessment initiatives to improve structural conditions such as optimising lesson hours and class size, revising the policy of the collegial consensus in assessment, and alleviating excessive teachers' administrative work, and actions to improve the sociocultural environment such as public perception on assessment through continuous education or grassroot movements.

Teachers can experience helplessness or depression due to constraints in assessment but struggle to enact teacher agency by means of the environment. Although the ecological approach to teacher agency has been criticised for the relational agency it implies (Stetsenko, 2019), this study suggests that teachers as part of the educational ecosystem can affect the transformation of the overall educational ecosystem. This can be a significant update for the theorisation of the ecological approach to teacher agency. However, this study still calls for follow-up future research in diverse contexts to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay between teachers and the environment regarding teacher agency in assessment. Moreover, this study foregrounds teacher agency as part of assessment practice with regard to assessment for learning, however, at the same time students' active involvement in their learning and assessment processes is also crucial. This leaves the door open for further research regarding the relationship between teacher agency and learner agency in assessment for learning. Last but not least, it is vital to provide teachers with systematic support and professional development opportunities in order for their educational ideals to flourish and encourage their active participation and agency at work, in turn beneficially contributing to the prosperity of the whole educational ecosystem.

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