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# The change and continuity of teachers' professional agency: a two-year longitudinal study in the case of Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

To transform existing education practices in tackling different challenges and future uncertainties, it is essential to engage teachers as active agents in students' learning, collegial collaboration, school development and societal issues throughout the career. This study investigates the change and continuity of teacher professional agency associated with the individual position and socio-cultural factors in Hong Kong. Data from semi-structured interviews were collected with 14 teachers over a two-year period in 2018 and 2020, and narrative analysis was utilized to examine teacher agency. The changes and continuity were categorized into four types: 1) expanding, 2) strategic, 3) exploring, and 4) withering agencies. The way teachers took and made work-related actions and decisions on their career trajectories could be associated with the changes in individual positions, the organizational culture, and the leadership style in the socio-cultural context. This study contributes to the existing understanding of the temporal development and enactment of professional agency. Despite the strong hierarchical structure embedded in the school managerial practices, a trusting management and collaborative work community that allow channels to receive bottom-up suggestions and spaces to enable individual learning could support positive changes and the continuity of professional agency.

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## Introduction

Teaching requires teachers' active engagement with students and colleagues in the classrooms and work communities within the school organization, along with continuous professional learning on the individual trajectories (e.g., Day, 2013; van der Heijden et al., 2015). Empirical studies from various socio-cultural contexts highlight the significance of teachers' professional agency in relation to implementing pedagogical innovations and reforms (e.g., Imants & Van Der Wal, 2020; Pyhältö et al., 2015), sustaining and achieving teacher professionalism (e.g., Edwards, 2015), and managing education emergencies (e.g., Chaaban et al., 2021). As evidenced in different institutional and organizational settings, developing a sense of teacher professional agency (e.g., Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Soini et al., 2016) and garnering continuous support for its enactment on the career path (e.g., Lau et al., 2022; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Varpanen, 2020) are significant issues in teacher development.

Professional agency is a multifaceted construct describing how individuals make decisions, act on choices, and exercise influence on their work and organization context (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Goller

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& Paloniemi, 2022). Bounded in the social-cultural conditions in classrooms and schools, along with policy demands and societal expectations, teachers' work does not always process smoothly and result in predictable outcomes (Day, 2013). The complexity in the profession requires professional agency, which is developed through teachers' active engagement in continuous learning and collaboration on the trajectory, to responses creatively and appropriately to the contextual needs (e.g., Cong-Lem, 2021). As indicated in previous research, teachers' involvement in learning and education issues can dwindle over time on the trajectory (e.g., Day & Gu, 2010; Huberman, 1993). Also, work circumstances are prone to changes in the development and challenges of the context, which in turn affect how agency is resourced and afforded (e.g., Cong-Lem, 2021; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2022). Hence, professional agency does not necessarily exhibit linear growth with the years of experience, instead, it is a developmental and practice-based phenomenon that may result in differentiated magnification over time in the interplay of the changes in both the personal circumstances and the social-cultural context (Biesta et al., 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

Despite of being characterized as dynamic and temporal in nature, there is a dearth of longitudinal studies capturing the possible evolution or stagnation of teacher agency enactment over time. The present study aims to address this gap related to how teacher agency has changed and continued, considering the temporal dynamics of individual and socio-cultural conditions. This study contributes to the existing teacher development research by investigating the potential personal and contextual factors associated with professional agency that provide meaning to teachers' lives on their career path. The study setting Hong Kong features an education system centring the government in policy and curriculum design, and schools are distributed managerial power in implementing the central initiatives. In addition to practicing conventional teaching and carrying out administrative duties, frontline teachers in the region are expected to implement different top-down changes and educational innovations to maintain competitiveness of the economy.

## Theoretical framework

### *Conceptualizing teacher professional agency*

Teaching is a creative and emotional human-centred activity (Day & Gu, 2010), which artificial technology cannot entirely replace. Teachers' interactions with students in classrooms, colleagues in work communities, and other stakeholders such as parents and school board members are essential in crafting practices and shaping the conditions needed for meaningful education (Biesta et al., 2015; Edwards, 2015). Previous studies have highlighted professional agency in teachers and schools' continuous development, including but not limited to implementing and experimenting novel pedagogical practices (e.g., Leijen et al., 2022; Leite et al., 2022; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2022), realizing education reforms (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009), and responding resourcefully during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic (Chaaban et al., 2021). Rooted in the sociological literature, agency is a multifaceted construct diversely conceptualized in social sciences and disciplines such as psychology and anthropology (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Whether teachers can afford to exercise agency for potential transformations is associated with the workplace resources, readiness of leaders and community to support their engagement, learning, and development (Billett, 2001) in addition to individuals' professional backgrounds and experiences. Emphasizing such an interplay between professional subject and its situated context, which means teachers and their work environment by this study, the subject-centred socio-cultural approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) describes professional agency as work-related actions and decisions related to the three dimensions of 1) influencing at work, in which teacher's voice is heard and considered in the decision-making process; 2) developing work practices, which connotes one's active engagement in the development and transformation of their own as well as shared practices; and 3) negotiating one's identity, which refers to aligning one's career with their professional beliefs and goals (Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). Within this approach, professional agency is understood as a practice-based phenomenon, focusing on intentional work-

oriented actions and decisions made in relation to individual tasks, collective work practices, and organizational development for potential changes and transformation (see also Ukkonen-Mikkola & Varpanen, 2020).

Specifically in school and education settings, teachers' agency is exercised in pedagogical, relational, and socio-cultural aspects (Pappa et al., 2019). This means that pedagogical agency is enacted mainly within classrooms associated with teaching and learning, whereas relational agency comprises collegial relationships and expertise strengthening in the work community, and socio-cultural agency encompasses the wider environment and stakeholders such as parents and authorities beyond the immediate school context. Moreover, depending on the level of power granted to a person holding the position in the structure of the context, the extent and nature of agency enacted by workers could vary. For instance, an investigation on workers in a healthcare setting (Collin et al., 2015), such as physicians, nurses, and administrators, shows that they enact various degrees of 1) transformative, 2) responsive, 3) relational, and 4) resisting agency in their work practices. Transformative agency refers to the problematization and suggestions raised when innovating and transforming practices; while responsive agency constitutes the voices raised in agreement and support, keeping the development process ongoing; whereas relational agency takes the perspectives of different groups in developing practices; and finally resisting agency represents actions driven by scepticism and even response by disregarding to ideas and suggestions. Hence, professional agency's enactment emphasizes the interactions and relationships among different actors bounded to their positions in the work context.

### ***Temporality of professional agency in the interplay of actor and environment***

To analyse the complexity in the flow of time, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) emphasize agency as a temporally embedded social engagement process that is influenced by the past, oriented towards the future, and acted out in the present. Agency is an interplay of the actors' routines, purposes, and judgements in three temporal dimensions: iterative (forming habits), projective (imagining alternative possibilities), and practical – evaluative (contextualizing past habits and future projects in present contingencies). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) refer to such separate yet harmonious temporal dimensions as the chordal triad of agency, which interacts with the reproductive and transformative aspects of social actions. Building up on the temporal chordal triad in the dynamics of the actor with context, the ecological approach conceptualizes agency as an achievement in the temporal and spatial ecology of individual efforts, available resources, and contextual and structural factors (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta et al., 2015). Agency is viewed as an emergent phenomenon in which the actors shape their responses towards the situations engaging their past insights and experiences, future projections in short and long term, and present's practical evaluation of the resources (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Specifically, the actors always act by means of – and not simply in – their situated environment (Biesta et al., 2015). The approach explains why agency is a phenomenon which is achieved in one situation but not in another, since its enactment is a temporally constructed engagement by actor of different structural environments (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 997).

As the actors move along and experience the unfolding contexts on their career trajectories, their relationship with other actors and orientations to the structure can be switched or recomposed over time, and in turn associated with the affordance and enactment of agency in the actor. Previous studies demonstrated teachers' agency is inclined to change and continue over time in the shifting educational events and interventions (e.g., Leijen et al., 2022; Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). For example, the study regarding the reform in the Finnish vocational education setting (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009), in which teachers are required to break through classroom boundaries and collaborate with employees in authentic workplaces, illustrated that when teachers demonstrated their competences and developed more familiar relationships with employees over time, the developed trust and understanding allowed them to exercise their agency further while developing tasks for students and even influenced

workplace practices. Also, in a collaborative inquiry-based training course with the ecological model embedded, Leijen et al. (2022) demonstrated the visible change in the projective dimension in the participants of the training, whereas the change in the international and practical-evaluative dimension were modest and insignificant respectively. Furthermore, in response to the shifting educational situation due to COVID-19 pandemic, the multiple case study on teachers in Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait and Morocco (Chaaban et al., 2021) revealed that the agency enacted varied among different socio-cultural contexts – between private and public sector, and across countries. The studies from different educational and socio-cultural settings illustrated the complexity and contextually bounded nature of teacher agency, and its differentiated manifestation due to the change in teachers' capacities, change in the context, or both.

In this study, professional agency is theoretically framed as a developmental practised-based phenomenon (e.g., Ukkonen-Mikkola & Varpanen, 2020; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020) of the actors' temporally constructed engagement (Biesta et al., 2015; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) bounded in the situated social-cultural context (Billett, 2001; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). While recognizing the dynamic nature and interplay between the individual and the context in the temporal passage, the present study aims to investigate the change and continuity of the affordance of teacher agency for potential transformations is related to the changes in their positions and social-cultural conditions of the context.

### ***The research context – hierarchical work environment in schools***

The study aims to address the research gap on how professional agency has changed and continued in the temporal dynamics of individual resources and contextual affordances, in the case of teachers in Hong Kong during the period 2018 to 2020. The two-year time frame is adopted for exploration purpose, while the research context features a hierarchical work context in the school environment in the case of Hong Kong. Like other developed economies, the service-based region posits nurturing talents on the top agendas to maintain its competitive edge. Hong Kong was a British colony until 1997 and has since become a special administrative region in China. Entrenched from the colonized period, the current centralized decentralization approach in education management still centred the government in policy changes and curriculum design even after a decade large-scale education reform from handover period. Professional teacher unions possess weak, if no, collective influence on central decisions. Although schools are distributed with managerial power for policy implementation, decision-making power is often given to the upper management and principals (Ko et al., 2016), and there is no obligations to include frontline teachers in the process. Hence, the structure is hierarchical within the organization, as with the staff ranked by qualifications and years of experience and power concentrated in the management.

Regarding the working conditions, teachers endure long working hours for teaching and administrative duties, adapting different new technologies in classrooms and implementing top-down initiatives in schools. Moreover, the forces from the global pandemic and the local socio-political events during the research period 2018–2020 had shaped the landscape of teachers' work (Tsang, 2019). The school closure period due to the pandemic challenged teachers and schools with the technological skills and support in delivering teaching and enabling learning online. Furthermore, stricter political control was imposed in the region after the political events from 2019–2020. For instance, courses on national security became a compulsory part in teacher training and employment qualifications.

### **Research questions**

The study attempts to enrich the existing understanding of the dynamics between the actors and the situated context in association with the different personal and contextual changes over time,

which has not been adequately addressed in professional agency research. To investigate the changes and continuity of teachers' professional agency from a temporal perspective, the following research questions are raised in the case of teachers in Hong Kong between 2018 and 2020:

- (1) How have the changes and continuity seen in teachers' professional agency been over two years?
- (2) What kinds of teachers' individual backgrounds and socio-cultural conditions are related to the changes and continuity seen in teachers' professional agency?

## Methodology

### *Participants and data collection*

All the participants were in-service teachers in Hong Kong working in primary and secondary schools and teaching various subjects. They were invited via email from the researchers' personal and professional contacts. In the summer of 2018, 21 teachers agreed to participate in the first-phase interviews. Two years later, in the summer of 2020, they were invited to the second-phase interview via email. In total, 14 teachers agreed to participate in the follow-up study. Seven teachers were not included in the second phase due to job changes, immigration, or being busy. The gender ratio of the 14 teachers is 1:1, which closely reflected that of teachers in Hong Kong (female teachers comprised 56% of all teachers at secondary level) (The World Bank, 2022). Their average age was 35 years and teaching experience ranged from 2 to 17 years. They taught different subjects, such as languages, mathematics, science, business, and visual arts. Pseudonyms were used to ensure privacy in the findings.

This longitudinal study involved two phases of semi-structured interviews held in 2018 and 2020, aiming to explore teachers' experiences and reflections on their "deep, rich, individualized and contextualized" work situation (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 152). In the summer of 2018, interviews were conducted face-to-face at cafés or university lounges in Hong Kong. The average interview duration was approximately 53 minutes, with 44 and 89 minutes being the shortest and longest, respectively. In the summer of 2020, due to the ongoing pandemic situation, the second interview set was conducted via virtual platforms, such as Zoom. Its duration averaged approximately 48 minutes, with 20 and 97 minutes being the shortest and longest, respectively. The locations were as per the participants' choices based on their perceived ease and safety and to freely express their thoughts and feelings towards their work.

The first author conducted the interviews in Cantonese with the participants, informed them about their rights as research participants, and obtained their written consent. The semi-structured interview questions were framed based on three professional agency dimensions: exerting influence at work, developing work practices, and negotiating professional identity (Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). During the 2018 interview, the teachers were asked to describe their professional beliefs and values; interpersonal relationships at the workplace with students, colleagues, and management; professional opportunities and challenges for development; and whether they can influence decision-making processes and implement their career aspirations. If no opportunities were described, the interviewer followed up by enquiring about the barriers preventing them from acting and involving themselves in school-related matters. Finally, the teachers were asked how they would develop their careers in two years. During the 2020 interview, they were first asked to describe any position-related and general work changes after two years. Then, the discussion went further to reflect on the changes in their interpersonal relationships, professional development, and influence. Finally, they were again asked how they would develop their career in the future.



## Data analysis

In this study, we adopted narrative approaches (Riessman, 2008) as our major data analysis method for the teachers' professional life stories and changes. The questionnaire data collected provided us with an alternative source to cross-check the qualitative data's analysis, and the analysis process consisted of several steps to manage the data collected from different timepoints and methods.

In the first step, the first author, who is a native Cantonese speaker and fluent in English, transcribed the interview data verbatim and translated them from Cantonese into English. All participants, people, and organizations were assigned pseudonyms. In essence, the premise of narrativity lies in the innateness and familiarity of storytelling by which people produce meaning and perceive the world (Hänninen, 2004). Interaction and connection with the wider socio-cultural context in the teachers' narrated stories enabled us to capture the meanings they assigned to the experiences in their organization and society. We read the transcribed interviews from the years 2018 and 2020 several times, and our familiarity with the text enabled us to identify changes and continuities in their work situations.

In the second step, we focused on analysing both interviews with each teacher. We first identified the resources and constraints related to agency exercising in the respective organizations. We coded the actions and decisions related to developing their own and community work practices as transformative, responsive, relational, and resisting forms of agency (Collin et al., 2015). Additionally, participants' perceptions and feelings towards their career and teaching profession were illustrated. After delving into the reported profiles, we mapped the changes and continuity of professional agency enactment within individuals' situated contexts in the two-year interval and wrote agency stories for each participant in which teachers' verbatim expressions were retained for authenticity. By constructing stories, we obtained a picture of how teachers' actions and decisions in the past, present, and future were connected and what kinds of critical points and significant situations were associated with professional agency enactment and restrictions.

In the third step, we concentrated on identifying similarities, differences, and patterns of professional agency within and between individual accounts over the two years. By discussing all 14 stories, it became clearer how the teachers' work actions and perceptions changed and continued according to their situations. The participants were initially grouped into increasing, decreasing, and mixed professional agencies. Within the first two groups, they demonstrated similar action patterns and socio-cultural conditions supporting or constraining their professional agency in the two-year interval. Regarding the last group, their stories showed differences in areas related to agency enactment, such as familiarity with the organization, learning attitudes, and interactions with colleagues and management. These points further led to the illustration of two different agency types. Consequently, we identified four agency types: 1) expanding, 2) strategic, 3) exploring, and 4) withering agencies.

Finally, we re-read the interview codes and stories of every participant in the agency type and specifically focused on the parts in which teachers exercised their professional agency, such as their interpretation of individual positions and work situations supporting and constraining enactment. We extracted the respective data to construct summarized narratives for each agency type to demonstrate a similar pattern in their professional agency's changes and continuity. To retain data authenticity in the summaries, we adopted the teachers' expressions verbatim and story excerpts as much as possible while constructing composite narratives. The workflow of the data collection and analysis process is presented in appendix 1.

## Findings

The overall findings are presented in Table 1, which illustrates the description, work practice crafting nature, teacher position and related socio-cultural conditions, and participants with each agency type. Additionally, the narrative composite of each agency type is elaborated on in the next section.





### ***Type 1: expanding agency – the narrative of the right time, place, and people***

The expanding agency narrative depicted a growing influence and involvement in the decisions and development at work. Regarding the individual condition for this agency type, the teacher was promoted to or working towards influential leadership positions in the organizational hierarchy. Two participants were categorized under this agency type and here is the narrative composite of the teachers in 2018 and 2020 respectively:

I was a “grassroot” teacher. I had limited influence and no decision-making power in the organization. Yet, I was always eager to learn, explore and experiment new things in my job.

Now, I am promoted as a chairperson in the subject group or administrative committee. It is a middle-management position with heavier responsibilities. I must communicate with upper management frequently. In turn, I can exert more influence on and understand more about school matters. I co-ordinate work and engage the viewpoints of members with various backgrounds and experiences in my group. I also collaborate with leaders and colleagues from other teams and external parties. At school meetings, I am expected to express my opinion, although they might not always be the final decision. I must work independently and contemplate solutions to the challenges. I keep on learning to execute the responsibilities of my position.

It is noted that the promotion or change of position is accompanied by trust from the upper management and other leaders. Camelia, who shifted to a new school and became a subject chairperson, was aware of her role as a middle-management leader. Her position was critical in bridging upper-level initiatives with the frontline through negotiations and co-ordination with the respective members:

I regard myself as a semi-middle manager . . . I have more contacts with the principal, vice-principals, and other senior teachers on the management level, which enable me see things from a wider perspective. (T04 Camelia)

Other significant features include teachers’ active reflection and learning. Being a leader, the teacher bore the expectations to take transformative actions and develop the work community and organization. Fulfilling such expectations requires active learning and reflection. Mathew mentioned how he was supposed to work independently and make suggestions for tasks:

When meeting management, I asked them how to proceed with the tasks. They would ask me rhetorically how I would approach the tasks . . . In the past, there was someone who might guide me and give me feedback. Now I need to take up more responsibilities and put my hands and feet to handle the tasks. (T13 Mathew)

Another important condition is related to the school culture, in which teachers’ voices were encouraged and reinforced for their positions. Camelia, who shifted to a new position in another school, described how her approachable school management enabled herself and the work community to develop the organization:

With my school management now, everyone feels everything in the organization can be negotiable. I can even express my comments directly to the vice principals and the principal. (T04 Camelia)

To conclude, teachers with expanding agency were promoted and trusted in leadership positions with increasing influence in the organization, growing engagement in work practices, and continuous learning and reflection on their roles. The work community and management supported their agency despite their heavy responsibilities and challenges. They possessed the right position in the right environment to achieve professional agency. They could communicate actively with both the upper management and team members because their voices mattered in the organization – an agency-supportive environment. Through reflections and readiness to learn, they could implement transformative decisions and actions at work, and their identity as middle management was constantly reinforced and negotiated.

## ***Type 2: strategic agency – the narrative of the sophisticated cardplayer***

The next type, strategic agency, teachers were highly aware of their restrictions on management matters within the organizational hierarchy, and five participants were under this category. The teachers were not necessarily in official leadership or management rank due to limited promotion opportunities or simply disinterest. Yet, their experience and familiarity with the colleagues, management, and work culture, are the enablers for teachers to manoeuvre the organization's tasks and expectations, and identify the spaces to enact their professional agency, particularly in the pedagogical aspects. The following is the narrative composite of strategic agency in 2018 and 2020:

My job position was stable, but I was busy with different administrative committee tasks, which obstruct the improvement of my core teaching. Although there seemed to be channels to communicate with upper management, I usually didn't express much because our opinions were not influential in their decisions. I was willing to learn, implement or experiment new ideas when spaces allowed it, or resources were available.

Now, my position is still very stable. Promotion opportunities are limited, or I am simply not interested in them. As always, the school is a hierarchical structure controlled by the principal and management. This implies that organizational decisions are made without consultation due to management's hidden agenda, favouritism, or societal political pressure. I occasionally voice out my thoughts on school matters, though I understand well it might not be considered by management. Also, my desired direction of professional development could be restricted to the duties and responsibilities assigned by the management. However, as I get more familiar with the characteristics of the principal and my seniors, I could be tactful when negotiating my duties with and making suggestions to them. Similarly, as I know my colleagues' temper and working style more, I could communicate with them more sophisticatedly. I would seek spaces to experiment with teaching methods, pursue different knowledge points, or nurture student relationships, which are meaningful for my job.

Being in a stable position through the years enables the teachers to understand more about their professional selves and the related organizational demands. Lisa described what was expected from her and how she perceived her stable role:

I can foresee what I will be doing every year, as there won't be many changes ... I have established my teaching style ... and I know what the work challenges and my weaknesses are. I feel less panic when dealing with certain problems. I understand my strengths and development direction better. (T12 Lisa)

Despite increasing stability in the position and relationships at work, strategic agency teachers were constrained by ostensible democratic managerial culture, as the space for negotiation and expression could be limited in the hierarchy. Queenie mentioned that the management's decision-making process was being increasingly centralized, especially during the pandemic:

Our school management is quite centralized. All polices are top-down. Basically, whatever the top level decides, the frontline just implements ... Now, it has become even more centralized. When we could only work virtually due to class suspension, they (management) just made the decisions themselves and informed the teachers via email for implementation. (T08 Queenie)

Despite of restricted influence on school matters, the familiarity with management and colleagues and their experience in the organization over time were assets for strategic agency. They could voice out certain concerns and even influence upper-level decisions. Lisa illustrated how such familiarity helped her be strategically exempted from the duty of teaching Chinese in Mandarin, with which she felt very uncomfortable as both her native tongue and subject training were in Cantonese:

When negotiating duties with my principal, if I rejected her directly, even with a valid reason, it wouldn't be accepted. As I have known she is sensitive to teachers' mental health issues, I mentioned that the thought of teaching Mandarin Chinese already caused me serious psychological problems, such as insomnia and loss of appetite. Further, I told her my family started to worry about me ... She exempted me from the tasks and asked another teacher instead ... (T12 Lisa)

Concerning professional learning, teachers were willing to engage in new learning that catered to their practical needs and challenges, particularly those driven by the pandemic. Yet, they could be

sceptical of certain new policies and methods' meaningfulness. Rosie highlighted how she felt new technology could be irrelevant, but she felt it was still necessary for teachers to learn about it and implemented them with doubtfulness:

It is impossible to use old teaching methods. Of course, some (new technologies and methods) were like putting lipstick on a pig, but we still need to apply these elements in class – at least by learning about what these new technologies are. (T09 Rosie)

The strategic agency teachers, who knew their influence at work was partly constrained within the hierarchical structure, were experienced and realistic in their approaches. Yet, their established position allowed them to perceive stable teacher identities, locate areas to exert professional agency, and even manipulate different strategies in negotiations with colleagues and management. Although they usually implemented required work without much resistance, they would reflect on tasks from students' and colleagues' viewpoints, along with their own scepticism. Hence, when the meaning of policies and initiatives was communicated efficiently, they would wish to learn and collaborate further. They were deemed sophisticated players in the organization, who actively considered others' reactions and reflected on their own situation and environment when taking actions.

### ***Type 3: explorer agency – the narrative of the opportunity and potential seeker***

Like the strategic agency type, teachers with explorer agency had developed more familiarity with their duties, work community, and organizational culture. However, they perceived their positions as relatively new in the organization and still needed to seek the areas within the structure exert influence and keep learning to develop their profession. The narrative composite of the three teachers in 2018 and 2020 is as follows:

I was new to a position or in a temporary one in the organization. I didn't think the opinion from someone in an insignificant position would be considered.

Now, my job is more stable. I have started to become more familiar with the school culture, students, and co-workers. School is a stringent hierarchical structure under the principal and other senior staff members. I usually follow the ways in which things were done previously or what the seniors instruct. Although my discussion with the seniors could be stressful, it helped me develop myself and understand the organizational culture better. I am eager to further explore knowledge and opportunities to develop my strengths within and outside of the school.

Teachers with explorer agency were establishing their relatively new positions in the organization and exploring areas in which they could exert their influence and develop their professional interests. Like the strategic agency type, these teachers developed more familiarity with their duties, work community, and organizational culture. Gordon, an early-career teacher who was delegated more administrative duties, described how the work process and collegial collaboration became smoother:

Two years ago, I was assigned to co-ordinate special-needs education. The tasks were unfamiliar to me, and I felt very uncomfortable. Now, I understand more about the tasks, and I have more autonomy. When I invite my colleagues to help with my tasks, I can explain more clearly why I need their assistance and in which areas they can be involved. Many tasks have become smoother. (T02 Gordon)

Despite knowing their duties and the school environment, explorer agency teachers saw themselves in subordinate roles, who were obliged to agree with seniors and follow rules under the hierarchical structure. Elsa described how she was aware of submitting to seniors' instructions while attempting to exert her agency with insights gained from her experience:

I have always known the school structure is very hierarchical, which means I would need to follow orders from my boss. I am merely "a small potato". After two years, I have more wisdom to handle orders from above and suggest ideas. (T10 Elsa)

As seen in the expanding agency type, explorer agency teachers were prepared to engage themselves in steep learning to enhance their skills. They continuously searched for spaces where they could exert their agency and realize their career aspirations. For instance, Gordon and Elsa were eager to unleash their potential through, for instance, application of technology to enhance teaching and active collaboration with the local art community to widen students' horizons. Howard, an experienced teacher who finally settled in a permanent position, mentioned he began his master's degree to further polish his subject knowledge:

The more I teach, the more I think there is something that I cannot grasp well. I have an urge to further my studies. My main goal is to enrich myself and understand what I can improve. (T06 Howard)

Explorer agency teachers recognized that a strong hierarchy existed in the structure. Being relatively new to the position and the organization, the teachers had to submit to the norms and orders under it. Unlike the strategy type teachers who were sophisticated in identifying their power boundaries and areas for influences, the explorer types were attempting to explore spaces, make suggestions, and experiment with their ideas as they became more familiar with collegial characteristics and the organizational culture. Moreover, the explorer agency teachers were enthusiastic about learning different subjects, collaborating within and outside the school, developing different skills to strengthen their professional profiles. They actively negotiated their professional identities with their enacted and attempted agency. If supported by the leadership and resources in the workplace, their agency could possibly be developed over time.

#### ***Type 4. withering agency – the narrative of the meat on the chopping block***

Four teachers were categorized under the withering agency category, and they faced stricter control and closer supervision from management. There was little, if not, no space to exert influence or develop school matters, regardless of their seniority and rankings. They perceived themselves as orders executors, but were held accountable for any undesirable outcomes, which often took a heavy toll on their physical and mental health. Below is the narrative composite of the teachers in the years of 2018 and 2020:

I had heavy administrative tasks in addition to my core teaching duties. Management pressed policies down with little space for negotiation, and bottom-up suggestions could be rejected. Yet, within the work community, I could communicate and compromise with my colleagues, and it was possible to push forward changes or suggest new activities.

Now, the management has become even more authoritarian, and policies could be changed and introduced suddenly. I feel like "meat on the chopping block" with no choice but to follow orders. Also, I face high expectations and pressure to be accountable and responsible for everything. I feel obliged to follow management's, parents', and society's opinions. My professionalism deteriorates, and I don't think I can change anything. I feel stressed and even hopeless in the profession.

Facing the top-down orders related to online teaching, Violet, who was a senior teacher, described management's demands as "inhumane". Teachers had to continuously teach for several hours without breaktimes. Although strong opposition was expressed, a schedule was imposed, and teachers felt being held hostage with the moral responsibility to students' academic progress during the pandemic. Felix also endured such authoritarian management and described how he and his colleagues reacted to it:

They (the management) claimed their attitude was very open. But after you expressed your viewpoints, they would ban them as they wanted you to follow their way ... If you kept questioning them, you felt their bad attitude ... Among the co-workers, there was much discussion, and we were all open-minded. But when management joined the conversation, everyone didn't want to say anything. (T03 Felix)

Apart from authoritarian leadership, Louis's agency was restricted by socio-political changes, which prevented him from discussing certain relevant social issues in classrooms:

There are some issues in liberal studies that have become more sensitive. I cannot teach these issues as freely as I used to ... Professional autonomy in the subject is diminishing, and the space for development is becoming limited and unclear. There is a lot of curtailing and changes in the curriculum. (T05 Louis)

While working in such a repressive environment, teachers could hold negative and sceptical attitudes towards new learning suggestions from the top level. Violet expressed how it was stressful for teachers to introduce new methods when there was a lack of direction and time:

It is a must to learn about new things. But everything is coming very fast; there is no space to take things slowly. For example, if we need to use it (the new thing) now, the next goal (set by the upper level) is to run it smoothly. If there are any problems when running it, there is a need to find a person to take responsibility and be accountable. It is very stressful. (T11 Violet)

Teachers with withering agency were in an unfavourable, restrictive and even threatening work environment. They bore heavy, meaningless duties, endured long working hours, were pressurized to enhance students' academic performance, and contended with high expectations from society. Under such a repressive working environment, they spoke of considerably negative emotions, such as frustration and hopelessness, which were less frequently found in other agency types. They were in languishing position who could not change or influence any organizational matters and decisions. This negatively affected their professional identity's development, as they felt they were insignificant in the organization, their professionalism was under attack in society, and their future career development was uncertain.

## Discussion

This study aims to investigate the change and continuity of teachers' professional agency with a longitudinal approach in the context of Hong Kong. Previous studies have demonstrated teachers' professional agency is subjected to change and development at different career stages (E et al., 2022; Leite et al., 2022) and during various events such as educational reforms (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). The present study illustrated teachers' enactment of professional agency is subjected to change and continuation over time as demonstrated in the different agency types. The findings reinforced the achievement of professional agency as a career-long phenomenon subjected to temporal and spatial flow in the ecological interplay between individual positions and situated contexts (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Biesta et al., 2015; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

### *Understanding the change and continuity of teacher professional agency bounded in the social-cultural context*

First, the study highlighted similarities and differences between individuals in the change and continuity of professional agency achievement bounded in a hierarchical organizational structure, in the case of social-cultural context in Hong Kong. All 14 teachers in the research showed a unique career pathway and faced diverse work situations. Yet, there were similarities and patterns among the participants associated with individual positions and management styles in the hierarchical organization, leading to the identification of four types of change and continuity – 1) expanding, 2) strategic, 3) exploring, and 4) withering agencies – in the teacher narrative analyses.

Teachers with expanding agency were in influential positions interacting with agency-supportive and trusting environment. Being trusted and listened to, teachers afforded to actively engagement in school matters, collaboration with the work community, and acquisition of new knowledge amidst the challenging educational shift and heavy workload. Their professional identity and actions were well negotiated with the changes in their position and socio-cultural conditions (Kira & Balkin, 2014). Conversely, a socio-cultural context features an ostensible democratic or authoritarian management that could restrict or even eliminate teachers' professional agency, as presented in other agency types. The influence of both strategic and explorer

agency teachers on school matters is limited in a hierarchical structure with few channels existing for professional expression. However, the study demonstrated that these teachers were potential active professional agents, in exploring different areas to enact their agency and reaching their career aspirations through observation, experiences, and immersion in the environment over time. The strategic ones were relatively experienced and established, who understood how to negotiate with top-down orders, identified spaces to shape work practices, and focused on developing skills meaningful to the job. Furthermore, the exploring agency type, who possessed less experienced or relatively new to the organization, mostly perceived themselves as followers or implementers in the organization. Nevertheless, they were eager to explore the areas where they could unleash their potential, polish their professional skills, and engage in steep learning, as shown in early career stages (Lambert & Gray, 2020). Such intensified development could help them further establish their current positions and enhance their employability in the field.

While strategic and explorer agency types could exert agency to a certain extent over time, the withering agency type, even for the ones with experience or holding leadership positions, was constrained by an authoritarian management style. Under management's increasing control and monitoring, teachers faced intensified workloads, inadequate support, and diminishing influence on school matters. The withering agency type indicated strong negative emotions towards work and deteriorating well-being with issues, such as stress, exhaustion, and helplessness in a working context which is increasingly repressive and strict work environment. Additionally, their perceived identity was withering (Kira & Balkin, 2014), as their professional beliefs misaligned with the work requirement. They felt trapped in the current situation and hopeless towards the career profession.

During the research period from 2018–2020, the political instability in the region and the COVID-19 pandemics had affected the work of all teachers of the investigated context. The present study noted that changes of teacher agency enactment were not strongly affected by the pandemic. Instead, the school management (e.g., Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2022; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020) who were significant mediators for education changes and emergency measures, play a critical role in stimulating and restricting teachers' active agency over time. It is particularly apparent in a social-cultural context which characterized by hierarchical work structure in the case like Hong Kong. However, the socio-political changes, in the case of Hong Kong, could directly affect teachers' actions and decisions in the work environment. For example, teachers avoided learning materials and topics, as they became sensitive or inappropriate under the political climate nowadays. Teachers' pedagogical judgement was overridden by the political concerns, which in turn restricted professional agency enactment and threatened teacher professionalism.

### ***Professional agency as a non-linear developmental phenomenon***

The present study indicated development and enactment of professional agency is not linear with an increase in experience. Each teacher's background, experience, and situated contexts were unique, and professional agency fluctuated, changed, and was achieved in one situation but not another (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). The study highlights agency-supportive leadership and work community is crucial in affording agency enactment over time for teachers, regardless of seniority and experiences, in the social-cultural contexts with hierarchical work structure. Explorer-type agency, which is obvious in beginning and new teachers, could potentially achieve agency over time and further develop into the strategic or expanding type depending partly on how the individual and social-cultural factors unfold on their trajectory. The findings in the study echoes with the case of Dutch teachers holding PhD scholarships, whose agency in contributing to school development had to be supported by social resources like principals' support (see also Oolbekkink-Marchand et al., 2022). Nevertheless, withering agency type is detrimental to teacher's career development. Under a repressive and helpless work environment, even for the ones who were experienced ones and holding senior positions, strong negative emotions with very limited, if no, agency enactment were



indicated. Teachers who were physically and mentally burnout, might opt for disengaging attitude from work or even resignation from the career. Simultaneously, the organizational development would be stagnated when top-down orders neglecting teachers' voices which were crucial in resolving the problems and challenges in the shifting and demanding educational context. Professional agency is important in sustaining "a passion for teaching" (Day, 2013), as it is related to teachers' active involvement at work and career-long learning, and in turn contributes to the job satisfaction, well-being, and commitment in the profession. The development professional agency was closely connected to the interplay of individual and social resources bounded contexts in the unfolding career trajectory, and supporting professional agency is crucial in both the development in the individual teachers and school organization.

## Limitations

The data in the present study were from collected from the interviews with 14 teachers with different background and character, who voluntarily shared their feelings and thoughts towards their work situations in Hong Kong over 2 years of time. First, being able to recruit and follow up with more participants might further explore whether the discovered or other agency types are demonstrated in similar and different contexts. Second, the study was conducted with Hong Kong teachers situated in a social-cultural context featuring a hierarchical organization structure. It is worthwhile to investigate the issue in various contexts and investigate the change and continuation of agency enactment related to different organizational, historical, and social-cultural conditions. Third, besides interviews, other qualitative research methods such as observation or learning diaries, and quantitative measures with larger sample, would provide different insights and perspectives on the topic. Moreover, a continuous follow-up on the teachers over a longer period, could delve deeper and contribute to a better explanation of professional agency as a developmental phenomenon, and design suitable support to help teachers to sustain their passion and commitment in the career.

## Implications and conclusion

This study contributed to the existing understanding of how professional agency has developed on the teaching trajectory. Highlighting the differences and similarities of individual positions and socio-cultural conditions, the study with a two-year interval identified four agency types, which demonstrated the different ways teachers could exercise their professional agency for their career in the face of the support and constraints in their work situation over time. Although the school is traditionally hierarchical with differentiated ranks and administrative and managerial roles, in the case of Hong Kong, agency-supportive leadership and work community could make a difference in how teachers enact their professional agency. Moreover, the study indicated an authoritarian management culture could be detrimental to professional agency enactment, which in turn negatively impacts teachers' well-being and their career sustainability.

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