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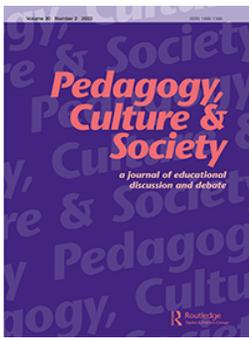
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# Teachers' professional agency in a centralisation-decentralisation system and a hierarchical cultural context: the case of Hong Kong

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## ABSTRACT

Teachers are frontline actors in actualising educational innovations. In some contexts, teachers' professional agency is undervalued. This study investigated teachers' agency and its related workplace affordances in Hong Kong, which features a centralised-decentralisation education governance system, and a hierarchical work culture. The study was based on 21 semi-structured interviews with teachers, and employed a deductive thematic analysis. Agency enactment was categorised into 1) pedagogical agency within classrooms, and 2) relational agency in the professional community. The factors contributing to workplace affordances were grouped as pertaining to 1) the collegial community, 2) school leadership, 3) access to resources, and 4) availability of time, space, and job stability. Agency-supportive leadership and a favourable collegial environment significantly facilitated teachers' agentic actions. Teachers did not explicitly resist but implemented emotionally meaningless order in a 'work-to-rule' manner. The study contributes to professional agency research as applied to a particular political, regional, and socio-cultural context.

## KEYWORDS

Teacher professional agency; centralised-decentralisation system; hierarchical work structure; subject-centred socio-cultural approach; workplace affordances

## Introduction

Professional agency is a significant research issue in the rapidly changing arena of education. Teachers are frontline actors in implementing changes, innovations, and reforms related to the development of students, the teaching community, and school organisations (Biesta and Tedder 2016; Lasky 2005; Toom, Pyhältö, and O'Connell Rust 2015; Van der Heijden et al. 2015). Scholars have conceptualised the notion of human agency from a variety of perspectives (see Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Eteläpelto et al. 2013). Broadly speaking, professional agency has been seen as manifested when individuals made decisions that impact on the workplace, when they develop the practices of the workplace, and when they negotiate their identities in the workplace context (Biesta and Tedder 2016; Vähäsantanen 2015). Within the school context, professional agency encompasses the influence of teachers in their work community in such a way that they develop teaching practices, the curriculum, and professional tasks, while feeling in control

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of their ways of working in line with their professional goals and interests (Biesta and Tedder 2016; Evelien et al. 2014; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015). Previous studies have indicated that professional agency is significant for the professional growth of individuals and the community, coupled with the continuous improvement and transformation of learning organisations (e.g., Lasky 2005; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015; King and Nomikou 2018).

Despite rich debates on 'recognizing and realizing teacher professional agency' (Edwards 2015, 779), especially in the Western context (Erss 2018), it seems that many socio-cultural contexts do not provide much scope for teachers to practise professional agency in their related environments. When power over educational matters is centrally concentrated, professional agency and civic involvement are likely to be highly restricted (Mok 2004). It is notable that in East Asian Confucian-heritage societies, workplace cultures feature high power distances, with teachers expected to observe their social roles and to implement demands according to the hierarchical order (Kwan and Li 2015; Manh Duc, Thi Mai Nguyen, and Burns 2020). Overall, one can claim that there has been a lack of inquiry into the dynamics of the socio-cultural context with respect to the education management system, and its relationship with the support – or lack of support – for teachers' professional agency. The present study represents an endeavour to address this lacuna.

To shed light on the empowerment of teachers in a specific social-educational context, this study examined teachers' professional agency in Hong Kong. Like other societies striving for global competitiveness, Hong Kong, which can be considered a Confucian-heritage society, must constantly adapt to global education initiatives in the field of information technology, and in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM subjects). Nevertheless, teachers' professional agency for educational change has remained understated in official curriculum guides and professional development reports.<sup>1</sup> Recognising the gap between academic endeavours and policy inattention, the present study aimed to contribute to a more versatile understanding of teachers' professional agency in the socio-cultural context in question. With this in mind, it seemed necessary to analyse both the supportive and constrictive conditions surrounding agency enactment in the Hong Kong context.

## **Teachers' professional agency from a subject-centred socio-cultural perspective**

Teaching is a creative and human-centred activity that emphasises teachers' active engagement in shaping the work practices and conditions necessary for meaningful education (Biesta and Tedder 2016; Edwards 2015; Evelien et al. 2014; Toom, Pyhältö, and O'Connell Rust 2015). Unlike autonomy which connotes independence and freedom from external influence and control, professional agency encompasses contextually and structurally bound work-oriented actions impacting on professional identity and the environment (Vähäsantanen et al. 2020). The extent to which teachers engage at work can be positively or negatively affected by various

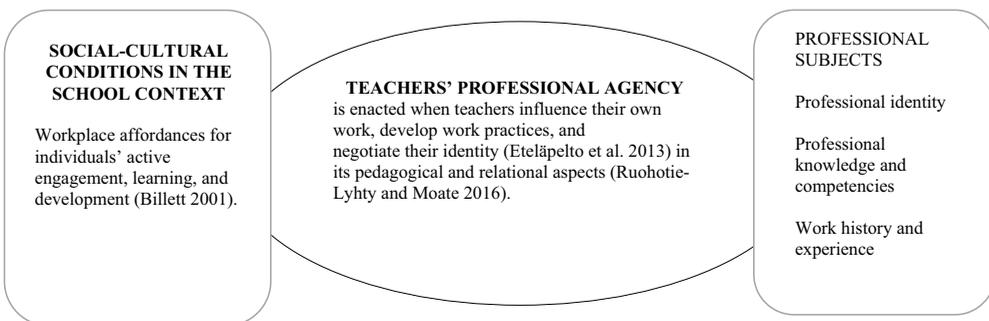
factors in the personal and wider environments, involving notably teaching beliefs, performative cultures, and curriculum policy and practices (Biesta and Tedder 2016). These dynamics, existing between individual and collective actions, and having social structures as their background, have been conceptualised from various theoretical approaches. This study adopted a subject-centred socio-cultural approach (Eteläpelto et al. 2013) which acknowledges the rapid changes occurring in working life, including in the teaching profession. The approach embraces a lifelong developmental perspective, and focuses on how the professional subject learns and creates subjectivity throughout work processes. It encompasses the notion that, although professional subjects and socio-cultural conditions are analytically separate, they are strongly interrelated with the practice of professional agency. As professional subjects, teachers actively construct and negotiate their identity positions at work using their own knowledge and work experience. As individuals in a given socio-cultural context, they function according to physical and technical material resources and intangible social factors, such as power relations, work cultures, and discursal and subject positions. The approach allows investigation into the practice of professional agency in terms of both the supportive and the constraining conditions operating in the relevant socio-cultural context.

In line with the above, the practice of professional agency can be understood as consisting of work-oriented actions and decisions in the following three dimensions: 1) *influencing one's own work*, 2) *developing work practices*, and 3) *negotiating one's identity* (Eteläpelto et al. 2013). In the educational setting, influencing one's own work means that as active agents, teachers are involved in the negotiation of work content and in decisions for independent or shared work. When teachers' viewpoints are recognised or actualised, the teachers are in turn regarded as influential and professional actors in their respective communities. The second dimension, that of developing work practices, may not necessarily entail the actual implementation of new policies and innovations. Rather, it highlights how teachers make sense of initiatives in relation to their contexts, and how they consequently turn them into actions and decisions. This dimension also focuses on teachers as developmental agents – people who potentially contribute to know-how and ideas, create new ways of working, and make bottom-up changes. The third dimension, that of negotiation of one's own identity, implies that professional identity is mediated through activities in and interactions with one's social environment, with teachers' agency viewed in terms of enacting one's interests, values, and goals in the work context. When active participation in social practices is supported in teachers' situated environments, teachers may then become able to identify and solve the problems of the social realities encountered in their classrooms and schools (Ukkonen-Mikkola and Varpanen 2020). Note, however, that despite the positive connotation of professional agency for active participation and development, agency can also be manifested in a resistant manner. Hence, teachers may also strive to maintain existing routines, adopt a 'work-to-rule' attitude to change – i.e., do no more than is formally required of them – or even directly resist changes (Eteläpelto et al. 2013; Vähäsantanen 2015).

## Analytical framework

Teachers' agency can be considered in terms of their intentional work-oriented actions (Ukkonen-Mikkola and Varpanen 2020) as applied to individual tasks and duties, the collective work culture and practices, and organisational development (Vähäsantanen 2015; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, and Hökkä 2015). In educational settings professional agency can be further categorised in terms of *pedagogical* and *relational* aspects (Ruohotie-Lyhty and Moate 2016). *Pedagogical agency* relates to the situations of teaching and learning within the classroom. It includes competences in the selection and use of materials, the construction of a collaborative learning environment with students, reflection on one's own instructional practices, and the implementation of different instructional strategies (Pappa et al. 2019; Soini et al. 2015). In parallel with this, *relational agency* entails the actions and decisions that occur within a given community and organisation. It reflects collegial relationships that encompass the sharing of knowledge and transformational practices. This latter aspect of agency covers the reciprocal relationships involved in the strengthening of expertise. It involves relationships that mediate individual interpretations and social factors at work. It is geared to the distribution of expertise, the enhancement of collective competence, and construction of a positive organisational climate (Edwards 2015; Pappa et al. 2019; Pyhältö, Pietarinen and Soini 2015).

In line with this, one may consider the ways in which the socio-cultural context of the school is bound up with the enactment of teachers' professional agency. Here, it is useful to apply Billett's (2001) integrative perspective on workplace affordances and individual engagement, in order to consider how the socio-cultural conditions in teachers' situated contexts support or limit their professional agency. This perspective highlights individuals as active agents with their own values and history. However, it also emphasises the workplace as a milieu that may embody a readiness to support individuals' active engagement, learning, and development. With these conceptualisations as background, [Figure 1](#) presents the framework of this study in its aim of analysing teachers' professional agency in relation to workplace affordances in the given socio-cultural context.



**Figure 1.** Teachers' professional agency from a subject-centred socio-cultural perspective in the present study.

The next section elaborates the conditions operating in Hong Kong schools, including the education governance system and the power distance factors embedded in the work culture of schools. These structural and cultural considerations are related to the crafting of the socio-cultural conditions of teachers, and they will be shown to impact on the enactment of their professional agency.

## **The context: Hong Kong**

### ***Historical and political background, and the centralised-decentralisation education management system***

For over 150 years, Hong Kong was under British colonial rule. Sovereignty was handed over to China in 1997. Thereafter, the region became a special administrative region of the Mainland, and was governed according to the ‘One Country Two Systems’ principle.

During the transitional and post-colonial period of the late 1990s, the region was confronted with political uncertainties related to sovereignty transition and to strong neo-liberalism which emphasised management effectiveness in the public sector (Ball 2003). Large-scale reforms were undertaken with a view to excellence, competition, and accountability in schools (Sweeting 2005). Although the old centralised system had been deemed unfit to grapple with the new educational challenges, the British administration had exercised extreme caution in policy changes during the transitional period (Mok 2004). It had ruled out the kind of devolutionary decentralisation that would open up democratic governance, empower teachers, and enhance the participation of major stakeholders such as parents and trade unions. A managerially focused ‘centralized-decentralization’ approach was adopted (Hung et al. 2019). The aim of which was to enhance efficiency in the deployment of financial and human resources. The Education Bureau played a dominant role in policy formation, imposing stringent regulative measures on school accountability (Kwan and Li 2015).

In the decade following the sovereignty transition and the large-scale education reforms, rapid technological change placed great demands on the professionalism of teachers who were required to adopt new methods. However, teacher agency was not emphasised in central guidelines, curriculum documents, or professional development reports.<sup>2</sup> Overall, teachers and schools were merely required to execute top-down instructions.

### ***A hierarchical work culture with a Confucian heritage***

In synergy with education management’s focus on technologically-oriented education policies and the efficient use of resources in the workplace, the thoughts, actions, and interactions of teachers closely reflected the existing power distances and work culture in schools (Kwan and Li 2015). Similar to other Asian contexts in which a Confucian heritage is evident – such as Singapore, South Korea, and Vietnam – Hong Kong features a working culture that is characterised by high power distances (Hofstede and Bond 1988) with employees being expected to behave in alignment with management rules and orders. Confucian thinking emphasises a communitarian perspective according to which

individuals should try to live up to expected social roles and responsibilities, striving for societal harmony and order (Tan 2014). Individuals who respect their social roles and responsibilities are called *junzi* (people with a noble character). Applied to the modern work context, *junzi* leaders – persons who have been granted more power – should win others over to their ideas through enacted virtues, including trustworthiness. Correspondingly, *junzi* community members should respect the positions of their leaders and their peers while nevertheless exercising personal autonomy and rational judgement through appropriate behaviours in their respective roles.

In Hong Kong's schools, teachers have traditionally been ranked according to their years of experience and their qualifications, in accordance with British bureaucracy. The resulting high-power-distance work culture was reinforced by the Confucian social order. Although the centralised-decentralisation education management system allows schools a degree of autonomy in the application of resources and in the delivery of the central curriculum, the decision-making power is strongly in the grasp of upper management (Ko, Cheng and Lee 2016). The middle tranche of professionals, who are mostly comprised of experienced teachers, works closely with the upper level. There is thus a 'top-heavy' imbalance of power in principal-teacher relations, with control also of the information disseminated to teachers. Historically – and also currently – the hierarchical staff structure and leadership style has influenced teachers' self-positioning in their work context. This in turn affects teachers' evaluation of school tasks and initiatives.

The British and Confucian heritage continues to affect teacher agency in Hong Kong. Note, however, that although there are peculiarities unique to the Hong Kong experience, the overarching dynamics have implications which reach beyond this region's borders, and which extend over time. This aspect will be further discussed following the presentation of our methodology, data, and analysis.

## Research questions, design, and methodology

### Research questions

Our research design was intended to address the characteristics and processes of agency enactment among teachers in Hong Kong. With this aim in mind, two main questions were framed:

- (1) How is professional agency enacted by teachers in the light of their socio-cultural context?
- (2) What kinds of socio-cultural conditions support and constrain teachers' professional agency in the given context?

### Participants

The participants in this study were all in-service teachers in Hong Kong, working in primary and secondary schools, and teaching various subjects. Altogether, 21 teachers agreed to participate in interviews in the summer of 2018. They were invited via email, on

the basis of the researchers' personal and professional contacts. Prior to the study they were verbally informed about their rights as research participants, and consent forms were signed.

A total of 17 teachers reported working in different privately or publicly funded schools, at primary and secondary levels. Four teachers worked in a single government-subsidised secondary school. A balanced gender representation was achieved, including 11 female teacher participants and 10 males. The average age was 32 years, the youngest teacher being 25 and the oldest 44. Four participants were novice teachers who had 0 to 3 years of full-time experience, nine were mid-career teachers with 4 to 7 years of continuous teaching experience, while eight had been teaching for 8 to 15 years. Their primary subjects included biology, Chinese, economics, English, French, liberal studies, mathematics, and visual arts.

### *Data collection and analysis*

Teachers' experiences and reflections can provide data that are 'deep, rich, individualized and contextualized' in nature (Ravitch and Carl 2021, 152). A qualitative method based on semi-structured interviews was deemed appropriate to explore new ideas and relevant issues regarding teachers' professional agency (O'Reilly and Dogra 2016). The interviews typically lasted for an average of approximately one hour. The main interviewer was the first author. First of all, the teachers were asked to describe their professional beliefs and values and their interpersonal relationships in the workplace, such as with students, teachers, senior staff, or other related personnel. They were then asked to express their attitude regarding educational changes and professional developments, and to discuss any opportunities and challenges they faced in the school. Following this detailed presentation of their work situation, the teachers were asked to indicate whether there were any opportunities for participating in and influencing school-related matters, and in implementing their career aspirations. If no such opportunities were described, the interviewer followed up by asking about the barriers that prevented teachers from taking action and becoming involved in decision-making.

The interview data proved to be rich and complex, covering a wide range of professional agency manifestations and workplace affordances. We adopted a theory-oriented analysis that was nevertheless flexible enough to take account of the perspectives of different participants, highlighting their similarities and divergences, and generating deep insights into the issues under investigation (Braun and Clarke 2006; Nowell et al. 2017). The first author, a native speaker of Cantonese and fluent in English, transcribed all the interviews verbatim and then translated them from Cantonese to English. The data were then transferred to ATLAS.ti for analysis. All the interviewees, people, and organisations were assigned pseudonyms. The first author generated initial codes related to the actions, decisions, and situations in which teachers demonstrated their agency in the workplace. The initial codes were further refined and documented in a coding manual.

To address the first research question, the codes were reviewed and categorised into further sub-themes (including, for example, 'using different teaching methods in the classroom' and 'communicating actively with senior staff'), under the main themes of *pedagogical* and *relational* professional agency respectively. For the second research

question, codes on the affordances of professional agency (for example, 'work community atmosphere', 'leadership style', 'availability of materials and resources') were grouped into larger main themes, in line with the subject-centred socio-cultural perspective. All the codes were then re-read, and some examples were reconsidered, insofar as they seemed to indicate situations in which the teachers merely executed their school duties rather than applying professional agency. Thereafter, each sub-theme and main theme was analysed and modified following consultation between the authors, the aim being to ensure comprehensiveness and clarity regarding the enactments and affordances of professional agency. Finally, the frequency of teachers who mentioned each theme was counted.

## Results

### *Professional agency in the socio-cultural context of Hong Kong*

In line with our conceptual position as indicated previously, agency was categorised into 1) *pedagogical agency in the classroom context* and 2) *relational agency in the professional community*, as elaborated below.

#### *Pedagogical agency in teaching and learning*

Teachers were asked to describe their work and their influence on students and the classroom context. Pedagogical agentic features were highlighted via the teachers' active reflections, their actual activities, and their engagement in identifying and solving students' learning and developmental needs. In many respects the overall picture was similar to that emerging in previous studies (see, for example, King and Nomikou 2018; Pappa et al. 2019; Soini et al. 2015). Most teachers (14/21) were aware of the students' reactions, and reflected on them. They focused on building relationships with students in everyday classroom time and in social interactions. Some teachers (6/21) were willing to take further actions to adjust their instructional strategies or experiment with new teaching methods to enhance students' learning. A few teachers (4/21) devoted additional time to helping students with certain subjects, such as providing after-school consultations, supplementary lessons, or online groupwork. Camelia actively reflected on her teaching. She enacted her agency through adjusting her instructional methods with the aim of catering to students with various levels of ability:

Some students are slow, and some are quick learners. Such performance differences trigger my reflection on what methods are suitable in order to make the quick learners achieve more, and to let the slow and weak ones experience success. Based on everyday classroom interactions and students' performance, I would adjust [the instructional methods] the next day. Also, the teaching methods for some other related topics later on will be adjusted. (Camelia)

To advance their expertise in their current and future pedagogical work, some teachers (8/21) sought to acquire knowledge beyond their school communities. Thus, they might search for information online, participate in seminars and workshops organised by the Education Bureau, universities, or other professional institutions, join subject groups with teachers from other schools, and even pursue formal academic degrees. Such forms of knowledge acquisition and training enabled teachers to enhance their professional

competences and improve their practices in parallel with today's rapid educational changes. Dortha, an English teacher, mentioned her active involvement in external professional development:

When there are some training sessions provided by the Education Bureau which I am interested in, I will participate. They are certainly useful, and I can learn many things. Because when you are only staying in one school, you just work, work, and work. You cannot know what the reforms are out there. In fact, there are many reforms from the Education Bureau ... Although it has already been talked about and written in the curriculum guide, how many teachers [in my school] catch up with such things? Or they still follow the old curriculum guide ... (Dortha)

As well as taking actions related to subject-matter, some teachers (6/21) created their own professional spaces for implementing their pedagogical beliefs and interests for students. Here, they drew on upon their own efforts, the available resources, and collegial assistance. Work-related actions included (but were not limited to) teaching topics of interest that were not in the official curriculum, sharing teaching materials publicly, and co-organising inter-disciplinary activities with colleagues. Nicholas shared an example of initiating civic education topics during the homeroom and lunch periods to enhance students' development:

I often play videos related to challenging conditions in some poorer countries ... I hope this might encourage [students] to appreciate food much more. Also, I have lunch with the students. They often complain that the school lunch is not appetizing. The only thing that I can [do to] persuade them is to eat the same food with them. It shows that the teacher can finish all the food and leave the dish clean. I can do that as an adult, so why can't the children do it? I would seek to be a role model to remind them. (Nicholas)

Regarding pedagogical aspects, teachers exerted their agency to influence and develop their own ways of teaching their subject through strategies aimed at assisting students' learning. Some teachers further created spaces to realise personal educational aspirations within their school context. In addition, continuous professional development enhanced teachers' competences. In doing so, they also negotiated their identity as professional actors for current and future pedagogical needs.

### *Relational agency in the collegial community*

When asked to share their perceptions on their influence within their collegial community, more than half of the teachers (12/21) emphasised that trusting and collaborative relationships enabled them to share their teaching ideas openly, co-operate on novel initiatives, and seek advice regarding problems. Particularly for subject teachers, collegial discussions related to lesson planning and class observations helped them to improve their teaching methods, implement new educational innovations, and even make changes to well-established practices among the group. Colleagues were mentioned as important sources of knowledge and support when addressing challenging student issues and novel administrative tasks, or experimenting with initiatives. Camelia described how she learnt from and negotiated with her colleagues on new teaching ideas:

We would have meetings and discuss a certain topic, [such as] the way to demonstrate and design the lesson. We would exchange ideas. In fact, there were many occasions when I absorbed some new ideas and methods [from others]. And it is positive and helpful for

my long-term teaching . . . Different teachers would have different opinions . . . but in such [a] collaborative environment, it could be said that we can negotiate and evaluate [the situation]. (Camelia)

In fact, many interviewees illustrated their agency in co-creating a learning and collaborative community with their co-workers. However, when asked if they had any influence with the leaders of administrative committees or at management level, only three teachers mentioned that they were listened to and could affect the situation from within the school hierarchical structure. Thus, Rosie, who held a subject chair position, felt that she was able to express her opinion to management regarding the development of the school. Nevertheless, she emphasised that she did not have any decision-making power. Her suggestion had in fact been considered and implemented, but she explained that some of her colleagues remained dissatisfied with the extra workload related to top-down decisions:

I can express my opinion [to the principal]. But if I have any decision-making power, that is not the case. For example, there are not many new students apply for our school. I suggested that we can organize bridging courses and different activities for the new students . . . The management considered and listened to it, and the course has been put in the school plan for the coming year . . . [All the same], some colleagues complained about the extra duties in the summer because of that. (Rosie)

Overall, teachers expressed relational agency through the mutual sharing and exchange of ideas, offering and seeking help with problems, and other collaborative activities with co-workers. Such active participation enabled teachers to solve problems in their particular situations (Ukkonen-Mikkola and Varpanen 2020). This kind of relational agency tended to be manifested in smaller groups, and to involve notably subject-specific and pedagogical matters. It seemed to be less prevalent in relations with senior staff, management personnel, and the school administration at the upper hierarchical levels. Note, however, that research must take account of aspects beyond the immediate teaching context, since wider socio-cultural conditions can impact on teachers' pedagogical and relational agency in significant ways. This aspect is elaborated in the workplace affordances section below.

### *Workplace affordances for professional agency*

This section addresses teacher agency affordances as it relates in particular to Hong Kong. Using Billett's (2001) perspective on workplace affordances as a basis, we found the socio-cultural conditions for teacher engagement in work activities in our material to be encompassed by the themes of 1) *the collegial community*, 2) *school leadership*, 3) *access to up-to-date resources*, and 4) *availability of time, space, and job stability*. These themes will be discussed below.

#### *The collegial community*

A strong collegial community was regarded as a significant enabler for professional agency in both pedagogical and relational respects. Through collaborative activities (such as lesson observations, professional workshops, and group meetings), 11 teachers indicated that a mature collegial relationship enabled them to communicate, co-operate

and learn from one another, discuss and communicate viewpoints, give and receive feedback, and advise and consult one another. Similar results have been found in previous studies in the Finnish context (Pappa et al. 2019; Pyhältö, Pietarinen and Soini 2015). Trust, open-mindedness, and equality were given special emphasis as nurturing supportive collegial relationships and communities. Irrespective of hierarchy ranks or seniority level, a trusting environment was viewed as agency-promoting. It existed when members felt they were listened to, and had opportunities to influence work decisions and practices. In such an environment, they also felt encouraged by the community to experiment with teaching methods aimed at enhancing students' learning, to engage actively with professional group development, and to transform work practices within and beyond the classroom. Gordon indicated how a trusting community and open-minded members had supported him in expressing viewpoints, and in turn, reinforced the mutual relationships in his mathematics group:

Everyone is very open-minded (in the mathematics department), and we share our own viewpoints. Even when there are different opinions, teachers still feel safe to express and discuss. Mutual trust is nourished. (Gordon)

By contrast, the hierarchical structure and culture were perceived as restricting teachers' agency in the development of school communities. When asked about their broader influence in the school, five teachers described it as very limited. There were unpleasant encounters and experiences with senior staff and management, ideas had been rejected and ignored, and teachers had been made to feel that they had been subordinated to a position of quiet followers, who had no right to challenge top-down instructions. Consequently, they chose not to be active, to speak-up, or express themselves, seeking thus to avoid conflicts with or negative evaluations from their seniors. Felix described his frustration when he attempted to communicate with his management, and his awareness that his opinions would not result in any changes:

There is no atmosphere for expressing our own opinion at my school. That means that what [the management] has suggested, I just do it. Because we also feel . . . that even if we had expressed our opinion, the end result wouldn't be changed. It is a bit frustrating, so we would prefer not to speak up. (Felix)

Moreover, an untrusting atmosphere in the working community could lead to some teachers (5/21) becoming averse to co-operation with colleagues in disagreeable situations. Teachers reported isolation from colleagues, and they worked individually on matters assigned to them as a strategy to avoid further hostility. Beatrice elaborated on the threatening atmosphere in her subject group. This had led her distance herself from collaboration:

Because [the relationship in] our subject group is a bit hostile, there is not much co-operation . . . The atmosphere is like a mental power struggle. That is to say, knowing when to dodge, and being aware not to fall into traps. (Beatrice)

Overall, a collegial environment characterised by trust and mutual respect, regardless of ranking and seniority, supported teachers in terms of exchanging ideas, collaborating, and implementing meaningful changes. By contrast, a rigid and hierarchical community was seen as contributing to feelings of constraint and negativity, with uneven power relations inhibiting collective transformative initiatives.

### *School leadership*

In addition to the relational architecture within collegial communities, *agency-supportive leadership* was viewed as essential for agency enactment. School leaders were in a powerful position to make final decisions under the managerially-focused decentralisation system. Over half of the interviewed teachers (12/21) mentioned a range of feedback channels for contacting upper management, including questionnaires, formal and informal meetings, and having teacher representatives on management committees. The latter aspect was regarded as crucial in sustaining agency-supportive leadership, and ensuring that teachers' opinions were taken into account. These findings are in line with an earlier (Finnish) study on collective agency-promoting leadership (Hökkä et al. 2019). With specific reference to policy changes and the introduction of innovations that could be delegated from the government to schools, seven teachers indicated that their management entrusted them with autonomy and space, while setting clear goals for the implementation of new practices and pedagogical aspirations. Queenie described how her principal established channels for collecting colleagues' opinions. This made it possible for teachers to influence school decisions:

[The new principal] is younger in comparison with those in the past. She is more open-minded and more willing to listen to opinions. She likes doing ... something related to voting ... If an issue needs colleagues to give comments, there is an opportunity [to do so]. (Queenie)

However, the interviewees considered it unlikely that many of their recommendations would lead to any actual changes in practice. They believed that management consistently drove its own agendas, concerns, and priorities, many of which remained opaque to teachers. Leadership that was unsupportive of agency was mentioned, involving a lack of clear goals or systems for teacher feedback. These aspects led to frustration and dissatisfaction. Six teachers expressed their grievance concerning inadequate support or clear guidelines from school leaders or the Education Bureau in terms of deploying innovations and implementing new curriculum demands. These experiences triggered negative feelings, with the innovations being experienced as extra burdens that were neither emotionally meaningful nor appropriate for students' needs. Ian shared such an experience in relation to using technology in class without any meaningful direction. In this case, it simply became a matter of satisfying external evaluations:

Very often, schools in Hong Kong, when they try new teaching and learning methods, they are not thinking about the students ... It [the activity] is to satisfy the requirements from the Education Bureau ... For example, we are supposed to use more iPads in the classroom, especially during lesson observations ... Sometimes, I question whether that is really meaningful. (Ian)

On the whole, agency-supportive leadership was perceived as fostering communication channels and teacher autonomy in improving teaching methods, with possibilities to develop organisations and carry out initiatives from the bottom up. However, a lack of clear direction and purpose, inadequate facilitation, or inappropriate resources could result in inaction and negative emotions on the part of teachers.

### *Access to resources*

Due to the ever-changing nature of society, the knowledge and skills acquired from the initial teacher training programmes were viewed as inadequate to meet the challenges experienced in practical settings. With the resources available and with collegial support within the respective schools, five teachers mentioned that they were able to learn about changes and to experiment with new teaching methods and practices. Also, eight teachers described how they had advanced their subject knowledge and didactic skills via resources acquired outside the school. Different formal programmes and professional gatherings held by the Education Bureau, universities and other organisations could also inspire teachers to put forward new ideas at work, share knowledge and information about their experiences, raise awareness among teachers concerning current trends, and be prepared for future changes. Based on the experiences of other schools, Rosie, a STEM coordinator, commented that external workshops had inspired her to modify activity plans, and to execute them according to the situation in her own school:

[The external workshops] offer me the relevant assistance. I understand the work of other schools, then I can consider whether I can modify any plans and execute them in my school. I would say that all the [external] STEM workshops are very interesting, though some won't be applicable [to my school] because of my school's student ability. (Rosie)

Hence, it was essential to make access to resources, such as training and workshop, available both inside and outside school for teachers to equip with updated know-how, and exchange ideas with teachers in other schools and professionals in different industries. This allowed them to transform practices in their own schools.

### *Availability of time, space, and job stability*

Regardless of the potential pedagogical and relational agency available to teachers, six of the teachers found that they were over-burdened by hectic teaching duties, administrative workloads, and miscellaneous tasks. They thus had scarcely any time or space to plan or develop initiatives, reflect on classroom teaching, or implement their career aspirations. Queenie described how her busy working life hindered her from actualising her teaching beliefs, which would involve nurturing better student relationships:

I can't realize [my teaching beliefs] completely. Because I am busy. Being busy is a very critical reason . . . I need to work a lot, so very often, I don't have much time to have contact with the students. Even when you have time, you need to do other jobs, such as preparing lessons, marking homework, and doing other administrative duties. (Queenie)

Especially for new and early career teachers, the terms of employment and the career prospects could limit their agency at school. Four teachers mentioned that unstable employment contracts and unclear career paths had demotivated them in terms of participating in school matters. They were less outspoken in their schools due to their comparatively low positions, and a fear of conflict with senior staff and colleagues, which might – as they saw it – potentially affect their job evaluations. The two interviewed teachers who were on temporary contracts indicated a preference for diverting time and effort into searching for more secure employment instead of contributing to

their current work duties. Howard, who had experienced a job change every year, illustrated how the renewal of contracts hindered him from maintaining teaching and learning quality:

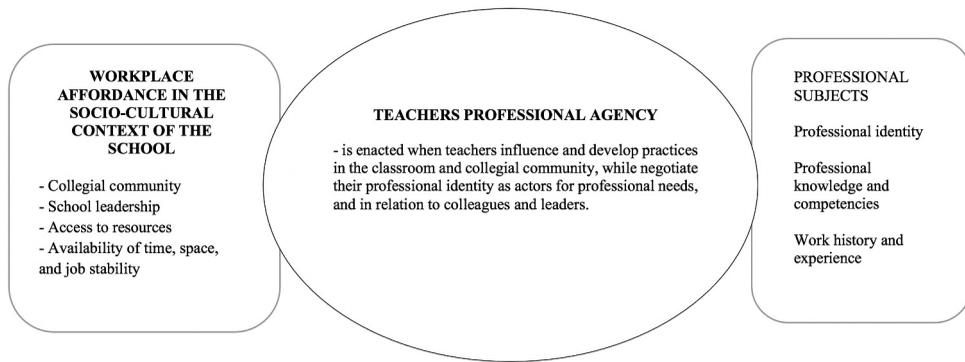
In May and June, I am more concerned about finding a new position, so after the school day ends, I won't be staying in school too long. I have no time, and I won't put so much effort into preparing the lesson. This will to some extent affect the quality of the teaching and learning. Without time, space and job stability, teachers could not afford to enact their pedagogical aspirations. Energy was drained into non - pedagogical matters like administrative duties and job applications. Also, teachers well being and job satisfaction could be negatively affected due to stress and frustration due to heavy workload and job insecurity. (Howard)

## Discussion

Concerning the first research question (How is professional agency enacted by teachers in the light of their socio-cultural context?), agency was themed as *pedagogical* and *relational*. As in previous studies (e.g., King and Nomikou 2018; Lanas and Kiilakoski 2013; Edwards-Groves et al. 2010), teachers were found to be capable of enacting their professional agency in their work practices and of making transformative changes in their workplaces. The teachers in the study held strong core values regarding student-related issues, and they reflected on their everyday interactions with students. The classroom existed as the main milieu in which pedagogical agency was manifested. It was the arena in which the teachers developed and experimented with methods to improve students' learning, and within it, they created spaces to realise their educational aspirations. The teachers also reported active relational agency in collegial collaboration, especially within smaller groups, and in relation to professional subject matters. However, regarding whole-school administration and management matters, only a few teachers mentioned instances in which they were able to exert influences on work practices and decisions.

As regards the second research question (What kinds of socio-cultural conditions support and constrain teachers' professional agency in the given context?), the collegial community and the school leadership acted as a double-edged sword that could either advance or limit teachers' professional agency. As also exemplified in previous studies (e.g., Edwards-Groves et al. 2010), a mutual collegial community and leadership were critical in granting the professional space to reinforce teachers' engagement in and contribution to the workplace. Moreover, the availability of appropriate resources, time, space, and career stability was crucial in affording teachers the agency to improve existing practices or introduce new ones. A negative collegial atmosphere with a lack of mutual trust, and with leadership that was unsupportive of agency and lacked clear goals, tended to limit professional agency. Teachers reported how they did not feel respected as *junzi* members with professional autonomy and judgement in the hierarchy, and how they coped with such situations by isolating themselves and avoiding cooperation.

The study sought to examine more broadly how teachers' professional agency enactment can be supported in relation to a given socio-cultural context. Thus, [Figure 2](#) synthesises teachers' professional agency and workplace affordances for agency enactment, as revealed in the present study. It represents a step towards refining the analytical framework of professional agency, taking the subject-centred socio-cultural approach as



**Figure 2.** Teachers' professional agency and related workplace affordances in the socio-cultural context of the school.

a point of departure. It illustrates how the specific workplace conditions in a given socio-cultural context – such as the collegial community and the school leadership – are significant in affording both pedagogical and relational professional agency.

### *Significance of the present study*

Despite the specific system and structure operating in Hong Kong, the overarching dynamics of context have implications that reach beyond local boundaries. First of all, teachers as agents of change have been highlighted both in this and in other studies covering different cultural contexts and subject fields (e.g., Manh Duc, Thi Mai Nguyen, and Burns 2020; Van der Heijden et al. 2015). Being trained and qualified as education professionals, the teachers in this study were capable of exerting pedagogical agency, showing awareness of, and reflecting on students' academic and moral developmental needs. They demonstrated a willingness to engage in further learning and to experiment with new pedagogical methods, so long as resources and space were available within the socio-cultural context. Within the collegial community, teachers reported active engagement in a trusting environment. Such a situation helped them to improve their didactic skills, and to develop the organisation as a whole. The Hong Kong case is here in line with knowledge obtained from different societal, cultural, and regional contexts, in which pedagogical and relational agency has been found to strengthen teachers' professional identities, with possibilities to improve and even transform classrooms and community practices amid educational changes and innovations (e.g., Engeström, Nuttall, and Hopwood 2020; Vähäsantanen 2015).

Secondly, school leadership is critical in supporting teachers' enactment of agency, especially in contexts featuring managerially-focused decentralisation and a hierarchical work culture. Hong Kong's centralised-decentralisation system allowed school principals to be dominant as local executors of central policies. This emphasised school-based management as an organ of administrative control, in preference to professional control in which teachers would occupy dominant roles. Under the hierarchical governance structure, most power was concentrated in upper management. Teachers lacked

knowledge on pre-existing agendas and had very little power to influence managerial decisions. Because of the limited flexibility and increased ambiguity surrounding teachers' decision-making, the teachers' agency was inhibited (Kwan and Li 2015).

Overall, one could say that agency-supportive leadership that provides coherent directions, allocates resources appropriately, and actively listens to teachers is critical in buffering the proximal zone between centralised policies and teachers, and is significant for the actualisation of teachers' agency. As also indicated in earlier studies (e.g., Hökkä et al. 2019), agency-supportive leadership was found to be associated with workplace transformation, professional learning, identity negotiation, and the commitment of staff to organisational well-being. It was observed that in a work culture infused with the Confucian heritage, teachers' participation in school matters tends to be hierarchically restricted, insofar as they expected to abide by the seniors' decisions and follow commands, and not to voice concerns to leaders directly (Kwan and Li 2015). Senior staff and management could very easily exacerbate the hierarchical work environment, and this could lead to teachers' silence, inaction, aversion to collaboration, and negative feelings towards the work situation. In order to tackle the hierarchically restrictive participation in the examined context, *junzi* leaders (such as the principal and seniors) would be well advised to practise a more agency-supportive form of leadership. This would enhance teachers' professional agency as *junzi* members in the socio-cultural context in question.

Thirdly, the centralised-decentralisation system upheld the government's political dominance, in preference to genuinely engaging teachers and professional groups in educational changes. Stringent control measures, which are intended to ensure the implementation of central policies and the accountability of school-based practices (James, Cheong Cheng, and Tai Hoi Lee 2016), are forced upon schools, and these in turn increase teachers' non-teaching workload. The post-colonial government often frustrated education professionals through the frequent introduction of complex reforms and intensive initiatives without comprehensive consultation (Kwan and Li 2015). The findings of the present study indicated the importance of having time, space, and job stability for teacher agency to flourish, these being the conditions that allowed reflection on teaching and work, the nurturing of student relationships, or involvement of teachers and students in creative tasks. The survey conducted by Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKPTU) in 2018 revealed that 70% of teachers reported working 50 hours or more per week, and 30% indicated moderately severe to severe symptoms of depression. Our study similarly reveals conditions that have adverse effects on professional agency and implications for educational quality. One discouraging feature is that HKPTU, the biggest teaching union in the region, resolved to disband in 2021, due to radical changes in the political and societal landscape of Hong Kong. There no longer appeared to be even the kind of minimal political affordance that would allow professionals to exert collective agency on centralised educational policies.

As a final insight, it could be said that there was no evidence of strong resistance agency from teachers in the face of emotionally meaningless or authoritative orders from school leaders and the government. Yet such silence should not be interpreted as acceptance. As mentioned above, regarding the Confucian-heritage work culture, teachers refrained from voicing their opinion. Instead they apathetically distanced themselves, conceding their position as lacking in influence. Avoidance of conflict was deemed to be culturally appropriate as well as prudent, insofar as disagreement might have

negative consequences, such as unfavourable changes in assigned duties, poor evaluations on contract renewals, and even the risk of losing one's job. The negative consequence of this kind of avoidance comprised negative emotions, low satisfaction, isolation from the collegial community.

In line with the above, it is unsurprising that a survey by the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (2021) indicated an alarming situation, with over 50% of teachers encountering workplace bullying, while over 60% felt that school management was inattentive to communication with teachers, or to teachers' well-being. In the absence of socio-cultural conditions favouring teachers' agentic actions for creative changes and transformations, schools will continue to be criticised as stagnant spaces, slow to react to technological developments or societal changes (Burner 2018). Teaching will then be viewed as an unfavourable profession for young talents, and the school as a workplace will be viewed as harmful to mental health.

### *Practical and theoretical implications*

Potentially, school-based management under the centralised-decentralisation system can afford teachers the space to enact their agency in pedagogical matters and in collegial collaboration. However, leadership is crucial in directing teachers' agentic actions aimed at improving their classrooms, the collegial community, and their organisations. The Confucian-heritage context asserts strong power distances and hierarchical work structures, with a heavy emphasis on social roles and order; nevertheless, the inhibiting facets of this heritage can be counteracted when a trusting collegial atmosphere and an agency-supportive environment are cultivated.

In addition to recognising teachers' voices in the immediate school context, communication channels to connect professional communities and schools with the Education Bureau are significant for the adoption of innovative teaching and learning methods. Central policies and initiatives which lack clear directions, well-communicated goals, adequate resources, or effective feedback systems produce distress and confusion in schools, and among teaching communities. Other studies, too, have shown how these negative features result in half-hearted implementation of enforced changes, performed merely to satisfy administrative requirements (e.g., Manh Duc, Thi Mai Nguyen, and Burns 2020). The centralised-decentralisation form of governance does have the potential to bring about genuine power distribution and recognition of teachers' professionalism, but it requires policymakers and authorities to attend to the perspectives of teachers and professional communities, and to take into account insights from academic research.

From a theoretical perspective, the empirical data from the present study led to a framework for analysing the dynamics of the education management system in the support given to teachers' professional agency, taking into account the socio-cultural context of schools. It can be claimed that the affordance dynamics operating in the school socio-cultural context have implications beyond particular education management systems or regions. The essence of professional agency lies in teachers' individual and collective agentic ability to enact concrete changes in their everyday classroom teaching. This requires 1) mutual interactions and collaboration in a trustful collegial community, 2) accountable leadership, which is open to opinions and bottom-up feedback, 3) accessibility to both in-school and external resources, 4) autonomy, with the space and security

for teachers to influence and develop their own practices. If teachers are not granted the professional agency to realise their career aspirations, use their creativity, voice critical opinions, or enact transformative change, they will merely be transmitters of information. Their position will decline to that of hesitant and artificial agents working merely according to technocratic protocols – rather than persons bringing about humanistic, empathetic, and positive changes that cater to students' own needs, and to genuine school development.

### *Limitations and further recommendations*

Certain limitations of the study should be recognised. Firstly, the data were mainly qualitative and were extracted from a limited number of interviews, representing the perceptions of the teachers themselves; thus, the findings were not based on other data sources that could have enriched the insights (for example, work shadowing or obtaining other stakeholders' perspectives). Secondly, the regional context in question contained its own particular historical and political realities. It should be recognised that professional agency and its related workplace affordances could vary even between this region and geographically close regions with similar heritages.

Teachers' professional agency is essential in the development of education innovation and in transforming professional practices. Although many countries and authorities are eager to foster a competitive edge in this space, teacher professional agency is not emphasised – and may even be constrained – in certain political, social, and cultural contexts. This study thus recommends more diverse research in a wider range of settings, the aim being to achieve perspectives on how education innovation and borrowed good practices become realised – or inhibited – in relation to teachers' agency, or lack of it. Furthermore, the present study suggests a framework for analysing the dynamics of workplace affordances that support teachers' professional agency, but it covers only pedagogical and relational aspects. Future research could go further, seeking to investigate the relationships among different factors surrounding professional agency. The overall aim would be to develop more context-related resources and training procedures, aimed at new initiatives and improved professional practices.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined professional teachers' agency and its workplace affordances, applying a subject-centred socio-cultural approach. It drew on the Hong Kong context, which features a centralised-decentralisation education management system, and hierarchical work structures influenced by a shared Confucian heritage. The findings emphasised that, potentially, teachers are crucial agentic actors in actualising innovative practices in their classrooms and organisations. However, agency-supportive leadership was found to be critical in promoting the professional agency of a well-trained teaching force in the examined case. It is argued that, irrespective of the regional and political specificities of the context, professional agency can indeed be supported. However, this means trusting teachers in their own efforts to improve their professional practices, a mutual exchange of opinions in the community, and consideration of teachers' experiences and perspectives. In addition, availability of appropriate resources, work stability, and professional space are

crucial in enhancing workplace affordances for agency. Teachers are undoubtedly critical actors in students' academic and moral development, and they prepare students for the uncertainties and challenges of the world and of the future. However, the political and socio-cultural contexts surrounding teaching may contain sensitive spaces. These can lead to a lack of genuine efforts to identify the distinctive factors that support and inhibit professional agency. In such a situation, professional agency may remain veiled behind political factors that require teachers to implement far-reaching top-down initiatives.

## Notes

1. This insight is based on a search for the terms 'agent' and 'agency' in the following reports: 1) *Progress Report 2015 Committee on Professional Development of Teachers and Principals Hong Kong* ([https://www.edb.org.hk/irooms/eservices/T-surf/Content/Documents/cotap\\_progress\\_report\\_2015-en.pdf](https://www.edb.org.hk/irooms/eservices/T-surf/Content/Documents/cotap_progress_report_2015-en.pdf)), and 2) *Secondary Education Curriculum Guide 2017- Professional Development and School as Learning Organization* ([https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/renewal/Guides/SECG%20booklet%2011\\_en\\_20180831.pdf](https://www.edb.gov.hk/attachment/en/curriculum-development/renewal/Guides/SECG%20booklet%2011_en_20180831.pdf)).
2. For example, *The Report on the New Academic Structure Medium Term Review and Beyond in 2015* ([https://334.edb.hkedcity.net/new/doc/eng/MTR\\_Report\\_e.pdf](https://334.edb.hkedcity.net/new/doc/eng/MTR_Report_e.pdf)) does not refer to any aspect of teacher agency.

## Disclosure statement

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