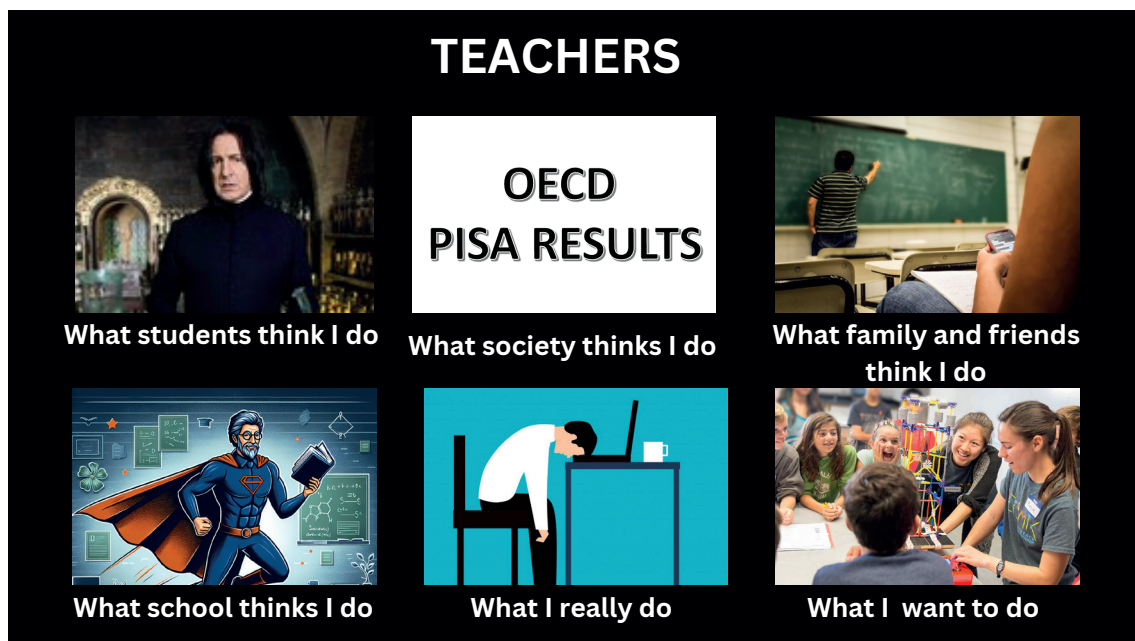


Josephine Lau

Teacher Identity Tensions and Professional Agency in the Hong Kong Context



JYU DISSERTATIONS 779

Josephine Lau

Teacher Identity Tensions and Professional Agency in the Hong Kong Context

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ABSTRACT

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Teachers are the frontline actors in transforming education practices and actualising pedagogical innovations to prepare young generations for societal challenges and future uncertainties. However, teacher identity tensions can arise when external demands and expectations conflict with teachers' beliefs and values regarding the profession. The unsolved tensions decrease teachers' job satisfaction and commitment to the profession. To reinforce teacher career development for education transformation, it is important to engage teachers as active agents and support their professional agency along the career trajectory. Teachers' agency can be enacted by developing their own and community's work practices, exerting influence in the organisation, and negotiating their professional identity with the situated context.

Research gaps still exist regarding what teacher identity tensions crop up along the career trajectory and how professional agency changes and continues via longitudinal lenses. Additionally, empirical studies that delve into contexts featuring a workplace culture of high power distance are even rarer. This dissertation aims to investigate teacher identity tensions and professional agency in the sociocultural context of Hong Kong. The dissertation includes three substudies utilising qualitative methods. Substudy I revealed teachers' identity tensions in the situated sociopolitical context and immediate school context and how different career stages are related to these identity tensions and the associated coping strategies. Substudy II concentrated on teachers' professional agency in the Hong Kong context, which features a centralised-decentralisation education governance system and a hierarchical cultural work environment. The substudy presented the agency enacted in terms of pedagogical and relational aspects and the agency-promoting factors related to the context. Substudy III was a longitudinal study that explored the changes and continuities of teachers' agency and identified four agency types: expanding, strategic, exploring and withering.

This dissertation argues that teacher professional identity and agency could be empowered through trust in management, a collaborative work community, accessibility to resources beyond the school context, and the availability of democratic communication channels to the central policies despite the historically and culturally embedded hierarchical structure in a work environment like that in Hong Kong.

Keywords: longitudinal study; teacher career development; teacher identity tensions; teacher professional agency; qualitative analysis

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

Lau, Josephine

Opettajan identiteettikonfliktit ja ammatillinen toimijuus Hongkongin kontekstissa

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Opettajat ovat ensimmäisenä rintamassa muuttamassa koulutuskäytäntöjä ja toteuttamassa pedagogisia innovaatioita valmistakseen nuoret sukupolvet yhteiskunnallisiin haasteisiin ja epävarmuuksiin tulevaisuudessa. Silti opettajien identiteettikonflikteja voi syntyä, kun ulkoiset vaatimukset ja odotukset ovat ristiriidassa opettajien ammattikäsitteen ja arvojen kanssa. Ratkaisemattomat konfliktit vähentävät opettajien työtyytyväisyyttä ja ammattivelvollisuuden tunnetta. Opettajien ammatillisen kehityksen vahvistamiseksi koulutuksen muutoksen osalta on tärkeää osallistaa opettajat aktiivisiksi toimijoiksi ja tukea heidän ammatillista toimijuuttaan urapolulla. Opettajien toimijuus voi toteutua kehittämällä omia ja yhteisönsä työkäytäntöjä, vaikuttamalla organisaatiossa ja neuvottelemalla ammatillisesta identiteetistään tilannesidonnaisessa ympäristössään.

Silti tutkimuksessa on edelleen aukkoja siinä, mitä opettajan identiteettikonflikteja syntyy uran varrella ja miten ammatillinen toimijuus muuttuu ja jatkuu pitkittäisnäkökulmasta. Lisäksi empiirisiä tutkimuksia, jotka pureutuvat korkean valtasuhteen työpaikkakulttuuria sisältäviin ympäristöihin, on vielä harvemmin. Tämä väitöskirja pyrkii tutkimaan opettajien identiteettikonflikteja ja ammatillista toimijuutta Hongkongin sosiaalikkulttuurisessa kontekstissa. Väitöskirja koostui kolmesta osatutkimuksesta, jotka käyttivät laadullisia menetelmiä. Osatutkimus 1 paljasti opettajien identiteettikonflikteja tilannesidonnaisessa sosiaalipoliittisessa ja välittömässä kouluympäristössä sekä eri uravaiheet liittyvät identiteettikonflikteihin ja niihin liittyviin selviytymisstrategioihin. Osatutkimus 2 keskittyi opettajien ammatilliseen toimijuuteen Hongkongin kontekstissa, joka sisältää keskitetyn hajautetun koulutushallintajärjestelmän ja hierarkkisen kulttuurisen työympäristön. Toimijuus ilmeni pedagogisina ja suhteellisina näkökohtina, ja kontekstiin liittyvät toimijuutta edistävät tekijät esitettiin. Osatutkimus 3 oli pitkittäistutkimus, jossa tutkittiin opettajien ammatillisen toimijuuden muutoksia ja jatkuvuuksia, ja siinä tunnistettiin neljä toimijatyyppejä: laajentava, strateginen, tutkiva ja hiipuva toimijuus.

Tämä väitöskirja väitti, että opettajien toimijuutta voi vahvistaa luottamus johtamiseen, yhteistyöhön työyhteisössä ja demokraattisten viestintäkanavien saatavuuteen keskeisiin politiikkoihin, huolimatta historiallisesti ja kulttuurisesti juurtuneesta hierarkkisesta rakenteesta työympäristössä kuten Hongkongissa.

Avainsanoja: laadullinen analyysi; longitudinaalinen tutkimus; opettajan ammatillinen toimijuus; opettajan identiteettikonfliktit; opettajan urakehitys

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Jyväskylä 12.4.2024
Josephine Lau

LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This doctoral dissertation is based on the following publications. These articles are referred to as substudies in the text. Copies of the articles are appended to the dissertation.

- Article I Lau, J., Vähäsantanen, K., & Collin, K. (2022). Teachers' identity tensions and related coping strategies: Interaction with the career stages and socio-political context. *Professions and Professionalism*, 12(3). <https://doi.org/10.7577/pp.4562>
- Article II Lau, J., Vähäsantanen, K., & Collin, K. (2024). Teachers' professional agency in a centralised–decentralisation system and a hierarchical cultural context: The case of Hong Kong. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 32(3), 699-719.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2022.2086606>
- Article III Lau, J., Vähäsantanen, K., & Collin, K. (2023). The change and continuity of teachers' professional agency: A two-year longitudinal study in the case of Hong Kong. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Education*. Advanced online publication.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2023.2283368>

The author of this dissertation is the first author of each article. Thus, the author of this dissertation was responsible for writing the article manuscript. Taking into account the instructions given and comments made by the co-authors, the author of the dissertation collected the data, conducted the analyses and wrote the report of the three publications.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Regardless of times and contexts (e.g., Alsup, 2006; Day, 2008; Huberman et al., 1993; Palmer, 1998), being a teacher is a challenging profession demanding both intellectual and emotional labour. When teachers enter students' lives, they accompany and promote the academic and personal growth of the next generation. Teachers could inspire the young minds to strive for a better life and a more desirable future for humankind. The impact of teachers' work might not be easily and immediately measured, and what attracts the talented ones to and retains the experienced ones in the caring and meaningful profession could be moral rewards and societal recognitions beyond monetary terms. In the changing society and the challenging world of our times, it is important to facilitate teacher's career development as the profession is positively contributing to the shaping of a prosperous society and a better world.

Teacher identity tensions and professional agency are the core issues investigated in this dissertation to understand teachers' career development. For several decades, scholars in the education field have been contributing to the understanding of teachers and their professional lives (e.g., Day, 2008; Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Huberman et al., 1993; Lortie, 1975; Sikes et al., 1985). The "Old Truths" (Day, 2013) emphasize the relevance of professional identity in relation to the teachers' individual and collective development (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004), and highlight the importance of teacher agency in constructing a meaningful career through making significant differences in classrooms, school organisations and even to society (e.g., Toom et al., 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2015).

Teachers nowadays are expected to be professional learning and career-long active agents, who could engage with different education innovations, adapt themselves to diverse work demands, collaborate with colleagues to devise creative ways to tackle changes and challenges, and make professional judgements regarding top-down orders (e.g., Biesta et al., 2015; Edwards, 2015; Ketelaar et al., 2014; Olsen, 2014; Schapp et al., 2019; Toom et al., 2015). The work-oriented actions and decisions, which teachers take and make, sustain and shape their professional identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016).

The self-understanding in the profession is both a result of and a guide to work practices along their career trajectory (Olsen, 2014), in which the close association between the concepts of professional identity and professional agency is underscored.

However, teachers' professional beliefs, values and ideals could conflict with the demands and changes encroaching on the profession. The discrepancies between the personal and professional dimensions in teacher identity could result in identity tensions affecting teachers' psyches and ways of tackling the issues (Alsup, 2006; Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018). Moreover, the affordances of manifesting professional agency in exerting influence in the workplace and developing work practices are contextually bounded (Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). Despite the significance of professional agency in teacher development, the extent to which agency is supported and emphasised could vary from school to school, and from context to context. Particularly in today's world, which is signified by rapid technological advancement, societal changes and challenges from multiple facets, teacher identity and professional agency persist as critical and interrelated issues in teachers' lives.

Despite the prominence of teacher identity tensions and professional agency, substantial gaps still exist in the research on teacher lives and development. First, regarding teacher identity tensions, previous studies (e.g., Alsup, 2006; Pillen et al., 2013) have mainly focused on the initial training and early career stage in the classrooms and school organisation. However, it has been noted that some of these identity tensions in the early professional life phases could persist to the later stages in experienced teachers (van der Want et al., 2018). Extending the exploration of identity tensions beyond the initial stages and the immediate school environment could broaden the understanding of the peculiar factors related to identity tensions in specific situations. Hence, there is a need to identify **what teacher identity tensions arise in different career stages within and outside of the school environment**.

Second, concerning teacher professional agency, which is another core concept closely associated with professional identity, studies from the temporal perspective have been inadequate. Extant studies have advocated for the cultivation of a sense of professional agency from initial training (e.g., Heikonen et al., 2020; Soini et al., 2015) to the career-long trajectory (e.g., Day et al., 2006). However, longitudinal studies on how teacher agency could evolve, dwindle or be sustained are still lacking (Toom et al., 2022). Thus, the gap regarding **what possible changes and continuity take place in the enactment of teacher agency over time** needs to be addressed.

Furthermore, there is a scarcity in the exploration of both identity tensions and professional agency issues in different sociocultural contexts. Studies on teacher identity tensions conducted in regions like the Netherlands (Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018) and the United States (Alsup, 2006; Palmer, 1998) remain influential; while "recognising and realising teacher professional agency" (Edwards, 2015, p. 779) is a prevalent discourse influencing teachers' training and development in the Western context (Erss, 2018). However, perspectives from

non-Western contexts, which might offer different insights on the emergence of identity tensions and a different scope regarding the exercise of professional agency, are insufficient in the field. In other words, an examination of **what factors in the non-Western context could be connected to teacher identity tensions and agency manifestation** could further expand the understanding of the two closely related and important concepts in teacher development.

Addressing the existing research gaps in teacher identity tensions and professional agency with empirical evidence is essential for supporting teachers' changing work lives. It would shed light on the facilitations of teachers' development amid the setbacks and challenges along their career pathways, and on the construction of meaningful and sustainable careers for both new and experienced teachers. This doctoral study, which adopted the case of Hong Kong, **aims to explore identity tensions and professional agency among teachers in relation to the identified research gaps**. This dissertation includes three empirical studies. Substudy I more precisely investigated identity tension issues faced by teachers at different career stages within and beyond the school environment. Substudy II explored how teachers manifested their professional agency bounded in the specific context. Lastly, Substudy III illustrated what changes and continuity take place in the enactment of teacher professional agency over time. Data from interviews with teachers with 0 to over 15 years of experience, conducted over a period of two years in 2018 and 2020, were utilised.

The next subsections illustrate the theoretical framework guiding the investigation of this doctoral study. First, how teacher identity tensions were understood in previous empirical studies (e.g., Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018) is demonstrated. Then, the subject-centred sociocultural approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), which the dissertation adopted to investigate professional agency in teachers' work lives, is explained. The approach incorporates a lifelong developmental perspective, with a focus on the actions and decisions of the professional subject in relation to the specific context. Next, in the consideration of temporality in professional agency, the chordal triad of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and the ecological approach (Biesta & Tedder, 2007) are used as a reference in the investigation. Lastly, the contextual lenses are utilised to explore both identity tension and agency enactment issues specific to teachers in Hong Kong.

1.1 Teacher Identity Tensions

Teacher identity tensions arise when the beliefs, values and ideals in the personal dimension conflict with the demands and expectations in the professional dimension regarding teachers' profession (Alsup, 2006; Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018). Before investigating the issues related to teacher identity tensions, it is essential to comprehend the concept of teacher professional identity.

1.1.1 Teacher Identity as a Developmental Process

Despite the tremendous interest and endeavours in teacher identity research over the last two decades (Alsup, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Day, 2008; Kelchtermans, 2009), no single absolute definition could embrace the complications and complexity of the concept of teacher identity. As a matter of course, the basis of teacher identity encompasses the traditional assets consisting of professional beliefs and values, along with the subject knowledge and educational competences in the pedagogical and didactical areas (Beijaard et al., 2000, 2004; Vähäsantanen et al., 2019). In addition, teacher identity comprises personal variations of motivational and affective aspects, such as efficacy, commitment, emotions, and passions. These personal components are significant in the construction and preservation of professional identity (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day et al., 2006; Kelchtermans, 2009; Palmer, 1998). Hence, substantial variations could exist in the teacher identity development among individuals and groups of teachers from different expertise areas, professional backgrounds and school cultures (Beijaard et al., 2000).

From a development perspective (Beijaard et al., 2004), teacher identity is strongly connected to professional agency. The perspective represents a work history-based constellation of teachers' perceptions of themselves as actors in the process of their development (Olsen, 2014). Moreover, it describes how context and temporality interplay with agency in the construction and negotiation of identity based on the following features. First, instead of being a static entity or inborn phenomenon, teacher identity is fluid, shifting and unstable (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Through the interpretation and reinterpretation of the teachers' experiences, teacher identity is an ongoing developmental process along the career trajectory. Second, teacher identity is social in nature, as it is formed through the dynamic negotiation of the individual with different relational and contextual factors in the ecology of the work environment and career stages (Day, 2008; Huberman et al., 1993). Third, multiple identities could be harmonised, exist and emerge from different situations and demands, as well as in the relationships with co-workers and students in their pursuit of socially meaningful causes (Alsup, 2006).

Hence, when considering the temporal and specific contextual factors in teacher development, the inseparable relationship between identity and agency is emphasised. The identity-development process requires teachers' active engagement in the work setting and relationships. However, how teachers engage in the process is bounded to the situations emerging in the environment and are subject to change as different factors unfold along the career pathway. In this dissertation, teacher identity is defined as a process in constant negotiations with the different relations and diverse situations, which could be represented by conflicts and disagreements arising from the situated context.

1.1.2 Teacher Identity Tensions

As indicated, teacher identity is a dynamic developmental process that engages the professional self and the surrounding environment. Teachers are in constant interaction and negotiation with different relations and factors surrounding their social world. In relation to the professional subject and professional context, teacher identity is a notion involving both personal and professional dimensions. The former connotes the professional beliefs, values and ideals residing in the teacher themselves, while the latter signifies the requirements, expectations and demands from the classroom, school organisation, policy and society (Beijaard et al., 2004; Day, 2013). Identity tensions can emerge when the personal dimension is in conflict with the professional dimension (e.g., Alsup, 2006; Pillen et al., 2013). Teacher identity tensions can occur at different locales, such as classrooms and collegial communities, and at different times along the teacher career trajectory. To sustain teachers' career development, it is important to identify the identity tensions and provide appropriate support for the teachers to cope with the challenges, enact their professional agency and continuously negotiate their identity in making an impact on their career and the education arena.

Figure 1 illustrates how teacher identity tensions are understood in the dissertation. The left and right sides represent the personal and professional dimensions of teacher identity, respectively; while the centre symbolises the identity tensions when the two dimensions conflict with one another.

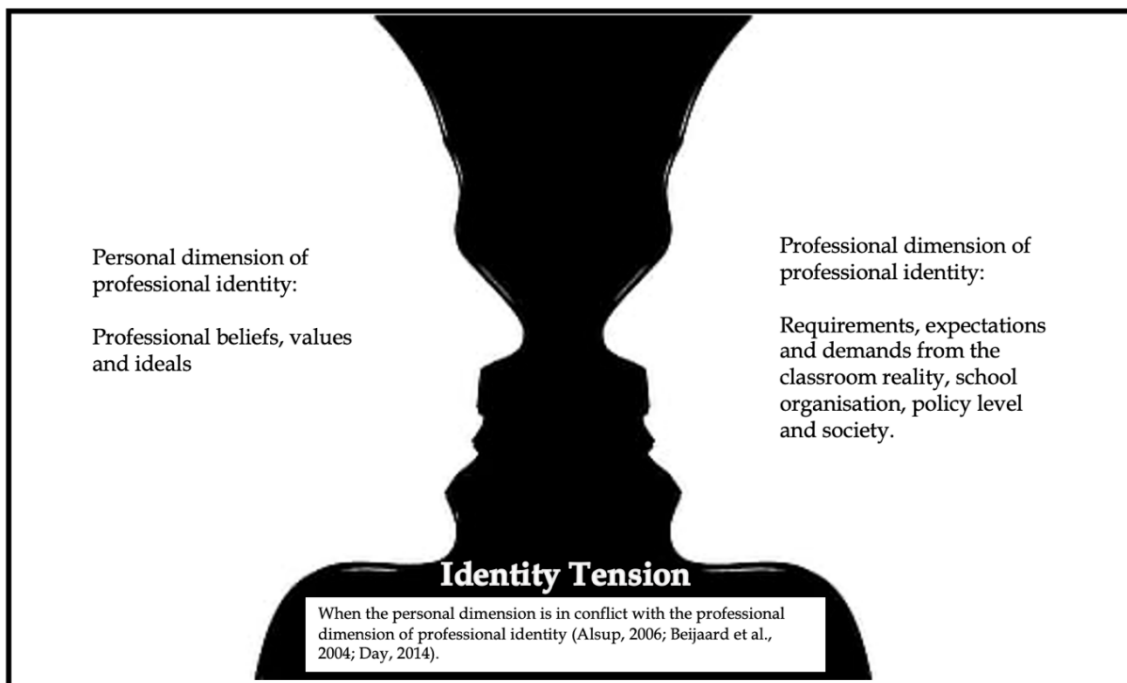


FIGURE1. ¹ Illustration of teacher identity tension

¹ FIGURE1 is based on a royalty-free photo found at <https://www.pickpik.com/head-brain-thoughts-human-body-face-psychology-110137>

1.1.3 Identity Tensions in Relation to the Career Stages

Studies on teacher identity tensions have predominantly focused on the early career phase, when the beginning teachers are starting to construct their professional identity from their initial training and work practices during the survival and discovery profession stages (Huberman et al., 1993). As demonstrated in the studies on student teachers in the United States and early career teachers in the Netherlands (Alsup, 2006; Pillen et al., 2013), beginning teachers encounter various identity tensions, such as the change of role to a fully responsible teacher, the discrepancies in the desired and actual support for students, and the conflicting ways in teaching among teacher educators and colleagues. The initial profession stage exhibits more career struggles like lower levels of competence (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020) and motivation (Ponnock et al., 2018). All these work-related tensions could negatively impact beginning teachers' professional development, well-being, and willingness to contribute to and stay in the teaching career. Thus, even the student teachers have graduated and obtained the qualifications, continuous support targeting the early career stage, such as mentoring and purposeful learning, is needed. Moreover, work tensions in the middle and late career stages should not be neglected. Some issues in the early stage could persist in the later stages (van der Want et al., 2018), and in turn affect teachers' commitment to and effectiveness in educational changes throughout their career (Day, 2008). In the study of teachers' work, lives and effectiveness in the United Kingdom (Day, 2008), differentiated initial and continuing professional development programmes are suggested as strategies for sustaining commitment to the career. This is because teachers at different career phases have different experiences and orientations towards the professional and personal aspects of life. Teachers' work, which is complicated by the changing world, has become increasingly demanding. Regardless of experiences and seniority, teachers are expected to devote personal time and extra effort to both teaching and non-teaching tasks, such as administrative duties, extracurricular activities, supplementary tutoring and learning about different changes and innovations in education (Ponnock et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to research beyond the early career stage and identify the identity tensions at different stages to accommodate appropriate support for teachers grappling with the immense emotional, intellectual, and social demands of the ongoing educational changes and social movements.

Concerning the categorisation of teacher career stages, teacher life development studies have undertaken efforts to understand the different professional life phases from various perspectives (e.g., Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Sikes et al., 1985) and regional contexts (e.g., Day et al., 2006; Huberman et al., 1993). According to the linear career development model, the first three years of teaching are widely acknowledged as the early career stage. However, no consensus has been reached on the number of years of experience indicating the commencement of the middle or experienced stage (e.g., Day, 2013; Graham et al., 2020; Huberman et al., 1993). Following Huberman's model, Day et al. (2006) derived six professional life phases, with a focus on teachers' commitment to and effectiveness

in their careers over time. Teachers with 0–7 years of experience are categorised as being in the early professional life phase. The middle phase consists of teachers with 8–23 years of experience. The very experienced ones with 24+ years of experience are grouped into the late professional life phase. Furthermore, in the study of teaching quality in relation to teaching experiences (Graham et al., 2020), a range of 4–5 years of experience is suggested as the “transitional” stage, since stabilised career decisions are made after the initial three years, while those immersed in the classrooms for over five years are categorised as “experienced”. In this dissertation, the early career phase consists of the beginning stage and transitional stage, representing teachers with 0–3 and 4–7 years of experience, respectively. Teachers who have been in the profession for 8–15 years are in the experienced stage in the middle career phase.

1.1.4 Identity Tension in Relation to the Context

A range of factors in the external environment could influence the personal and professional dimensions in the development of teacher identity (Beijaard et al., 2004; Ye & Zhao, 2019). Teachers’ tensions could emerge at different locales in the context related to the school environment and society. At the immediate school level, teachers are required to perform their identity roles in relation to interactions with students, collaboration with colleagues and school management culture (Kayi-Aydar, 2015). In the daily interactions with students, teaching is a “emotional work” calling for the whole-person involvement in understanding how students learn, and the investment of teachers’ authentic selves in caring for the students’ growth (Day, 2014). In relation to the school organisation, teachers are required to collaborate with colleagues and be actively involved in the teaching community to enhance teaching quality, implement different changes and initiatives, and share administrative demands. Various conflicts might arise in the collegial community over teaching conceptions regarding the ways in which tasks should be handled (Schaap et al., 2019). Teachers could also disagree with school leaders and management about expectations and demands regarding the priorities in instructional practices and administrative policies. For example, a performance-driven school culture could clash with teachers’ internal beliefs and values that advocate for more well-rounded student growth. In addition, stakeholders, such as parents, could have pedagogical ideas differing from those of teachers and schools.

As the construction of teacher identity does not occur in a vacuum within the school organisation, identity tensions at the broader sociopolitical aspect in the context should also be taken into consideration. The sociopolitical level comprises the forces of traditions, authority, laws and rules, along with the principles, rights and responsibilities that contribute to framing what a teacher represents for the society (Zembylas & Chubbuck, 2018). It has been noted that the societal image and status of teachers vary across cultures and regions, thus leading to different demands and expectations for the profession. For example, the “neoliberal cascade” (Connell, 2013) and rapid technological breakthroughs could have

induced governments to impose hasty educational changes and policies, which have in turn led to heavy and meaningless workloads for the teaching frontline (Davies, 2013). Furthermore, the power of ideologically oriented authoritarian regimes could override the institutional and organisational structures of schools and impel teachers to become larger political agents implementing central missions (Schulte, 2018). Thus, the identity tensions perceived by teachers in different contexts could vary according to the diverse sociopolitical situations.

1.2 Teacher Professional Agency

To understand what teacher agency is, the nature of human agency needs to be briefly explained. Human agency is a multifaceted construct rooted in the sociological literature and diversely conceptualised in social sciences and other academic branches, such as psychology and anthropology (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Goller & Paloniemi, 2022). Although it is debatable whether the concept is overly socialised or individualised in the disciplinary theoretical discussions, analytical dualism (Archer, 2003) allows the investigation of both the actors' capacity and the contextual factors as causative influences on agency. In the field of workplace research, agency can also be considered from three major perspectives: 1) dispositional, which is related to the prerequisite for making decisions, causing things and exercising power; 2) relational, which is the contingency between the individual and the situational affordances of the environment; and 3) transformational, which is about the behaviours and actions of individuals aiming for transformation and change in the work context (Goller & Paloniemi, 2022).

Distinct from professional autonomy, which emphasises the profession's independence and freedom separating from external influence and control (Erss, 2018), professional agency comprises contextually and structurally bounded work-oriented actions (Vähäsantanen, 2015). The practice-based phenomenon impacts negotiations of professional identity, intentional construction of individual tasks and duties, the collective work culture and practices, organisational development and even potential changes and transformation (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Varpanen, 2020; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). The extent to which teachers positively or negatively engage at work and exercise agency for potential transformations is related to their professional background and experiences (Biesta et al., 2015) and to the readiness of the workplace (Billett, 2001) in supporting teachers' engagement, learning and development.

Specifically in the school setting, professional agency can be further categorised in terms of pedagogical, relational and sociocultural aspects (Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016). Pedagogical agency is associated with the situations in teaching and learning. It is enacted through teachers' pedagogical and didactic competences, including the actions and decisions in selecting and using the teaching materials, constructing a collaborative learning environment, reflecting on one's own instructional practices, and implementing different instructional

strategies to improve students' learning and one's own professional skills (Pappa et al., 2019; Soini et al., 2016). In parallel with this, relational agency entails a range of social interactions and relationships within the situated community and organisation. It reflects the collegial relationships that encompass the sharing of knowledge and transformational practices. Social relationships and interactions could in turn strengthen personal and collective expertise and competence. These relations are important in constructing a positive organisational climate and culture (Edwards, 2015; Pappa et al., 2019; Pyhältö et al., 2015). Lastly, sociocultural agency goes beyond the immediate classroom and school settings, and it is exercised in the wider sociocultural environment in relation to other stakeholders, such as parents, policy makers, institutes and authorities (Pappa et al., 2019).

Given its potential and capacity to transform and bring changes to the work practices and environment, teacher agency is a highlighted concept immersing into the development of innovative teaching methods, the transformation of the school organisation, and the implementation of educational reform in societies (Day et al., 2006; Eteläpelto et al., 2015). Teachers' engagement in the school environment and educational issues is essential for shaping the practices and conditions for meaningful education (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Edwards, 2015; Ketelaar et al., 2014; Toom et al., 2015). In relation to professional development, agency also connotes teachers' initiatives in continuous learning and reflections on the professional self with the situated context (Soini et al., 2016). At the intervals of societal challenges, technological advancement and personal and professional changes in life, professional agency is essential to the achievement of a meaningful teacher career,

To sum up, teacher identity and professional agency are intertwining entities which are significant to teacher career-long development. Teacher identity negotiation and agency enactment retain an intricate, dynamic, and multifaceted relationship (e.g., Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2016; Ukkonen-Mikkola & Varpanen, 2020; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). The concepts are connected to the personal and social-cultural affordances, as well as broader societal and political factors, which are interacting in the teachers' navigation through the complexity and challenges in the educational contexts (Biesta et al., 2015; Billett, 2001). Teacher identity negotiation is a relational and contextual process involving teachers' agency in determining the positions, performing the work contents, and influencing the professional matters in school context. Identifying identity tensions enable teachers and teaching community to clarify the professional beliefs, and to open up opportunities to align the professional values with the external expectations. It could in turn enhance teachers' sense of agency and enable them to act and react in their professional roles. Recognising and emphasizing the intertwining nature of teacher identity tensions and professional agency, the present dissertation aims to analyse the dynamics of the concepts in relation to different socio-cultural contexts and in the organic flow of time, which are still inadequately addressed in the existing research.

1.2.1 Temporality in Professional Agency

Temporality is an important element in the complexity of understanding agency. When professional subjects walk along their career trajectories, different situations and happenings in lives unfold. The relationships with other actors and the orientations towards the structure could be switched or be recomposed over time. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) emphasised agency as a temporally embedded social engagement process that is influenced by the past, oriented towards the future and acted out in the present. In other words, agency is interpreted as the interplay of the actors' routines, purposes, and judgements rooted in the temporal dimensions. Specifically, the dimensions of the past, present and future are, namely, 1) the iterative dimension, which involves the selective reactivation of past patterns of thoughts and actions as habits and routines; 2) the projective dimension, which is the imaginative generation of alternative possibilities; and 3) the practical-evaluative dimension, which is related to the contextualisation of past habits and future projects in present contingencies. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) also refer to the temporal dimensions as the chordal triad of agency (1998), which connotes the dimensions's distinctive but harmonious properties when they interact in the reproductive and transformative aspects of social actions.

Likewise, teachers' professional agency is prone to change with the fluctuation of time, as indicated in previous studies (Leijen et al., 2022; Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). For example, vocational teachers, who have faced large-scale reforms in the Finnish context, demonstrated the importance of developing trust and understanding over time with the students' employers when implementing the practicum (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). When trust and understanding were built in the relations and situations, the vocational teachers were afforded the opportunity to exercise their agency in developing tasks for their students and even in making suggestions regarding the work practices to the employers. In addition, a study on supporting teacher agency through a collaborative inquiry-based in-service course in Estonia (Leijen et al., 2022) illustrated that teacher agency could change and increase with interventions. The changes were mostly associated with the awareness of one's knowledge based in influencing work practices in classrooms and the work community. Professional agency is a practice-based developmental phenomenon, which is prone to changes and continuity as different events and factors spread out over a teacher's career. However, there has been little exploration of how agency enactment changes and continues over time in association with different personal and contextual factors.

1.2.2 Approaches to Professional Agency

In this dissertation, the subject-centred sociocultural approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) was utilised to investigate how teachers afforded the enactment of professional agency in the investigated context. The approach is functional in identifying the professional agency enacted by the professional subject, and the dynamics between the personal factors and the sociocultural conditions of the

workplace in agency manifestation. Regarding the understanding of temporality in professional agency, the ecological approach (Biesta et al., 2015), which integrated the choral triad of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), was taken into account. The approach is practical in understanding how the changes and continuity of agency are temporally and spatially related to the investigated contexts.

1.2.2.1 Subject-Centred Sociocultural Approach

Focusing on the rapid changes occurring in working life, the subject-centred sociocultural approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) embraces a lifelong developmental perspective emphasizing on how the professional subject learns and creates subjectivity throughout the work processes. The approach views the professional subject and the sociocultural conditions as analytically separated (Archer, 2003), but strongly interrelated with the practice of professional agency. Regarding the professional subject, agency enactment is related to professional identity, knowledge, competences, work history and experiences constructed over time. Concerning the sociocultural conditions, agency is achievable due to physical and technical material resources and intangible social factors, such as power relations, work cultures, discourses and the subject's position.

Apart from understanding the factors and conditions related to the phenomenon of agency enactment, the approach indicated that professional agency involves work-related actions and decisions related to the three dimensions of 1) influencing at work, in which teachers' experiences are considered in the decision-making process; 2) developing work practices, which connotes one's active engagement in the development and transformation of one's own and shared practices; and 3) negotiating one's identity, which refers to aligning one's career with one's professional beliefs and goals (Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). Figure 2 demonstrates the definition of the subject-centred sociocultural approach in the analysis of professional agency.

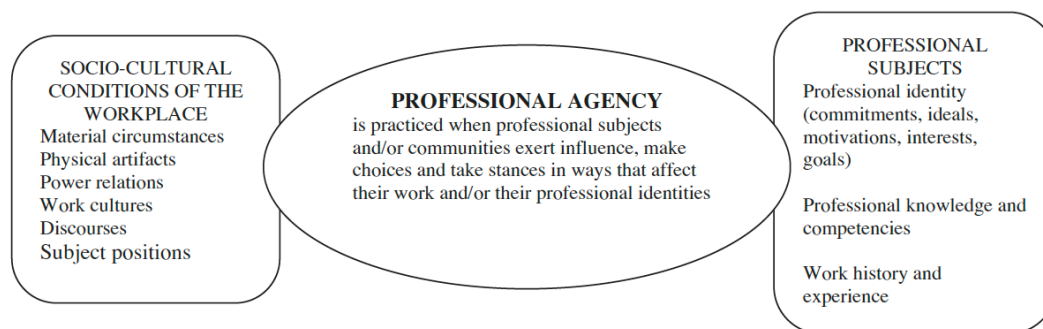


FIGURE2. Professional agency within a subject-centred sociocultural framework (Eteläpelto et al., 2013)

1.2.2.2 Ecological Approach

With an emphasis on temporal dimensions, the ecological view of human agency (Biesta et al., 2015) is an approach linking the dynamics between the actors and the context. The ecological approach perceives agency as temporally and spatially achieved through the actor's past insights, future projections and present practical evaluation. In other words, the achievement of agency is the ecological interplay among individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors over time (Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta & Tedder, 2007). The three temporal dimensions in the chordal triad of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) are integrated into the ecological perspective of agency with more refined interpretations. The iterative dimension maintains the stability of the social world and helps the actor sustaining identities, interactions, and institutions over time; while the projective dimension connotes the actor's thoughts and action in the received structure, which might be creatively reconfigured with the actor's hopes, fears and desires for the future. The centre in the approach is the practical-evaluative dimension, which is related to the actor's capacity in the structure to choose practically and normatively from the alternative actions in response to the demands, dilemmas and ambiguities emerging from the evolving situations. Figure 3 shows the ecological perspective of professional agency and demonstrates how different factors in the three abovementioned temporal dimensions interplay in the manifestation of agency. The ecological approach highlights that the achievement of agency is prone to the fluctuation of time in relation to the different factors of the actor and in the environment. It endeavours to explain why agency could be enacted and supported in one situation, in a specific context or at a certain period, but not another.

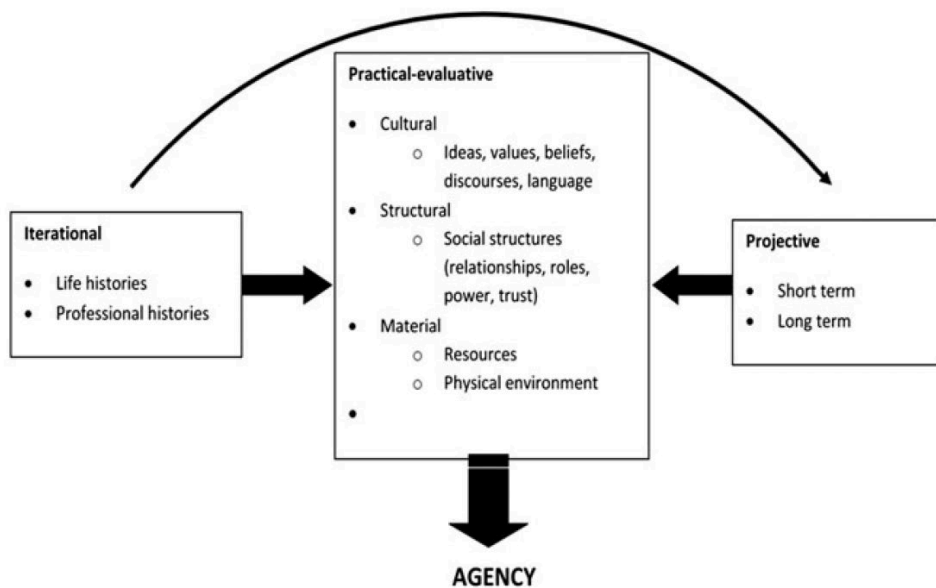


FIGURE3. A model for understanding the achievement of agency (Biesta et al., 2015)

1.3 The Research Context: The Teaching Profession in Hong Kong

This dissertation adopts the contextual lenses—in this case, Hong Kong—in the exploration of teacher identity tensions and professional agency issues. This case addresses the lack of research from non-Western contexts. To understand the current context in which teachers in Hong Kong are situated, this section touches upon the work structure and culture, as well as the changing political and societal sphere of the region affecting the dynamics in the work environment.

1.3.1 The Centralised-Decentralisation Education Management Structure

Hong Kong was under British colonial rule for over 150 years, and sovereign rights were returned to China in 1997. During the 1990s, when Hong Kong was in its political transitional and postcolonial era, a series of large-scale education reforms were launched. These reforms, with a view towards excellence, competition and accountability in schools (Sweeting, 2005), aimed to address uncertainties related to the political transition and the neo-liberal forces that emphasised management effectiveness in the public sector (Ball, 2003). Regarding the education governance, the British administration recognised that the centralised system was unsuitable and ineffective for grappling the new educational challenges but exercised extreme caution in policy changes in the transitional period (Mok, 2004). The late colonial government ruled out the devolutionary decentralisation management system, which led the region to miss out the opportunity to develop a form of democratic education governance, which would further entrust school leaders and teacher professionalism, and enhance the participation of different stakeholders in education policy making. Instead, the managerially focused “centralised-decentralisation” approach (Hung et al., 2019) was adopted, with the aim of boosting efficiency in the deployment of education resources. The Education Bureau in the government held the dominant central position in policy formation and retained the power to impose stringent regulative measures in school accountability (Kwan & Li, 2015). In the school organisation, principals and management were designated with managerial power, such as the utilisation of human and financial resources, the development of curriculum material to cater to individual school needs and the implementation of policies from the central bureau (Tan & Ng, 2007).

Like many developed economies aiming to maintain a competitive edge in the world, the Education Bureau in Hong Kong continuously initiated curriculum renewals and educational changes in schools. Rapid technological development and societal changes placed great demands on teacher professionalism in learning new skills and adopting various technologies in the realisation of different projects and plans. Nevertheless, teacher professional agency was not emphasised, if not unmentioned, in any central guidelines, curriculum documents or professional development reports in the region. In general, teachers and

schools were the executors of top-down instructions, without great involvement in the formation of central education policies.

1.3.2 Initial Teacher Training and Hierarchical Bureaucratic Work Structure in School Organisation

Teachers in Hong Kong are highly qualified professionals with degree- or post-graduate-level teacher training. The professionalisation of teachers in the region was closely associated with the large-scale reform during the political transition era in the 1990s. In the early 2000s, all graduates from initial teacher training programmes were degree holders. Teacher training institutions were constantly modified and enhanced to enrich the skills and experience of the student teachers, and there are mainly four universities² offering government funded undergraduate and postgraduate teacher training programmes. The professional training at the bachelor level usually takes four to five years. A semester or a year of overseas immersion is emphasized on language student-teachers and highly recommended for other subjects. Instead of a master qualification highlighting the graduate's research competences, the 5-year teacher training programme often leads to a double degree comprising bachelor qualifications in both education and the subject area. The double degree track also facilitates the graduates' career development beyond the classrooms and schools. Regarding the curriculum, all the universities offer education studies modules associated with teacher identity and sense of professional agency development. The concepts of teacher identity and agency are mainly diffused in the modules such as teacher professionalism and ethics, school leadership and management, career-long learning, and teacher roles in reforms, even though the concepts might not be taught as an independent subject. Teacher training in Hong Kong offers professional and quality curriculum, which could potentially prepare future teachers as collaborative and reflective educators for the diverse school environment, and equip them as change agents in the challenging teaching career. No additional requirements other than the initial teacher training are needed to become a fully qualified teacher. However, to safeguard the professional standards at the entry into the teaching profession, graduates from other disciplines without recognised teacher training could only be recruited as permitted teachers, which implies more restrictions on appointment terms and lower remunerations.

Within schools, management and staff structures are hierarchical. In public and government schools, where almost 80% of the teachers serve (Education

² The universities are Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU), The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), The Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK), and The University of Hong Kong (HKU). Self-funded teaching programmes are also offered in other universities, including the mentioned ones. The course description of the education studies of the mentioned universities are retrieved on 12th February 2024 from:
HKBU- <https://handbook.ar.hkbu.edu.hk/2022-2023/course/EDUC>
CUHK- <https://www.fed.cuhk.edu.hk/~ede4343/course-lists/#educational-studies>
EDUHK- <https://www.eduhk.hk/acadprog/undergrad/>
HKU- [https://www4.hku.hk/pubunit/drcd/files/ugdr2022-23/Education/BA&BEd\(LangEd\).pdf](https://www4.hku.hk/pubunit/drcd/files/ugdr2022-23/Education/BA&BEd(LangEd).pdf)

Bureau, 2023), the teaching staff are ranked according to qualifications and years of experience. Their salary follows the ranks on the pay scale of civil servants, in accordance with the bureaucracy from the colonial government. Although the centralised-decentralisation education management system allows schools a degree of autonomy in the application of resources and the delivery of the central curriculum, the decision-making power is strongly in the grasp of upper management (Ko et al., 2016). The middle tranche of professionals, which mostly comprises experienced teachers, works closely with the upper level. Thus, there is a “top-heavy” imbalance of power in principal–teacher relations, with the top also controlling the information disseminated to teachers. Historically – as well as currently – the hierarchical staff structure and leadership style has influenced teachers’ self-positioning in their situated contexts, which in turn affects teachers’ evaluations of school tasks and initiatives.

1.3.3 High Power Distance Work Culture and the *Junzi* Character in Confucian-Heritage Society

In addition to the hierarchical organisational structure, the work culture in Hong Kong is characterised by high power distances (Hofstede & Bond, 1988), in which employees are expected to behave in alignment with management rules and orders. A culture of high power distance is prominent in regions of Confucian heritage, such as Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam. Confucian ideology emphasises a communitarian perspective, according to which individuals are a larger part of a community, and one should try to live up to the expected social roles and responsibilities in their position in the hierarchy (Tan, 2014). Hence, respect for seniors, such as parents and teachers, is the traditional culture embedded in Confucian-heritage societies.

On the personal level, philosophical Confucianism emphasises the life-long pursuit of becoming a *junzi*. A *junzi* is an individual with noble character who cherishes humanistic virtues, such as respect for others, justice and altruism, and who possesses intellectual qualities like passion for learning and being self-reflective (Tan, 2014). In other words, a *junzi* does not blindly submit to conformity and allegiance to top-down orders, but a *junzi* is an agentic being capable of interacting with the social environment. In such a way, a *junzi* could demonstrate value-based judgement, autonomy, critical reflection, and creativity on the self-cultivation pathway. As applied to the modern work and professional context, *junzi* leaders – persons who have been granted more power in the position, such as principals and senior management – should win others over to their ideas through enacted virtues such as trustworthiness and fairness. Correspondingly, *junzi* community members like teachers, should respect both their leaders and their peers, while exercising personal autonomy and rational judgement through appropriate behaviours in their respective roles.

1.3.4 Political and Societal Events Impacting the Education Sector During 2018–2020

Apart from the political transition from colonial rule to the one-country two-systems³ form of governance, the societal and political structure of the region encountered great changes that impacted the education sector. In contrast with the apolitical attitude of the public during colonial rule, civic society became more engaged in the political and societal issues like education in the region. Different stakeholders like parent associations and other non-profit organisations, were actively involved in the educational movements, such as protesting the controversy of introducing the “moral and national education” as an independent subject in 2012, and demanding the abolishment of the burdensome assessment for primary students in 2015. Although the civic society had been flourishing in the 2010s, the Hong Kong political scenario underwent drastic changes towards the end of the decade. While the 79-day Umbrella Movement in 2014 was ended by a police clearing operation, the anti-authoritarian movement in 2019–2020 was abruptly aborted by the enforcement of the National Security Law in mid-2020 (Yam, 2022). All these political changes elicited stricter control into the civic society and impacted the education sector. In 2021, the largest pro-democracy teacher trade union - Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union, which existed for over half a century, resolved to dissolve. Since 2023, all newly appointed teachers have been required to pass a basic law and national security law test.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a huge challenge in the education field worldwide. The global pandemic led to the unprecedented physical closure of schools for almost two years in Hong Kong, from 2020 to 2022. Classes had to be shifted online, and virtual learning exacerbated several negative effects on education, such as the digital divide between the rich and poor and students struggling to catch up with learning progress and being deprived of the socialisation gained from the school community.

1.4 Aim and Overarching Questions of the Dissertation

Despite the endeavours in research on teachers’ work lives, there are still inadequate temporal and contextual viewpoints on identity tensions and professional agency in teachers’ career development. From the temporal perspective, this dissertation aims to explore 1) teachers’ identity tensions at different career stages, and 2) the changes and continuation of their professional agency over time. From the contextual perspective, the dissertation aims to address 3) the specific factors in the context related to identity tensions and agency manifestation.

³ “One country two systems” is a political negotiation allowing Hong Kong to retain many of the established structure and existing characteristics, including its legal, financial, and educational systems, after Britain transferred the sovereign rights of the colony to China in 1997. While China remains officially socialist, Hong Kong could remain officially capitalist as a special administrative region of the sovereign country.

The following three overarching questions (OQs) are raised to pursue the aim of the dissertation:

1. What are the identity tensions perceived by teachers at different career stages?
2. How is professional agency manifested by teachers over time?
3. What are the factors connected to teacher identity tensions and agency manifestation in the specific context?

The above OQs were investigated through three substudies with different foci. OQ 1 was addressed by Substudy I that focused on identity tensions and related coping strategies in relation to the career stages, and by Substudy III that focused on how changing teacher agency is negotiated with professional identity as the career trajectory unfolds. OQ 2 was explored by Substudies II and III. The former study represented the professional agency afforded to teachers in the different work dimensions, while the latter addressed the change and continuity of teacher agency over a two-year longitudinal investigation. OQ 3 was examined through all the three substudies, which are focusing on professional identity and agency issues in the specific context in Hong Kong that features a centralised-decentralisation education governance system and hierarchical work culture. Figure 4 shows the relationship between the OQs and the research questions of the three substudies.

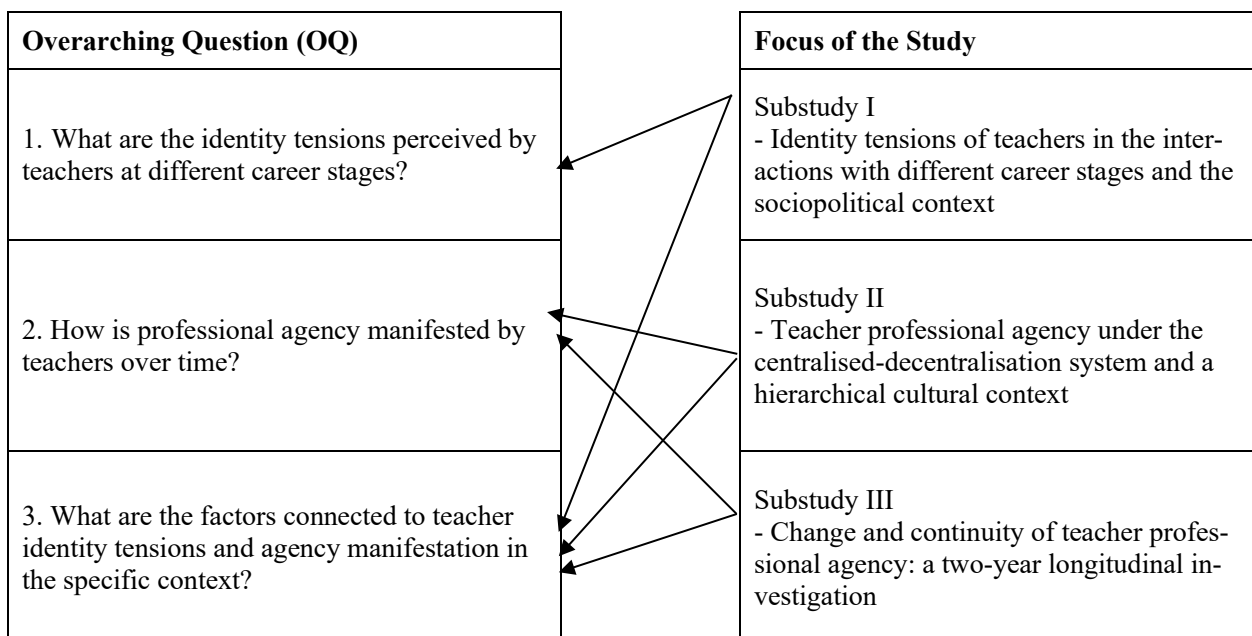


FIGURE4. The overarching questions in relation to the three substudies of the dissertation

The conceptual framework of the dissertation and its relationship with the three substudies are illustrated in Figure 5. Substudy I explored the tensions between the personal and professional dimensions of teacher identity (e.g., Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018). The personal dimension represented the professional beliefs and values residing in the teacher; while the latter consisted of demands and expectations at the societal and school levels. Substudy II focused on the professional agency enacted by the teacher in relation to the affordances in the situated sociocultural context. The study adopted the subject-centred sociocultural approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) and highlighted the hierarchical management and work culture of the school context in Hong Kong. Substudy III was an exploration of the change and continuity of teacher professional agency in the organic flow of time. The study also explored possible factors from the professional subject and in the sociocultural context that contributed to the changes and continuation in agency achievement.

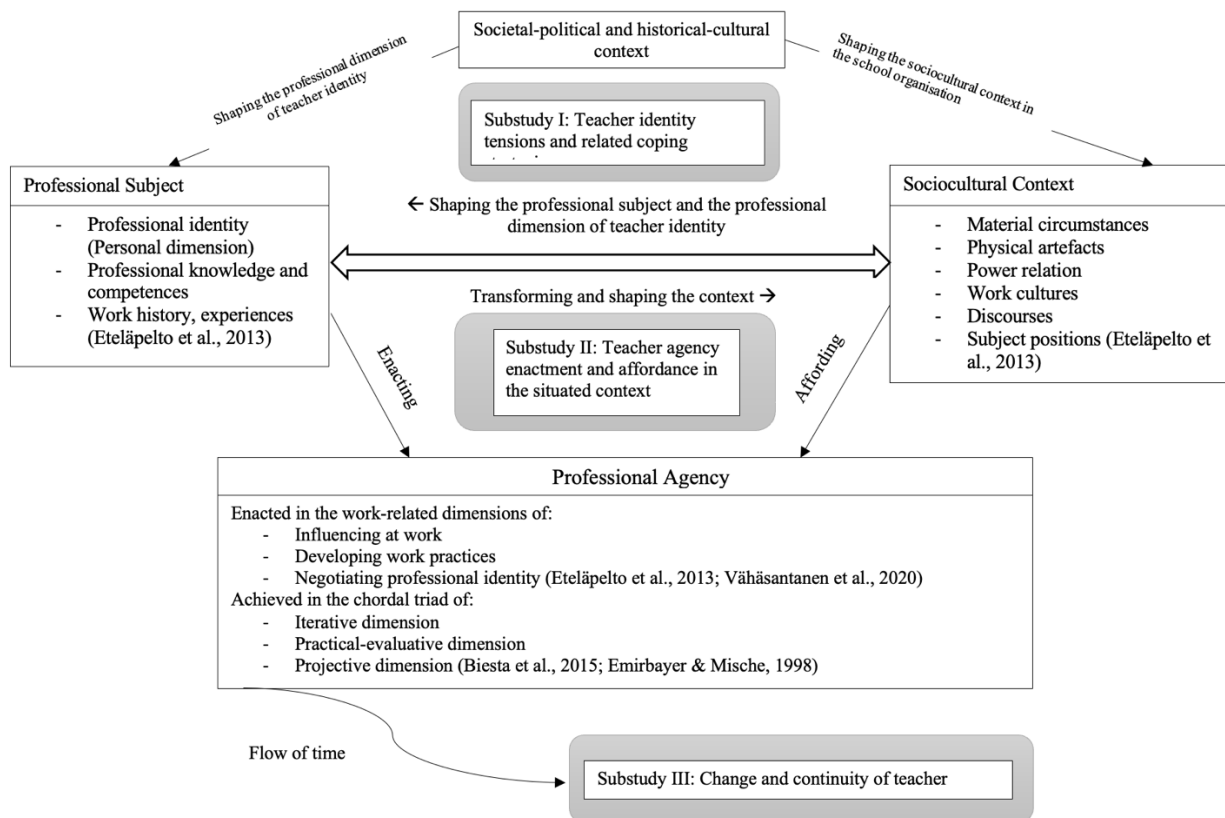


FIGURE5. The theoretical conceptual framework of the dissertation

2 METHODOLOGY

In this section, the methodology of the dissertation is presented. First, the rationale for adopting the qualitative longitudinal framework in the investigation is explained. Then, the epistemology and ontology of how the dissertation understood the social world of the teaching profession is interpreted. The section continues with the participants' backgrounds and the data collection process. Finally, the data analysis methods of the substudies are described.

2.1 Qualitative Longitudinal Framework

Qualitative longitudinal research is a rich and evolving method that makes possible the consideration of the dynamic nature of teachers' professional lives in the changing world. This dissertation employed qualitative data collection and analysis methods with a longitudinal approach to investigate the contextual and temporal aspects of professional identity and agency in the teaching profession.

Interviews were the main method for data collection in the dissertation, and two phases of interviews were conducted in 2018 and 2020, respectively. Teachers' experiences and reflections were "deep, rich, individualized, and contextualized" (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 152), and interviews were considered appropriate for exploring the convoluted phenomenon and emerging issues regarding professional identity and agency development (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017) in the situated context. Semi-structured interviews were used (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014) because they allowed spaces for participants' expression and flexibility for the interviewer to follow up and clarify the responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative and recursive process, which is an intentional and systematic process requiring researchers to be collaborative, creative and emergent in the immersive engagement with the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Concerning the data analysis methods, theory-oriented thematic analysis and the narrative approach were adopted as the analytical tools for the rich data from the teachers' interviews. First, the adoption of deductive thematic analysis

enabled the researcher to engage in the initial coding of the interviews based on the findings from previous studies on identity tensions (e.g., Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018) and professional agency (e.g., Pappa et al., 2019; Pyhäntö et al., 2015; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Moreover, the method allowed flexibility in calibrating the perspectives of different participants, featuring their similarities and divergences and generating more profound insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017) into the issues investigated in the studies. Second, the narrative approach was used to examine teachers' lives because it honoured the lived experiences of teachers as a source of important knowledge (Patton, 2015). Moreover, the significance of narrativity was situated in the innateness and familiarity of storytelling, which shows how humans create meaning and perceive the world (Hänninen, 2004). When interacting with and connecting the teachers' narrated stories with the wider sociocultural context, the dissertation was thus able to capture the meanings that the teachers assigned to the experiences in their workplace and society. In addition, the teachers' stories supported the dissertation in studying their identity and agency in a temporal continuum of the past, present, and future.

In addition to the qualitative data collection and analysis method, the longitudinal approach is another significant part of the dissertation framework. Time is the driving strength in all types of temporal research, which is, in nature, exploratory, flexible, creative and porous (Thomson & Mcleod, 2015). By investigating teacher professional identity and agency issues over time, the dissertation was able to discover the mechanisms and factors from the professional subject and the situated environment in which the phenomenon unravelled (Neale, 2018).

The organic flow of time is the linchpin to understanding the dynamic nature of lived and living professional experiences and the relationship of individual professional lives with their context and wider social processes (Neale, 2018). The qualitative longitudinal approach allowed the dissertation to deal with the participants' subjectivity in the shifting meanings that the teachers hold when experiencing concrete changes through events, circumstances and social processes. Due to such a responsive tempo and sensibilities in the teachers' experiences, the dissertation engaged in "walking alongside" the teachers as their professional lives spread out (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003), instead of merely taking a "snapshot" of the teachers' work situation.

The power of qualitative research lies in its capacity to generate counter-narratives on which frontline data-based perspectives can be cultivated, validated and publicised in an endeavour to provide organisational and social change (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). By engaging the longitudinal approach in the qualitative methods, the qualitative longitudinal framework guided the dissertation in the investigation within and across teachers' rich experiences to decipher the meaning, nuances, and similarities in encounters of identity tensions and enactment of professional agency over time.

2.2 Epistemology and Ontology

Epistemology concerns the ways and methods of understanding the reality in the social world, and ontology refers to ideas about the nature of such a world (Neale, 2021). This dissertation adopted interpretivism and social constructivism as the epistemological and ontological inquiry stance. Teacher professional identity and agency development on the career trajectory are complex social phenomena bounded in the sociocultural context. The social fabric of the work context is interwoven with the interpersonal and collective beliefs, experiences, events, actions and interactions of individuals and the work community over time. Hence, the realities of teachers' work worlds are divergent, and alternative explanations for the social reality are considered. The interpretive approach embraces the interpretations of the teachers' selves and their respective worldviews regarding their situated sociocultural conditions. The work world is experienced, interpreted, constructed, and reconstructed by the teachers through their daily interactions and evolving social activities. The phenomena in the work lives change with time and context, and it is important to understand these aspects "from the inside" – that is, from the teachers' point of view – to understand what the social reality is (Dilthey, 2002; Neale, 2021). This dissertation understood lived experience on teachers' career path as a convoluted blending of experiences, practices and actions in which the reflexive and imaginative professional subject interact with the other actors in their environment to create and re-create the social world (Dilthey, 2002).

The ontology of social constructivism is that the social world is a continuous process. In other words, the social world is newly and repeatedly created in the different encounters in the lives of individuals, as they interact in the world to establish a realm of meaningful definitions through the mediums of languages, labels, actions and routines (Morgan & Smircich, 1980). By the same token, the social world is a web of intersecting events and practices that are perpetually flowing, fluctuating, and interacting as work lives unfold on the trajectory. The nature of the knowledge on teacher identity and agency are socially constructed through teachers' living and lived experiences, subjectivities, and social interactions with other actors, the community and different stakeholders along the career pathway (Harris, 1987; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). From such a fluid and processual perspective, teacher professional identity and agency are thus understood with an intermediate post-structural approach (McNay, 2004). It recognises the individuals' capacity of self-reflection and self-evaluation with the social, practical, and natural orders of reality (Archer, 2000).

In this respect, the socio-cultural approach plays important roles in understanding the nature and the interpretation of teacher identity and agency on their career, particularly in the present thesis adopting the Hong Kong context. Teachers are recognised as subjects with autonomous beliefs and actions, along with personal histories and aspirations. They are in constant negotiation and reaction to the social world. While teachers can enact to the relations and environment

with their own subjectivity and intentionality, the situated social-cultural contexts could always posit as support and hinderance for the actions and the thoughts of the subjects (Billett et al., 2006; Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

2.3 Qualitative Longitudinal Research in Practice: The Researcher's Engagement

The qualitative longitudinal framework in practice describes how the researcher's previous experiences and theoretical understanding of the investigated issues engage and affect the entire process (Hesse-Biber, 2010). The dissertation consisted of two phases of interviews with in-service teachers in the summers of 2018 and 2020, respectively. The essence of qualitative longitudinal research is in its engagement with humans' hearts and minds (Neale, 2018). For this dissertation, it enabled access to the "interior logic" of teachers' lives to discern how one understands, negotiates, shapes and experiences their unfolding professional lives over time, as well as how and why the social world in the context unfolds in diverse ways against their respective settings of change (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003). The researcher had worked as a teacher at different levels in both formal and informal settings in Hong Kong for seven years. This background enabled the researcher to actively engage with the participants when they were narrating their experiences and reflections. This was possible because the experiences in the field and knowledge in the context allowed the researcher to be more sensitive to the nuances and context-specific factors related to the teachers' identity tensions and professional agency development. In addition, as the researcher was the interviewer for all the interviews, she could engage in the social interactions with the interviewees in the meaning-making process. When the professional stories and experiences were constructed and interpreted, intersubjectivity was bridged between the researcher and the study participants. Thus, concentrated insights into the participants' experience were gained (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

2.4 The Research Process

This section describes the data collection process for the study. The participants' backgrounds are described, along with how the interview data were analysed to scrutinise the identity tensions and professional agency issues.

2.4.1 Data Collection

During the first phase of data collection, the teachers were initially approached from May to July 2018 via electronic correspondence and face-to-face

communication based on the researcher's personal and professional contacts. The interested participants were invited to the interviews via an email stating the purpose, procedures, and ethical commitment of the study. All interviews were conducted individually in Cantonese, which was the native language of both the researcher and the participants. The interview venues included study lounges and cafes at universities, which were suggested by the researcher and agreed upon by the participants. As the environment could indirectly mark the quality of the conversation exchange, the researcher suggested spaces where the participants could feel comfortable and safe to express thoughts and feelings and share their honest opinions regarding their work situation. All interviews were recorded. The interviews were conducted from June to August 2018.

Although the participants were informed that the interviews would be about teacher identity and work conditions in Hong Kong, the specific concepts of professional identity and agency were not explained in detail. The brief study introduction allowed teachers to be mentally prepared for the context of the interviews but not to incline them towards offering planned answers to the interview questions related to the investigated phenomenon. Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher further explained the dissertation to the participants, verbally informed them about their rights as research participants and obtained their written consent, of which both the researcher and the participants kept a copy.

Each interview comprised five parts related to the investigation of the teacher work situation. The first part was on professional identity, which examined the interviewee's professional beliefs, values (Beijaard et al., 2000; Eteläpelto et al., 2015) and sense of agency (Soini et al., 2015), as well as others' perceptions of the teaching profession. The second part dealt with the interviewees' collaborative and learning relationships with the students (Pyhältö et al., 2015), colleagues (van der Heijden et al., 2015), and other personnel encountered in the workplace. The third part inquired about the interviewees' reflections and actions related to the professional development and creative initiatives (Buchanan, 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2015). The fourth part focused on whether opportunities and resources existed for exercising professional agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen, 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2015). The last part of the interview was concerned with the participants' career prospects (Buchanan, 2015; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The average interview time was 53 minutes. The shortest interview was 44 minutes, and the longest was 89 minutes.

The second phase of data collection took place in 2020. All participants from the first set of interviews were contacted again electronically via instant messengers from May to July 2020. The participants who had continued with their teaching profession and agreed to take part in the second interview were sent an email that stated the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical commitment. Likewise, concepts of changes and continuity of professional agency were not mentioned to prevent the tendency to develop premeditated responses.

Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, pandemic restrictions made travel and physical meetings difficult, if not impossible, for the second phase in 2020. Social-

distancing rules and distant work operations still applied to schools in Hong Kong. All interviews had to be conducted virtually, and the researcher could only suggest using virtual spaces offering cyber accessibility and security and recommend that the participants opt for a physical space that could provide a stable online connection, comfortability, and the safety to express their opinions regarding the topic. Again, the researcher followed the ethical procedures for the study before the interviews commenced, and the interviews were audio recorded on a computer.

The second interviews were conducted from June to September 2020. They focused on the changes in the different work aspects over the two-year interval. The interviews consisted of six parts. The first part was about the change in professional activities in general. The interviewees could indicate any changes related to their work positions and conditions, and then express their thoughts and feelings towards the current situation. The other five parts explored the same topics as in the first phase of interviews, namely, 1) professional identity, 2) relationships at work, 3) professional development, 4) work influence and agency, and 5) career prospects. The interviewees were asked to ponder their current situations, and indicate any changes compared to the past. The average duration of the second interviews was 48 minutes, with the shortest and longest being 20 and 97 minutes, respectively.

Substudies I and II utilised the data from the first phase of interviews, while Substudy III employed the data from both the first and second phases of interviews. For the detailed interview protocols, see appendix I for the 1st phase, and appendix II for the 2nd phase. Table 1 summarises the data collection process and outcome of the dissertation.

TABLE1. Data collection process

Time	Action taken	Outcome
1 st Phase of Data Collection		
April to September 2018	Participants were contacted through the researchers' personal and professional contacts.	21 teachers agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews. Resulted in a total of 283 pages of transcript (12 Times New Roman, single-spaced) and 746 minutes of recording.
2 nd Phase of Data Collection		
May to September 2020	All 21 participants in the 1 st phase of data collection were contacted electronically.	14 teachers agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews via virtual platforms. The remaining 7 participants opted out due to job changes and busy schedules. Resulted in a total of 153 pages of transcript (12 Times New Roman, single-spaced) and 676 minutes of recording.

2.4.2 The Participants

The first phase of interviews in 2018 consisted of 21 participants. Two teachers worked in primary school, while the rest taught at the secondary school level. Eleven were female teachers, and 10 were male. The gender ratio closely reflected that of teachers in Hong Kong, in which female teachers comprising 56% of all teachers at the secondary level (World Bank, 2022). The average age was 32 years old, with the youngest being 25 and the oldest 44. Regarding the professional training and education level, all teachers were university graduates with registered teacher qualifications. Ten possessed master's degrees. Their teaching experience ranged from 0 to 15 years. For the school funding types, 18 teachers worked in government or government-aided schools, and five worked in direct-subsidised or private schools. This proportion was similar to the ratio of publicly and privately funded secondary schools in Hong Kong, where 77% of schools are from the public sector (Education Bureau, 2023). Concerning employment terms, six teachers were on temporary terms, and 15 were in permanent positions or regular contracts. Regarding the subjects of teaching, the teachers taught biology, economics, Chinese history, Chinese language, English language, English literature, integrated science, liberal studies, mathematics and visual arts. The teachers were also involved in various administrative duties related to career and life planning, discipline and counselling, extracurricular activities, maths Olympiad, school-based management, school public promotion, self-learning assessment, special education needs, student health, STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education and subject panels.

In the summer of 2020, all the 21 teachers were contacted again. Fourteen agreed to participate in the second interview. Of those who could not take part, three had changed to other occupations, three were occupied with personal and work matters, and one had left Hong Kong. The gender ratio of the second interviews was 1:1. Only 1 teacher served in a privately funded school, and all the teachers were employed on permanent or regular contracts at that time. Table 2 illustrates the professional background, career stages, subject taught and major administrative duties of the participants in the first phase of interviews in 2018, along with the major changes in positions and duties in the second phase of interviews in 2020.

TABLE2. Background of the participants

	Participants	Gender	Years of exp	Career stage in 2018	School level in 2018	Employment term	Subject(s) taught	Major changes in positions and workload in the 2-year interval
1	Dortha*	F	9	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	English	Stepped down from the subject department head position after one year.
2	Gordon*	M	4	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Mathematics	Became the coordinator in the special education needs support committee.
3	Peony	F	1	Beginning	Primary	Temporary	English, French	N.A.
4	Felix*	M	7	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Mathematics	Became the vice head in the subject department.
5	Camelia*	F	10	Experienced	Primary & Secondary	Regular	Mathematics, Science, English	Changed to another school organisation and took up the subject head position in the new school.
6	Louis*	M	8	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	Liberal Studies	Switched to a different administrative committee. The employment term became permanent.
7	Howard*	M	8	Experienced	Secondary	Temporary	English	Changed to another school and a permanent position.
8	Xavier	M	3	Beginning	Secondary	Temporary	Mathematics	N.A.
9	Nicholas*	M	7	Transitional	Primary	Regular	Mathematics, English	No position change but dealt with much more eLearning issues.
10	Beatrice	F	8	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	English	N.A.
11	Sophia	F	9	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	English Literature, English	N.A.
12	Queenie*	F	5	Transitional	Secondary	Temporary	Mathematics	Teaching duties covered more levels, and took up more administrative duties.
13	Rosie*	F	15	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	Biology, Science, Liberal Studies	No major duties changes but increase in administrative work, extra STEM activities.
14	Ian	M	3	Beginning	Secondary	Temporary	Liberal Studies	N.A.
15	Opal	F	7	Transitional	Secondary	Temporary	Chinese	N.A.
16	Elsa*	F	0	Beginning	Secondary	Regular	Visual Arts	No major changes but had more administrative duties. The employment term became permanent.
17	Violet*	F	11	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	Chinese	Became the vice head in the subject department and switched to another administrative committee. More administrative workload.
18	Lisa*	F	7	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Chinese	No major changes.
19	Karl	M	6	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Economics	N.A.
20	Mathew*	M	7	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Mathematics	No major changes but more administrative duties.
21	Terrance*	M	11	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	English	No major changes but more workload from the administrative demands.

*Participants who participated in both 1st and 2nd phases of interviews.

2.4.3 Data Analysis

The researcher, who was a native Cantonese speaker and fluent in the English language, transcribed all interviews verbatim and translated the data from Cantonese into English. All the interviewees, people and organisations were assigned pseudonyms. The 21 and 14 interviews from the first and second phases, respectively, were transferred to atlas.ti for further analysis. The transcribed data were demonstrated to be rich and complex, covering a wide range of teachers' experiences and conditions in the concerned context. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data for Substudies I and II, and the narrative approach was adopted in both Substudy I and Substudy III.

2.4.3.1 Thematic Analysis

Regarding Substudy I's examination of teacher identity tensions and related coping strategies, and Substudy II's review of the professional agency enacted in the context of Hong Kong, deductive thematic analysis was adopted for the data from the first phase interviews.

As themes could not merely emerge from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the initial codes were created and combined to create the related themes based on the previous studies and theories. After the data were re-read, some of the codes and themes were recoded and regrouped respectively. In addition, the researcher collaborated with the team researchers to interpret, and reflect on the data to further generate, scrutinise, and vet the themes related to the investigated issues of the studies.

2.4.3.2 Narrative Approach

Narrative approaches (Riessman, 2008) were utilised in the analysis of the teachers' stories in Substudies I and III. In Substudy I, apart from the thematic analysis showing a rich overview of the phenomenon across the interviewees, narrative approach was used to further illustrate the teacher identity tensions. Altogether, stories from the three teachers who experienced most identity tensions in the respective early, transitional and experienced career stage were presented from the first phase of interviews.

To scrutinise the change and continuity in professional agency over time in Substudy III, the researcher became familiarised with both the first and second phases of interviews with 14 teachers. The profile story depicting the work situation in 2018 and 2020 of each teacher was constructed after the data were read and re-read. The data were analysed according to the themes that emerged from the participants' stories (Ravitch & Carl, 2021), and similarities, differences and patterns among the stories were identified. Through dialogical engagement with other experienced researchers, the themes and patterns became clearer, and the stories of the individual participants were grouped into different categories. Consequently, the profile stories within each category were reorganised into narrative composites representing emerging agency types.

To summarise the research method in relation to the foci and the research questions of each substudy, Table 3 illustrates the overview of the three substudies in the dissertation.

TABLE3. Overview of the research methods of the three substudies

	Substudy I	Substudy II	Substudy III
Foci of the study	Identity tensions of teachers in the interactions with different career stages and the sociopolitical context	Teacher professional agency under the centralised-decentralisation system and a hierarchical cultural context	Changes and continuity of teacher professional agency: a 2-year longitudinal investigation
Research questions	1a. What are the identity tensions perceived by qualified teachers at different career stages in the sociopolitical context of Hong Kong?	2a. How is professional agency enacted by teachers in light of their sociocultural context?	3a. What changes and continuity have been seen in the enactment of teacher professional agency over two years?
	1b. What kinds of strategies do teachers at different career stages adopt to cope with these identity tensions?	2b. What kinds of sociocultural conditions support and constrain teachers' professional agency in the given context?	3b. What kinds of teachers' individual backgrounds and sociocultural conditions are related to the changes and continuity seen in the teachers' professional agency?
Data of the study	Physical interviews in 2018	Physical interviews in 2018	Physical interviews in 2018; online interviews in 2020
Analytical method	Deductive thematic analysis; Narrative analysis	Deductive thematic analysis	Narrative analysis
No. of participants	21 teachers	21 teachers	14 teachers

3 OVERVIEW OF THE ORIGINAL STUDIES

This section presents a summary of each of the three substudies in the dissertation, followed by an overview of the original studies illustrating the foci and findings in relation to the OQs.

3.1 Substudy I: Teachers' Identity Tensions and Related Coping Strategies: Interaction with the Career Stages and Sociopolitical Context

Substudy I concerned how identity tensions and coping strategies were associated with teachers' career stages and identified the tensions at the different sites in the teachers' situated context. Drawing on the understanding of teacher identity as a fluid, fluctuating and subjective developmental process (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011) on the career trajectory, the study addressed the dearth of investigations on teacher identity tensions in relation to the different career stages and the situated sociopolitical context. It attempted to contribute to the holistic and dynamic understanding of teacher identity tensions and to facilitate the continuous teacher professional development beyond initial training.

Substudy I utilised the interview data with 21 teachers from the first phase of data collection in 2018. Based on the years of teaching experience, the teachers were categorised into the beginning stage, transitional stage, or experienced stage. The study adopted deductive thematic analysis on the interview data to investigate the topic of identity tensions and coping strategies. The interview data were coded, and nine tensions were identified. The tensions were grouped under the micro level associated with the classroom and work context, and the macro level that goes beyond the immediate school environment. The four domains under the micro level are student relationships, collegial relationships, school organisation, and parent relationships. The two domains under the macro level are

societal expectation and top-down policies. Moreover, coping strategies were categorised under the emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies accordingly.

Regardless of the teacher career stage, the identity tension related to the hierarchical work structure *“Wanting to express ideas and opinions, yet feeling restrained under the hierarchical structure”* was reported by most teachers. In contrast, the least indicated identity tension was associated with parents: *“Wanting to be education partners with parents vs feeling the need to give way to parents’ demands.”* In addition, identity tensions and coping strategies seemed to be associated with teachers’ career stages. Most beginning teachers encountered all the identity tensions except those related to parents and social status. At the transitional stage, almost all identity tensions at the beginning stage continued, except the one related to the societal expectation in upholding high moral standards. As compared to other career stages, teachers in the transitional stage showed fewer identity tensions with the collegial community, but most reported those related to the social status and feeling teachers’ work was not being valued by society. For the experienced teachers, only two tensions were demonstrated: those related to the hierarchical work structure and the collegial community.

For the coping strategies, although the teachers mentioned multiple ways to handle identity tensions, the most mentioned strategy is *“tolerating the situation to avoid further conflict”*. Beginning teachers exhibited different emotion-focused and problem-focused behaviours to cope with the situations; while the transitional teachers did not report many of these strategies. Most experienced teachers either passively tolerated the situation, or actively communicated and negotiated with the conflicts. In addition to the deductive thematic analysis, three teachers’ narratives were selected to illustrate the phenomenon. Each of these teachers encountered the strongest identity tensions in their respective career stage. The stories were, namely, an identity tension survival story by a beginning-stage teacher, an identity tension story illustrating efficacy at risk by a transitional-stage teacher, and an identity tension story involving unrecognised effort by an experienced-stage teacher.

Substudy I contributed to the micro- and macro-level framework, which embraced the different domains in teachers’ situated contexts to identify the occurrence of identity tensions. Moreover, it emphasised the importance of differentiated support for teacher identity development and professional agency at different career stages. The study also indicated the specific sociocultural and political forces contributing to the identity tension and hinderance of professional agency.

3.2 Substudy II: Teachers’ Professional Agency in a Centralised-Decentralisation System and a Hierarchical Cultural Context

Substudy II dealt with the enactment and affordance of teacher professional agency in the dynamics with the socio-cultural context – in the case of Hong Kong.

The context is based on a centralised-decentralisation system at the education governance level, and a culture of high power distance work at the school level. The study investigated the manifestation of teacher agency in the dynamics of the sociocultural context, particularly in the underrepresented non-Western context. It also examined the supportive and constrictive conditions of agency enactment in the environment. Substudy II employed the data from the first phase of interviews with 21 teachers in 2018, which touched upon whether opportunities existed for teachers to influence their own work and school-related matters, in order to achieve their career aspirations. Taking up the subject-centred sociocultural approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), the study mainly applied deductive thematic analysis to investigate the exercised teacher agency, and also the related support and constraints in the situated environment.

Concerning the enactment of teacher agency, work-related actions and decisions were categorised into 1) pedagogical agency in teaching and learning, and 2) relational agency in the professional community. On the one hand, pedagogical agency aimed to enhance students' learning and facilitate their growth. It encompassed the teachers behaving in a way that i) reflecting students' reactions, ii) adjusting to and experimenting with teaching methods, iii) devoting extra time to help students, iv) acquiring knowledge beyond the work community and working hours, and v) creating one's own space to implement pedagogical beliefs and interest. On the other hand, relational agency concerned the teamwork in the collegial community and the interactions with the management. It highlighted the significance of a trusting and collaborative environment to attain goals, improve work practices and handle the challenges in the organisation. On the collegial level, the behaviour related to relational agency consisted of i) sharing teaching ideas, ii) cooperating on new initiatives, iii) seeking advice regarding work problems, and iv) expressing opinions to the management. The study then delved into teacher agency affordances in the workplace (Billett, 2001). The sociocultural conditions resourcing teacher engagement included 1) a collegial community that was based on trust, open-mindedness and respect to opinions, irrespective of rank and seniority in the structure; 2) school leadership that supported agency, which fostered communication with teachers; 3) access to up-to-date resources, which implied professional development opportunities inside and outside school; and 4) availability of time, space and job stability that allowed teachers to reflect on and plan for both the present tasks and the future development goals.

By delving into the enactment of teacher agency and its related sociocultural affordances in a different societal, cultural and regional context, Substudy II highlighted teachers as well-trained professionals, who were capable of exerting their pedagogical and relational agency. Again, teachers are emphasized as the agents of change, who demonstrated the possibilities to improve and transform education practices in their situated context. Although the centralised-decentralisation education governance system could potentially afford teachers spaces to enact their agency on pedagogical and collegial collaboration matters, agency-supportive leadership was significant in buffering the centralised initiatives and

the teachers on the front line. Moreover, the high power distance of the Confucian-heritage culture and hierarchical bureaucratic work structure could be counteracted by a trusting collegial environment. Instead of centralised dominance in education policies, active engagement of and voices from the teachers and professional groups were necessary amid the educational changes and innovations. As a final observation, no evidence of strong resistance agency was demonstrated from teachers when encountering emotionally meaningless or authoritative orders from the top down.

3.3 Substudy III: The Change and Continuity of Teachers' Professional Agency: A Two-Year Longitudinal Investigation

Substudy III explored the change and continuity of teachers' professional agency in the contextual and temporal dynamics of individual and sociocultural conditions. Professional agency is a multifaceted construct that cannot be simply assumed to be a linear development. However, there is a lack of longitudinal studies examining the expansion or stagnation of teacher agency enactment over time, and this study contributes to filling this gap. Substudy III utilised the data from the first and second phases of interviews with 14 participants each in 2018 and 2020, respectively. The first phase of interviews explored the enactment of professional agency in the participants' situated context; while the second phase of interviews followed up on the changes in their work situations and influences on school matters. Based on the ecological perspective on professional agency (Biesta et al., 2015), Substudy III applied narrative analysis to examine the teachers' stories and connect the dynamics between the actors and their respective contexts with temporal orientations.

Consequently, four agency types were identified: 1) expanding, 2) strategic, 3) explorer and 4) withering. The investigation focused on the change and continuity of professional agency in association with the subject's position and sociocultural factors in the context. The first type, *expanding agency*, consisted of teachers who were promoted to and counted on the leadership positions with influence in the work community and organisation. They were situated in an agency-supportive environment, as their opinions mattered to the work and organisational development. Their identity was continuously strengthened through the collaboration and communication with the colleagues and management, as well as through constant reflections and learning. Next, *strategic agency* was experienced by teachers who had established their positions in the organisation over time. They recognised that their voices were partly constrained by the hierarchical structure. However, they were aware of the possible areas where they could exert their influence, and even manipulate different strategies when negotiating with fellow colleagues and management. Even though these teachers normally implemented required tasks without much resistance, they were more

willing to engage in further learning and collaboration when the meaning of policy initiatives were communicated well. Similarly, participants who were categorised as the third type, *explorer agency*, also well understood the strong hierarchy that existed within the school structure. Unlike the strategic agency type, the explorer agency type was relatively junior or new to the positions. Yet, they were becoming more familiar with the collegial relationship and the work environment. Despite being novel to the organisation, the teachers were actively strengthening their professional profiles by engaging in learning within and beyond school, attempting to exert their influence in work practices, and exploring spaces for career aspirations. Finally, the fourth type, *withering agency*, included teachers situated in a work environment that was becoming more restrictive. Regardless of rank, seniority and experience, the teachers' professional agency in work and educational matters was constricted. In comparison with the other agency types, withering agency teachers mentioned noticeably negative emotions and attitudes in relation to their work in the organisation, professionalism in society and prospects of the profession.

As a longitudinal investigation, this study also noted that every teacher's background and situated context were unique. The exercise of professional agency could vary, change, and be achieved in one situation but not in another. The development of professional agency was a nonlinear practice-based phenomenon in the temporal and spatial interplay of individual and sociocultural factors. Moreover, Substudy III highlighted the change and continuity of teacher agency were in association with the subject positions and management styles in the organisation. Ostensibly democratic and authoritarian school leadership could restrict or even eliminate the potential enactment of agency. In contrast, professional agency could be expanded and supported when teachers had the opportunity to be promoted to influential positions that interacted with an agency-supportive management and work community.

3.4 Summary of the Substudies

To support teachers' work and career development in the swiftly changing world, this dissertation aimed to address the existing research gap in the investigation of teacher identity tensions and professional agency. Here, the issues were investigated through three substudies on 1) teacher identity tensions interacting with career stages and sociopolitical context, 2) teacher professional agency under a centralised-decentralisation system and hierarchical cultural context, and 3) the change and continuity of professional agency in a two-year longitudinal investigation. Table 4 demonstrates an overview of the findings of the substudies, including the foci and concepts related to the OQs.

TABLE4. Overview of the findings of the three substudies

	Substudy I		Substudy II		Substudy III	
Foci	Teacher identity tensions and related coping strategies		Teacher professional agency under a centralised-decentralisation system and a hierarchical cultural context		Change and continuity of teacher professional agency	
Findings	Identity tensions related to career stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -6 tensions on the micro level (classroom and immediate school context), and 3 tensions on the macro level (societal expectation and top-down policy) -Beginning-stage teachers encounter the most tensions and exercise the most coping strategies -Transitional-stage teachers' tensions are related to social status -Experienced-stage teachers are related to collegial relationships 	Professional agency manifested in the specific context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Pedagogical agency in relation to students learning -Relational agency in collaborating with colleagues 	Professional agency type related to change and continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expanding type with increasing agency - Strategic type exerting agency in certain areas - Explorer type attempting to exert agency - Withering agency with restricted agency
	Identity tensions related to the different domains of the context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Micro level includes relationship with students, colleagues, parents and school leadership and structure -Macro level includes societal expectations and government policies changes 	Professional agency affordances in the situated context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Trusting collegial community -Agency-supportive school leaders -Access to resources -Availability of time, space, and job stability 	Change and continuity of agency and factors related to identity development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Management style influenced work culture -Individual familiarity with the organisation - Subject position in the hierarchical structure

4 DISCUSSION

The three substudies were conducted in response to the overarching research questions drawn from the existing research gaps in teacher identity tensions and professional agency. The three overarching research questions focused on 1) the identity tensions perceived by teachers at different career stages, 2) professional agency manifested by teachers over time, and 3) the factors connected to teacher identity tensions and agency manifestation in the specific context. This section presents the findings of the substudies responding to the above questions.

4.1 Identity Tensions Perceived by Teachers at Different Career Stages

In relation to OQ 1, the findings of Substudies I and III illustrated that identity tensions were not limited to beginning teachers, but were also perceived by teachers at other career stages.

Aligning with the previous investigations into teachers' lives (e.g., Day, 2008; Huberman et al., 1993) and teacher identity research at the initial career stages (e.g., Alsup, 2006; Pillen et al., 2013; Ponnock et al., 2018), the findings in Substudy I highlighted that beginning teacher encountered the most identity tensions in different domains within and beyond the immediate school context. However, it was noted that the challenges in the school reality could act as a double-edge sword. The beginning stage offered steep professional learning and development opportunities, and it is a phase characterised by discovery and growth (e.g., Day, 2008; Lambert & Gray, 2020). Substudy I illustrated that beginning teachers reported the most strategies in coping with the identity tensions; while Substudy III showed that teachers in the early career phase were actively exploring the areas inside and outside of school, in which they could exert their agency. These active reflections and actions assisted the teachers in establishing their position in the organisation, building the expertise on their career, and constructing

their professional identity, while they were surviving and navigating the relational tensions, structural restrictions, and the contextual challenges.

After the induction stage, as the teachers were becoming more familiar with the work culture and organisation structure, fewer identity tensions were reported. Yet, identity tensions still surfaced in the later career stages, which have been indicated in the present substudies and earlier research on experienced teachers in the Dutch context (van der Want et al., 2018). Here, the discussion of identity tensions in later career phases was distinguished into the transitional and mid-career stages. Regarding transitional-stage teachers, Substudy I indicated that almost all identity tensions from the beginning stage continued, except those related to collegial relationships and societal moral expectations. The transitional-stage teachers, who survived the beginning stage, were often assigned more administrative duties, obligations, and leadership roles in small teams. The imbalance and tensions between increasing workload and private life arising from the early stage could persist into later stages (van der Want et al., 2018), which in turn damaged the wellbeing and decreased the job satisfaction of the teachers (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Yet, the heavier responsibilities after their survival phase could resemble opportunities for further career aspirations and development. This was because, through the delegated tasks, the teachers could explore areas and relationships to enact their agency in the situated context. This was shown in Substudy III, particularly in the explorer agency type of teachers. Depending on how the personal and sociocultural factors unfold on the career trajectory, the agency of the teachers at the early professional life phase could potentially be expanded in the organisation. Another distinguished identity tension in transitional-stage teachers was related to the profession's status in the society at the macro level. These teachers, who had been surviving the initial induction phase, might have greater motivation and an increased sense of self-efficacy in the teaching vocation (Day, 2008; Ponnock et al., 2018). However, they were realizing their professional agency enactment could be restricted by the school and governance structure. The restriction was reinforced by the inferior status embedded in the societal discourse, and by the limited teacher voices on the policy level.

Mid-career-stage teachers exhibited the fewest identity tensions, even though they were also assigned with various work responsibilities. A possible explanation for the diminishing identity tensions is that most teachers at this stage had become more sophisticated and experienced in optimising their resources and prioritising the time spent on tasks (Philipp & Kunter, 2013). Moreover, most of them had established their positions in the organisation. As demonstrated in Substudy III, the strategic agency type teachers were able to identify spaces and strategies to enact agency, despite being constrained by the management culture and work structure. However, this did not mean that the identity tensions and professional agency at the experienced stage could be neglected. Experienced teachers reported that most identity tensions were related to the collaboration with other colleagues. There could be two possible explanations associated with the collegial conflicts. First, the experienced teachers were often in

leadership positions, and their roles was continuously negotiated through the management tasks with other colleagues (Kira & Balkin, 2014). Second, although the teachers had accumulated years of teaching experience in the classroom, their established work styles could conflict with those of other colleagues amid the constant changes and new demands in the education setting (Schaap et al., 2019).

4.2 Change and Continuity of Professional Agency Over Time

Concerning OQ 2, Substudy II illustrated the pedagogical and relational professional agency that teachers manifested in the school setting, while Substudy III demonstrated the four types of change and continuity of teacher professional agency over a two-year period. The four agency types are, namely, expanding agency, strategic agency, explorer agency and withering agency. The changes in the professional agency that the teachers manifested in Substudy II were related to the teachers' positions within the dynamics of socio-cultural factors in the situated context. This included the availability of an agency-promoting environment, familiarity with the situated environment over time and access to resources beyond the school context, as presented in Substudy III.

4.2.1 Agency-Supportive Environment: Leadership and Community

An agency-supportive environment entailed leadership and community in the sociocultural context in which the teacher was situated. First, as described in both Substudies II and III, agency-supportive leadership connoted a clear direction for the implementation of initiatives, accompanied by trust and communication with teachers from the management level. School leaders who were agency-supportive allowed teachers the spaces and autonomy to execute novel methods from the bottom up. They also ensured that teachers' opinions, those related from individual career development to whole-school matters, were considered. In view of such open communication and feedback channels, this could resolve identity tensions related to the organisation's hierarchical structure restraining teachers from expressing their ideas and opinions. Second, when the work community was collaborated with trust, open-mindedness and respect to opinions, teacher agency was supported through sharing and communicating opinions, experimenting with novel educational ideas and technologies, resolving conflicts among members and solving problems in challenging situations (Pappa et al., 2019; Pyhältö et al., 2015), as shown in Substudies II and III.

The availability of agency-supportive leadership and community could possibly lead to diverging changes in professional agency and identity construction in teachers, particularly in the expanding and withering agency types as indicated in Substudy III. In the case of expanding agency, in which agency-supportive leaders and community were mentioned, the teachers illustrated an increasing influence and involvement in the work decisions and practices.

Regarding the subject positions, teachers of the expanding agency type were often promoted to leadership positions or given major school development responsibilities. As in the sociocultural context, they were backed by supportive management and endorsed by colleagues' confidence. The expanding agency type teachers were being listened to, as they had gained trust from both the management and fellow colleagues. This trusting relationship enabled them to mutually communicate between the upper level and the frontline, and execute the practices and initiatives in the classrooms and at the organisational levels. In turn, this developed and sustained teachers' identity involving the leadership roles that they navigated along their career trajectories through their management and coordinating duties. In contrast, a repressive sociocultural work condition was detrimental to sustaining and developing professional agency. In the case of withering agency, regardless of their seniority and experiences, these teachers were in a languishing position with restrictive agency in influencing any matters. The school management style was agency-unsupportive and the senior level even dictated the work practices in the organisation. This was demonstrated by the school leaders' negligence of and untrusting attitudes towards frontline opinions and concerns. Top-down policies were enforced without any negotiations with the frontline teachers. Despite staying in the job due to practical circumstances such as financial and skills concerns, the withering agency type teachers became more disengaged from the work and the profession. As noted in an earlier study on work identity (Kira & Balkin, 2014), when workers felt their work and professional identity were increasingly misaligned with each other, this would result in much more negative emotions towards the work situations.

4.2.2 Access to Resources Beyond the School Context

Access to resources is another important workplace affordance for the manifestation of agency. Being active and reflective learners was part of teacher professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2004), and Substudy II indicated that teachers demonstrated their active agency through engagement in professional learning. This mindset of career-long learning, which was instilled during initial training, had to be supported by training opportunities for all professional life phases, opinion platforms and feedback channels beyond the immediate school environment. The resources included formal study programmes, training workshops and professional gatherings, which could be organised by the central authorities, universities, teachers' union and different professional organisations in the civic society.

It should be emphasised that access to resources was particularly important for communicating measures in emergent situations and supporting teachers' agency. For example, facing the COVID-19 emergencies, all 14 participants were prepared to engage in further development to enhance their skills in promoting e-learning. In addition, in the case of strategic and explorer agency types whose professional agency was constrained by the hierarchical structure, teachers could still explore areas and identify spaces to enact their agency. This

was partly driven by the pedagogical aspirations from different trainings and resources in the local community and beyond.

4.2.3 Familiarity with the Situated Environment

In addition to the availability of an agency-supportive environment and access to resources, teachers' familiarity with the work relationship and environment over time was significantly related to the change and continuity of agency. The significance of this familiarity was indicated in both the strategic and explorer agency types as shown in Substudy III. The former type of teachers, who were mainly in the mid-career stage, had more experience with and more established positions in the same organisation. The latter ones, who were mostly in the beginning career phase, were relatively new to the organisation and were establishing their positions. Instead of the leadership and community support found in the expanding agency type, the agency enactment of strategic- and explorer-type teachers stemmed from the insights and experiences gained when interacting with their colleagues and work environment over time. These teachers were aware of their limited and restricted influence within the structure. However, in the case of the strategic agency type, the accumulated familiarity with the relations and environment enabled them to identify spaces and trusted relationships to enact their professional agency in meaningful areas. As for the explorer agency type, these teachers began to understand the work culture and collegial relationship, and they were enabled in their attempts to exert their agency in the interested areas. These findings related to familiarity that developed over time echoed the previous investigation of teacher agency in Finnish vocational education reform (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). Likewise, the Finnish study illustrated familiar relationships and trust, which developed over time between vocational teachers and employees, allowed teachers to exercise their agency in developing tasks for students, influence certain practices in the workplace and hence, cut the boundaries between the education setting and work reality.

4.3 Identity Tensions and Professional Agency in the Specific Context: Similarities and Differences

OQ 3 focuses on the factors connected to teacher identity tensions and agency manifestations that are distinctive in the Hong Kong context, representing a non-Western case. Despite the differences in the organisational and pedagogical traditions under the respective educational systems (Bayer et al., 2009), teachers in different contexts could face similar problems and challenges concerning the changing society and world.

First, similarities between the Hong Kong context and the other contexts presented in previous studies were illustrated. Regarding teacher identity tensions, Substudy I exhibited similar findings at the immediate school level, as

demonstrated with the beginning and experienced teachers in the Dutch context (e.g., Hanna et al., 2019; Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018). The similar domains of identity tensions were related to the relationships with students, colleagues' conflicting work styles, heavy workloads interfering with personal life and parental interactions. Concerning professional agency, Substudy II demonstrated that teachers in the Hong Kong context were potential change agents who were capable of exerting their professional agency in pedagogical and relational aspects, as evidenced in other cultural contexts (Edwards-Grove et al., 2010; King & Nomikou, 2018; Lanas & Kiilakoski, 2013). Teachers were dedicated to engaging themselves in career-long learning in meaningful areas for students' academic and personal growth, as well as in response to educational shifts, such as the COVID-19 emergency. As qualified professionals trained in pedagogical knowledge and skills, which is the case in many developed regions, teachers in Hong Kong were potential change agents making positive impacts in the regions' education arena when they were supported in the context.

Second, the dissertation highlighted the identity tensions and professional agency issues corresponding to the specific sociopolitical and historical-cultural context of Hong Kong, and these were found to be different from those in previous research. As evidenced in Substudy I, *"wanting to express ideas and opinions vs feeling restrained under the hierarchical school structure"* was a distinct tension in teachers of all career stages in the Hong Kong context. The hierarchical school structure in Hong Kong was an infusion of the British bureaucratic structure and traditional Confucian heritage. The colonial administrative structure ranked and promoted teachers according to their years of experience and qualifications, while Confucian teachings reinforced a high power distance (Hofstede & Bond, 1988) work culture that expected employees in lower and junior ranks to conform to the senior rules and orders. Moreover, under the centralised-decentralisation education governance system, school principals became the dominant local executors of central policies within the schools, and senior staff could exacerbate the power imbalance in the hierarchical environment. As demonstrated in Substudy III, teachers could afford to enact agency over time when they were in leadership positions or were tactful in identifying and exploring areas to exert their agency under the hierarchical structure. It was also noted that a repressive management style of school leaders could inhibit teacher identity and agency development. Facing a neglectful attitude and predetermined orders by the management or governmental level, teachers could only respond through inaction, silence and acceptance of their impotence within the profession (Tsang, 2019). This would result in negative emotions and stress at the workplace, which are demoralising and detrimental to the teachers' psyche. In the sociopolitical and sociocultural context of Hong Kong, teachers usually performed the required tasks without much resistance. Yet, when the meaning of policies was not being communicated effectively and the initiatives were misaligning from the professional beliefs, teachers would adopt a work-to-rule manner for the sake of completing the task and orders. Without the engagement and commitment from the teachers, it is doubtful for any top-down educational changes could be impactful and sustainable.

4.4 Summarising the Findings: Teacher Identity Tensions and Professional Agency in the Dynamics Between the Professional Subject and Context in the Flow of Time

The dissertation contributed to the existing research gaps on how teachers' identity tensions vary across career stages, and what changes and continuity in professional agency are demonstrated over time. The study also identified how identity tension and professional agency issues in a non-Western context are similar to and different from those in previous studies. Moreover, the findings from the substudies underscored the intertwining relationship between teacher identity and professional agency in the dynamics between the professional subject and the context as different factors were unfolded on the career pathways.

The discussion illustrated that support of professional agency is critical in sustaining teacher identity development. Professional identity was found to be an ongoing negotiation process with the environment (Beijaard et al., 2004). Likewise, the substudies indicated that professional agency is neither a static notion nor a capacity residing in the teachers' self. Rather, professional agency is a phenomenon that is subjected to change and continuity in the dynamics between the professional subject and the situated context in the flow of time. Regarding the dynamics in the sociocultural context, the availability of an agency-supportive environment, and access to resources contribute together to the positive changes in how teachers exert their agency. When teachers are afforded the opportunity to exercise agency in the leadership positions or in areas related to their professional interests and aspirations, their identity as mid-level leaders and teaching professionals could be reinforced and sustained. From the aspects of the professional subject, familiarity with the relationships, culture and structure within the school is crucial to affording agency and negotiating identity. Such familiarity enables teachers to identify effective communication styles with their colleagues and management, recognise spaces for agency enactment, and construct their professional identity through the work-oriented interactions and actions. Time is the crucial factor to cultivate the familiarity with the environment and the awareness of the relationships.

Moreover, the dissertation highlighted the significance of the different factors at the macro and micro levels in the contexts in the investigation of identity tensions and professional agency development. On the one hand, the macro level was found to represent the sociopolitical dimension that embraces factors such as societal norms and top-down government policies that were mostly specific to a context. The sociopolitical dimension exerted professional demands and expectations on both the teachers and the school organisation, which partly shaped the teacher identity, as well as the work culture and structure in the school organisation. On the other hand, the micro level represented the school context in which the teachers were situated. While the professional subject possessed the agency to transform the sociocultural context, the organisation could also shape the identity and actions of the teachers.

In sum, teacher agency and identity were ongoing phenomena that were prone to changes and continuity in the dynamics of the professional subject with the context. This dissertation recognises the prospective and retrospective nature of time, explored the ways that contextual forces shape teacher identity and agency and, in turn, are shaped by the teachers in the flow of time. Figure 6 shows the relations among the professional subject, the contexts and professional agency in the flow of time.

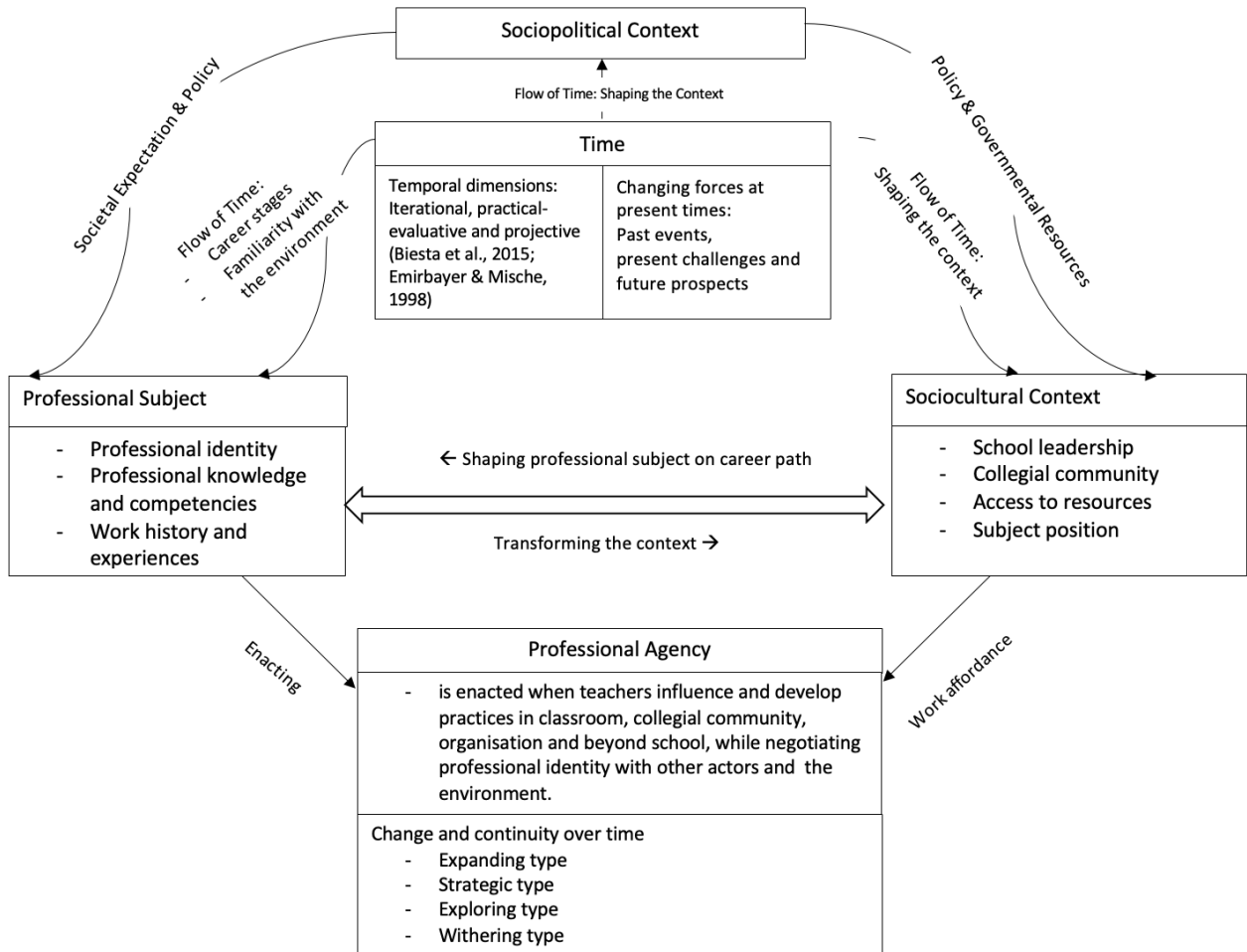


FIGURE6. The relations among the professional subject, contexts, professional agency and the flow of time

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness characterises the methodological accuracy and inquiry adequacy in qualitative research (Holloway & Galvin, 2023). It concerns five aspects related to the methodology of the dissertation: 1) credibility, which indicates the plausibility of the original data and the correct interpretation of the participants' original views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); 2) transferability, which refers to the research results' ability to be transferred to other contexts or settings with other participants; 3) dependability, which relates to the findings' stability over time (Bitsch, 2005); 4) confirmability, which deals with the degree to which the inquiry results are clearly derived from the data and can be validated by other researchers (Baxter & Eyles, 1997); and 5) integrity, which is related to ensuring that the informants and data are not false or fabricated (Wallendorf & Russell, 1989).

The trustworthiness of the dissertation was established through a range of measures and considerations taken during the research design, data gathering and data analysis process. It is important for the researcher to be aware of their own role and background in the interpretation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which could affect the credibility of the dissertation.

First, credibility was established through the researcher's familiarity with the teaching profession and the context. The researcher was a former teacher in various education settings, in particular, in the context of Hong Kong. Such a background was beneficial in understanding the teachers' social worldviews and social constructions (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). However, as the researcher was from the teaching field, there could be a potential risk of personal bias in the research design, data collection and data analysis process. To avoid this risk, the researcher collected multiple sources of data in the form of interviews and surveys. The interview data were used as the main source for the analysis, while the latter was used to corroborate the findings of the thematic analysis. In addition, the data were collected from participants from different school contexts.

Reflection notes were kept during the interview and data analysis process, and the researcher applied the code–recode strategy when analysing the interviews.

Second, to provide transferability of the dissertation, an extensive description related to the methodology and context was included in the articles and summary. This enabled other researchers to replicate the investigation in different sociocultural contexts. A deductive thematic analysis was adopted to explore the identity tensions and enacted agency in the investigated context. The method provided a structured framework for analysing the interview data. The researcher could integrate the existing theories and concepts of identity tensions and professional agency enactment into the investigation. In turn, the established theories and previous empirical studies enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. To avoid confirmation biases from the established theories and predefined themes of prior research, the dissertation also adopted the narrative approach, which provides rich and contextual data regarding the teachers' experiences, to triangulate the themes from the deductive analysis.

Third, the dependability of the research was ensured by having other experienced researchers take part in the data analysis process by engaging in the discussion and reflection on the themes and codes. The other researchers, who had different professional experiences and backgrounds than the author, were acquainted with the identity and agency issues in the work contexts.

Fourth, confirmability was provided through a detailed description of the research methods, as illustrated in Chapter 2 on the methodology. This description enables other researchers to repeat the investigation and enhance the findings of the present study.

Lastly, regarding the integrity and ethical concerns, all of the participants were informed verbally about their rights in the study and signed consent forms were obtained prior to the interviews. The interviews were held in locations where the participants felt safe expressing their views related to the work situations. Trust could thus be established with the participants to strengthen the credibility of the research. All the recordings and raw material have been stored in independent local storage devices, and all identifiers associated with the individuals and institutions were removed from the transcripts before the analysis to safeguard the privacy of the participants.

5.2 Theoretical, Practical and Societal Implications

The aim of this dissertation was to contribute to supporting teacher career development amid the continuous changes and challenges in the education arena. The dissertation investigated the issues of identity tensions and professional agency enactment in relation to the contextual and temporal factors. It further addressed the research gap regarding teacher identity tensions and professional agency with the consideration of the non-Western perspective and longitudinal approach. It contributes to several scientific and social significances in the area.

5.2.1 Theoretical Implications

The first theoretical implication lies in enhancing comprehension of the professional agency development through a temporal lens. The scholarly community has endeavoured to understand professional agency in the dynamics between the professional subject and the situated environment. For instance, the subject-centred sociocultural approach (Eteläpelto et al., 2013) highlights how the professional subject creates subjectivity when interacting with the other actors and the work environment. In contrast, the chordal triad (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and the ecological approach (Biesta et al., 2015) emphasise the temporal dimensions in which the subject is situated for the achievement of agency at the specific time point and in the specific context. However, we lack a detailed understanding of how teachers' professional agency evolves, dwindles, or sustains over time.

Instead of merely capturing snapshots of what type of professional agency the subject could enact at a time in the situated context, the dissertation attempted to present "a moving picture" of professional agency in teachers' work lives through their narratives (Neale, 2021) over a two-year period. Time is an important linchpin in researching the dynamics of the professional subject and the context. Both are subject to changes and reshaping in the flow of time. Adopting the longitudinal approach afforded the dissertation opportunities to access teachers' hearts and minds. Hence, it was possible to investigate the teachers' changing perceptions, reactions, and feelings towards the work context over time. These responses were apace with and in relation to changes in events, circumstances and conditions that are also exposed to being shaped by time forces. As a result, the dissertation contributed to the existing understanding of professional agency development and indicated four types of change and continuity: 1) the expanding agency type, which illustrates an increasing influence and involvement in work decisions, practices and organisational development; 2) the strategic agency type, which includes teachers who have become experienced with the work culture and are tactful in exerting agency in the organisation; 3) the explorer agency type, which depicts beginning or new teachers who are becoming more familiar with the organisation and explore areas to develop the career potentials; and 4) the withering agency type, which includes teachers whose professional agency is restricted by stricter control and supervision in the work environment. Furthermore, this dissertation highlighted that the change and continuity of professional agency is related to the availability of an agency-promoting environment and accessibility to resources in the context, and to the changes in positions in and familiarity with the environment of the professional subject.

The dissertation also illustrated a second theoretical implication: the intertwined relations between identity tensions and professional agency at different career stages in the teaching profession. Despite the prevalent identity tensions encountered by teachers at the beginning and transitional stages, the teachers demonstrated their agency in coping with the tensions in multiple problem- and emotional-focused ways. Some could even explore areas for new learning and initiatives, when surviving in the work challenges and navigating through the

career pathways. The active reflections and attempted agency enactment enabled the teachers to constructively negotiate their professional identity. Furthermore, experienced teachers might encounter fewer identity tensions, due to their familiarity with the sociocultural context. It was evidenced that some teachers could exert agency in strategic ways to cope with tensions related to the hierarchical structure and collegial conflicts. However, it was noted that identity tensions might not diminish as teachers passing through the career stages, and that the sociocultural context played an important part in this. As demonstrated in Substudy III, teachers of the withering agency type, who were situated in a work context that neglected and was untrusting of teachers' voices, reported many unpleasant emotions and negative perceptions of their professional identity. The sociocultural context featuring leadership and management styles that was not considering teachers' opinions could possibly intensify identity tensions and deter agency development for teachers at all career stages.

5.2.2 Practical and Societal Implications

The first practical implication points out the significance of differentiated support for teachers at different career stages for a sustainable and meaningful career. This dissertation demonstrated that teachers at different career stages face different identity tensions and contextual affordances in their agency enactment. At the early career stage, continuous support, such as mentoring and induction programmes, is essential for the beginning teachers to recontextualise their knowledge from professional training to the challenging school reality (Sarastuen, 2020). These teachers, who have survived the beginning stage might have greater motivation and an increased sense of self-efficacy (Ponnock et al., 2018) to further contribute to the profession. To facilitate transitional teacher development into the mid-career phase, school management and group leaders should be open in communicating teachers' ideas, as well as provide spaces to realise their potential and aspirations. Additionally, experienced teachers in this dissertation showed the fewest identity tensions. Yet, they were mostly in the leadership positions and reported that most conflicts were related to collegial collaboration. The experienced ones could be supported by leadership training programmes to strengthen their leadership roles. The agency of the experienced teachers could be further developed through guiding the team members in executing the tasks and implementing changes in a collaborative manner. Moreover, as unpredictable happenings or planned personal events in life unfold, teachers' changing orientations towards work also need to be attended to. Previous research on teachers' career life stages (Day, 2014; Huberman et al., 1993) has demonstrated that teachers' commitment, effectiveness and teaching quality can develop linearly or skip or regress in between the stages along the years of experience on the trajectories. Teachers' lives need to engage the concept of a sustainable career, which is built on the idea of continuous personal and professional development for enduring employment and professional life (De Vos et al., 2020).

The three indicators for a sustainable career consist of health (well-being, stress, physical health), happiness (job satisfaction, career success) and productivity. Even for the “glorious” sake of the next generation and future of the society, meaningless reforms and exhausting innovations could deplete teachers’ energy and passion towards education. It is important to take teachers’ voices regarding the meaning of the tasks, as well as their well-being, job satisfaction and career goals into consideration when cultivating a sustainable professional pathway. In turn, this can assist teachers in reaffirming commitment, resilience and passion for their identity and agency development in the changing and demanding work context.

The second practical implication concerns the support of agency and identity development in the specific school context of Hong Kong. Despite the context’s high power distance work culture and centralised education policy system, the dissertation demonstrated that teachers in the region were capable of exerting their professional agency, particularly in terms of the pedagogical and relational aspects. However, professional agency needs to be supported by an agency-promoting environment in school and society. The communitarian perspective in Confucian thinking could be applied in school management in the context, as it encourages individuals to live up to expected roles and responsibilities like a *junzi* with a noble character in striving for harmony and order in the community (Tan, 2014). Principals and seniors, who have been granted more power in the position, are advised to be *junzi* leaders and should win others over through their enacted virtues. A *junzi* leader entails the practice of a more agency-supportive form of leadership, which includes opening more channels for communication between management and the frontline, trusting teachers’ by allowing spaces to enact agency, and active listening to their career aspirations. In turn, school leaders could buffer the proximal zone between central policy and implementation on the frontline. This can also support teachers in becoming *junzi* members who can make professional judgements and enact their agency in their respective roles in the work structure.

The third practical implication regards the support of agency at the governmental and policy levels. This is particularly associated with contexts in which the locus of control in educational policies is in the hands of the government rather than a professionalised and highly qualified teaching force, like in the case of Hong Kong. Collective teacher agency and societal status could be empowered and enhanced when policy-making authorities open democratic dialogues with the professional communities and trade unions. Through democratic channels, collective teacher voices could exert influences on the critical education issues and realise social justices, such as how different education emergencies should be prioritised and how resources are allocated to facilitate the frontline responding to the diverse needs of student and school. Without the feedback and communication channels between the policy makers and the frontline implementers, teachers might not be able to interpret the meaning of the enforced orders. When the meaning of the policies is not communicated to the teachers’ beliefs and practical situations, genuine pedagogical changes would not be realised and schools

would execute the orders in a work-to-rule manner without any creative initiatives. Identity tensions are likely to intensify, as the governmental orders are misaligning from the teachers' values towards the profession. Although teachers in the Hong Kong context did not show evidence of strong resistance agency when facing emotionally meaningless tasks or authoritative orders, such silence should not be interpreted as welcoming nor acceptance. Instead, teachers encountered negative emotions and apathetically distanced themselves from the work context, as they conceded their position as inferior and insignificant. Even worse, when resistance agency could not be demonstrated towards the imposed orders aiming at the indoctrination of certain ideologies, it could affect and distort the moral, value and worldview development of the next generation. Yet, in the case of Hong Kong, it is questionable whether there are spaces for the existence of an active civic society after the National Security Law being enforced since 2020, as the legislation has posed radical changes and stringent pressure on the sociopolitical environment.

Lastly, the study also made one societal contribution that emphasizes teacher identity tension and agency research in tackling teacher recruitment and retention problem. All over the world, many regions, whether highly developed regions or developing countries, are facing a teacher shortage crisis. The critical situation has been described by the global media (e.g., Choi, 2023; Otte, 2023; UNESCO, 2023) as an exodus and emergency in the education sector. Depending on the sociocultural, historical, and political contexts, the reasons contributing to the unfavourable teaching working conditions and prospects include, but are not limited to, the lack of assistance in the diverse student needs and challenging behaviours in classrooms, incompetent salary and remuneration, inadequate teaching resources and training opportunities, demanding workloads and expectations and threats to teachers' professionalism. These factors have resulted in young talents being hesitant to enter the profession and in-service ones becoming exhausted. Teachers disengage from the tasks and even consider leaving the challenging job. When teacher recruitment and retention issues are not tackled properly, the future of society could be at stake. It is because students' learning and growth could be affected by the absence of well-trained professionals providing quality education that caters to individual intellectual and developmental needs. Although governments might resolve the problem through quick-fix methods, such as raising salaries and allowing untrained personnel into the classrooms, it is questionable whether these short-sighted remedies can sustain the commitment, resilience, and passion of the teachers. Teaching is a caring profession, which can impact the young generation and the society for the coming years (Hargreaves, 2003). The distinctiveness of the sociocultural context should not be neglected in the teacher shortage problem. Hence, investigations related to the identity tension and professional agency issues are advised to devise appropriate interventions for tackling the emergencies in teacher recruitment and retention. For example, as proposed by the dissertation, teacher identity issues could be identified in the specific domains at the societal political and

sociocultural levels. Hence, suitable interventions and changes could be made in affording teachers the conditions to enact their agency in their bounded context.

5.3 Suggestions for Further Research

First, this dissertation recommends further exploration of the issues related to teacher identity tensions and professional agency in different regional contexts. Amid speedy technological developments and more demanding expectations on teachers, many nations and authorities are enthusiastic about enhancing their education system to foster their country's competitive edge in the future uncertainties. Nevertheless, without recognising the problems that teachers on the front-line face, genuine changes and transformation would be challenging if not impossible to realise. It is recommended that to investigate the identity tensions facing the teachers in the context, and to recognise teacher professional agency by providing appropriate support. As indicated in this dissertation, teacher identity tensions negatively impact career development and well-being. Yet, professional agency is not emphasised and may even be constrained in some political, social and cultural contexts. In turn, teachers might perceive themselves as passive actors who are merely implementing orders in large-scale reforms and executing educational innovations according to the manuals. Exploring identity tensions and professional agency in a wide range of settings could enable comparisons among different contexts. It could expand the understanding of the issues from different perspectives, in relation to the range of sociopolitical and historical-cultural factors in the contexts. Identifying the opportunities and challenges in the identity tension and professional agency could provide context-based support for teachers to enhance teaching and learning, develop professional practices further, realise professional aspiration, and even improve the education system.

Second, this dissertation suggests adopting different research methods in the investigation of identity tensions and professional agency. This dissertation was conducted using a longitudinal qualitative framework. The data were excerpts of interviews in the context of Hong Kong from two phases of interviews in 2018 and 2020 with 21 and 14 participants, respectively. The insights of the dissertation could be enriched by data collected through other methods, such as ethnography through work shadowing and observations, quantitative methods targeting a larger number of samples, focus groups, learning diaries and perspectives from other stakeholders. All these ways could potentially broaden the understanding and explanation of the identity tension and professional agency phenomenon.

Third, with the findings and data available, the dissertation was able to delve deeper into the investigation of identity tensions and professional agency development in Hong Kong. Future investigation could span a longer time and be expanded to larger groups of teachers. The present dissertation was based on interviews with teachers who voluntarily shared their experiences and thoughts

regarding their own work situation and career development. Also, the changes and continuity were captured at particular time points. The participants provided valuable insights into how their teacher identity and career have developed in the face of the changes and challenges from the external environment over a two-year time. Continuing with a follow-up on the personal and professional development of teachers could contribute to a more holistic comprehension of how teacher identity tensions and professional agency issues are evolving and dwindling along the career trajectory.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

As indicated in previous research, teachers are frontline actors in implementing changes, innovations and reforms related to the development of students, the teaching community and school organisations (e.g., Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Lasky, 2005; Toom et al., 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2015). Both identity tensions and professional agency are significant issues in our times of rapid technological development, societal challenges and diverse demands in education. During the time when the dissertation was conducted in the context of Hong Kong, teachers faced different challenges at work and from society. These include but not limited to changes in curriculum, emphasis on STEM education, a series of political protests, the global pandemic, decreasing numbers of students due to migration and low birth rate, and also the arrival of artificial intelligence in the education sector. Change is a timeless challenge that teachers, at all stages and in all times, encounter throughout their careers. Yet, teachers in this dissertation reported their readiness and engagement in taking up the challenges and new learning amidst the changes and emergencies, as shown in the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of the uncertainties now and in the future, initial teacher training would never be adequate for providing teachers with up-to-date skills. This dissertation demonstrated that it is critical to provide career-long development, training opportunities, access to resources and spaces for teachers to learn about, experiment with and practise the new methods and innovations. Although learning the skills related to the deployment of advancing technologies and methods are essential, cultivating a mindset of lifelong learning and nurturing a sense of professional agency for personal growth and community development are of utmost importance in teacher training. These are the critical elements in teacher professional beliefs and values, which guide the teachers to create a meaningful and sustainable career for the long term in the fast-changing world.

For real changes and transformation to occur, teacher identity tensions and teacher agency need to be recognised in policy documents and supported in practice at the school organisation. With respected social status and professional voices being considered, teaching profession could become a sustainable career that attract talented young people to realise their career aspiration in the profession. Also, in-service experienced teachers could sustain their commitment to

further contribute their insights and passion for the betterment of education. After all, teachers, regardless of their career stages and the situated contexts, are human beings that would need emotional and material support from the school community and broader society to cope with the challenges in educational changes. When the professionalism of teachers is well respected and resourced, the human-centred profession would continue to bring about inspiring learning journeys for generations after generations. Education, which is backing up by the agentic teachers, is critical in shaping a society's future, communicating the values of humankind, and bringing hope to the world.

SUMMARY IN FINNISH

Opettajan identiteettikonfliktit ja ammatillinen toimijuus Hongkongin kontekstissa

Johdanto

Opettajilla on tärkeä rooli tulevaisuuden toimijoiden ja kansalaisten kasvatuksessa ja koulutuksessa. Jotta opettajat pystyvät vastaamaan moninaisiin kasvatustyön vaatimuksiin, heidän tulee itse olla aktiivisia toimijoita ja elinikäisiä oppijoita. Siksi on tärkeää tutkia näiden kasvattajien omaa kehittymistä, identiteetin rakentumista ja ammatillista toimijuutta, joita tässä väitöskirjatyössä tutkitaan. Henkilökohtaisten uskomusten ja opetuslalla vaadittavan osaamisen välinen ristiriita voi johtaa identiteettikonflikteihin, jotka vaikuttavat opettajien hyvinvointiin. Opettajan identiteetti ja ammatillinen toimijuus ovat täten kriittisiä ja toisiinsa liittyviä ilmiöitä nykypäivän nopeasti muuttuvassa maailmassa. Huolimatta aiemmasta tutkimuksesta, tutkimuskentällä havaittiin tutkimustarpeita, jotka liittyvät 1) identiteettikonflikteihin opettajan uran alkuvaiheen jälkeen, 2) opettajien toimijuuden tutkimiseen pitkittäistutkimuksellisella otteella ja 3) näiden kysymysten vähäiseen tutkimukseen muualla kuin länsimaissa.

Teoreettinen tausta

Tutkimusta ohjaava teoreettinen viitekehys pohjaa tutkimukseen opettajien identiteettikonflikteista ja ammatillisesta toimijuudesta uran eri vaiheissa. Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin subjektikeskeistä sosiokulttuurista lähestymistapaa. Hong Kongin kontekstissa työskentelevien opettajien toimijuuden jatkuvuutta ja muutoksia tarkasteltiin myös pitkittäistutkimuksen keinoin.

Tutkimuskysymykset ja tutkimusprosessi

Väitöskirja koostui kolmesta empiirisestä tutkimuksesta, jotka keskittyivät Hongkongilaisten opettajien identiteettikonflikteihin, ammatilliseen toimijuuteen ja toimijuuden muutoksiin ja jatkuvuuteen. Väitöskirjassa kysyttiin:

1. Millaisia identiteettikonflikteja opettajat kokevat uran eri vaiheissa?
2. Miten ammatillinen toimijuus ilmenee ja muuttuu opettajien uran aikana?
3. Millaiset tekijät luonnehtivat opettajien identiteettikonflikteja ja ammatillista toimijuutta Hong Kongin kontekstissa?

Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin laadullista pitkittäistutkimusta. Tutkimusaineistona hyödynnettiin haastatteluja, joita kerättiin opettajilta kaksi kertaa, vuonna 2018 ja 2020. Ensimmäinen vaiheen haastattelut tehtiin 21 opettajan, ja toinen vaiheen haastattelut 14 opettajan kanssa. Aineisto analysoitiin deduktiivisen

temaattisen analyysin ja narratiivisen analyysin avulla. Kahta haastatteluaineistoa analysoitiin kolmessa osatutkimuksessa eri tavoin, jotta yllä mainittuihin kolmeen tutkimuskysymykseen voitiin vastata. Osatutkimus I syventyi identiteettikonflikteihin ja siihen, miten opettajat selviytyvät niistä eri uravaiheissa. Osatutkimus II keskittyi opettajien ammatilliseen toimijuuteen ja osatutkimus III tarkasteli opettajien toimijuuden muutoksia ja jatkuvuutta kahden vuoden pituisen pitkäikäistutkimuksen aikana.

Tulokset ja pohdinta

Identiteettikonfliktit uran eri vaiheissa:

Tulokset osoittivat, että opettajien identiteettikonfliktit eivät rajoittuneet vain aloitteleviin opettajiin, vaan niitä kokivat myös muissa uravaiheissa olevat opettajat. Uran alkuvaiheen opettajat, joilla oli 0–3 vuoden kokemus, kohtasivat identiteettikonflikteja sekä kouluympäristössään että sen ulkopuolella. Koulutyön erilaiset haasteet tarjosivat kuitenkin myös mahdollisuuksia ammatilliseen kehittymiseen ja aktiiviseen toimijuuteen. Opettajien edetessä urallaan he raportoivat vähemmän identiteettikonflikteja, mutta jotkin konfliktit säilyivät uralla edetessä. Siirtymävaiheen opettajat, joilla oli 4–7 vuoden kokemus, kohtasivat konflikteja liittyen lisääntyneeseen työmäärään ja hallinnollisiin tehtäviin, kun taas keskiuran vaiheessa olevat opettajat, joilla oli yli 8 vuoden kokemus, raportoivat vähemmän identiteettikonflikteja. Kokeneet opettajat kokivat identiteettikonflikteja erityisesti kollegoiden kanssa tehtävään yhteistyöhön liittyen. Tällaisten identiteettikonfliktien kokeminen saattoi seurata opettajien siirtymisestä johtotehtäviin tai erilaisista tavoista tehdä työtä.

Ammatillisen toimijuuden muutokset ja jatkuvuus:

Tulosten mukaan ammatillinen toimijuus sisälsi kahden vuoden ajanjakson aikana sekä jatkuvuutta että muutoksia erityisesti pedagogisessa toiminnassa ja suhteessa muihin toimijoihin koulussa ja sen ulkopuolella. Tulokset viittasivat siihen, että ammatillisen toimijuuden muutoksiin vaikuttivat opettajien asemat kontekstissaan. Ammatillista toimijuutta tukeva ympäristö oli keskeinen tekijä ammatillisen toimijuuden muotoutumisessa. Toimijuutta tukevat johtajat antoivat opettajille autonomian ja mahdollisuuden toteuttaa uusia menetelmiä, kun taas työyhteisön tuki helpotti mielipiteiden jakamista, pedagogisten ideoiden kekeilemistä ja ongelmien ratkaisemista. Lisäksi erilaiset resurssit kouluympäristön ulkopuolella, kuten mahdollisuus koulutukseen ja ammatilliseen yhteistyöhön, edistivät opettajien ammatillista toimijuutta. Oman toimintaympäristön tuntemus osoittautui merkittäväksi toimijuuden muutoksen ja jatkuvuuden kannalta mahdollistaen ammatillisen toimijuuden tilojen ja toteuttamispaikkojen tunnistamisen.

Identiteettikonfliktit ja ammatillinen toimijuus Hong Kongin kontekstissa:

Hongkongin sosiaalipoliittinen ja kulttuurihistoriallinen konteksti näytti tulosten mukaan vaikuttavan identiteettikonflikteihin ja ammatilliseen toimijuuteen.

Hierarkkinen koulurakenne, joka pohjautuu brittiläiseen byrokratiaan ja konfutselaiseen perinteeseen, loi konflikteja liittyen uusien ideoiden ja mielipiteiden ilmaisuun koulussa. Koulutuksen hallinnon keskittäminen ja koulunhallinnon tyylit vahvistivat vallan epätasapainoa ja rajoittivat opettajien toimijuutta. Siksi toimijuutta tukeva ympäristö koulun organisaation sisällä ja sen ulkopuolella oli tärkeää opettajien ammatillisen toimijuuden edistämässä. Tämä tutkimus korosti, että opettajien identiteettikonfliktit ja ammatillinen toimijuus ovat dynaamisia ilmiöitä, jotka muotoutuvat ajan myötä ammatillisen toimijan (opettajien) ja kontekstin vuorovaikutuksessa. Yhteiskunnallinen ja poliittinen makrotaso ja kouluympäristön mikrotaso vaikuttivat sekä identiteetin että toimijuuden kehitykseen. Tulokset korostivat, että opettajan identiteetti ja ammatillinen toimijuus eivät ole staattisia käsitteitä.

Tutkimuksen vaikuttavuus

Ammatillisen toimijuuden kehittyminen ajassa:

Tämä tutkimus esitti "liikkuvan kuvan" ammatillisesta toimijuudesta hyödyntämällä pitkittäisnäkökulmaa. Se korosti ajallisuuden huomioimisen tärkeyttä ammatillisen toimijuuden kehittymisen ymmärtämisessä opettajan uran aikana. Tutkimus esitteli neljä erilaista ammatillisen toimijuuden muutoksen ja jatkuvuuden tyyppiä: laajentuva toimijuus, strateginen toimijuus, tutkimustoimijuus ja kuihtuva toimijuus tarjoten laajemman ymmärryksen siitä, miten ammatillinen toimijuus kehittyy ajassa.

Yhteys identiteettikonfliktien ja ammatillisen toimijuuden välillä:

Tutkimus kuvasti myös yhteyttä identiteettikonfliktien ja ammatillisen toimijuuden välillä eri uravaiheissa olevilla opettajilla. Vaikka identiteettikonflikteja esiintyi, opettajat osoittivat toimijuutta selviytyäkseen näistä konflikteista. Tutkimus korosti, että identiteettikonfliktit eivät välttämättä vähene opettajien uran edetessä. Kuitenkin työkontekstiin liittyvät tekijät, kuten johtajuustyyli ja kollegiaalisuus, voivat vaikuttaa merkittävästi näiden konfliktien muotoutumiseen ja ratkaisemiseen.

Eri uravaiheissa olevien opettajien eriytetty tuki:

Käytännöllisenä kontribuutiona tutkimus korostaa eri uravaiheissa oleville opettajille tarjottavan eriytetyn tuen tärkeyttä. Aloittavat opettajat voivat hyötyä jatkuvasta tuesta, ohjauksesta ja perehdytysohjelmista, jotka voivat auttaa heitä siirtymään koulutuksesta kouluympäristöön. Siirtymävaiheen opettajille tarvitaan mahdollisuuksia ilmaista ideoitaan ja toteuttaa potentiaaliaan. Kokeneet opettajat, esimerkiksi johtotehtävissä toimivat, saattavat tarvita johtajuuskoulutusohjelmia. Opettajien hyvinvoinnin ja työtyytyväisyyden tukeminen voi edistää keskeistä ja merkityksellistä uraa.

Toimijuuden ja identiteetin kehityksen kontekstuaalinen tukeminen:

Toisena käytännöllisenä kontribuutiona tutkimus korostaa ammatillisen toimijuuden tukemisen tärkeyttä erityisesti hierarkkisissa organisaatioissa. Tutkimus ehdottaa, että koulun johtajien tulisi omaksua ammatillista toimijuutta tukeva johtamistapa, joka ammentaa innoitusta konfutselaisesta ajattelusta. Tämä lähestymistapa rohkaisee avoimeen viestintään, luottamuksen kasvattamiseen, demokraattiseen vuoropuheluun ja kaikkien koulussa työskentelevien toimijuuden tukemiseen vähentäen identiteettikonflikteja ja tehostaen opettajien toimijuutta.

Opettajien rekrytoinnin ja sitoutumisen vahvistaminen:

Tutkimuksella on myös yhteiskunnallista vaikuttavuutta. Opettajien identiteetin ja ammatillisen toimijuuden vahvistaminen läpi uran voi helpottaa ja tukea opettajien rekrytointia ja vahvistaa opettajan ammattiin sitoutumista uran aikana. Opetusalan rekrytoinnin ja työssä pysymisen haasteet tulevat kasvamaan tulevaisuudessa, joten niihin liittyvä tutkimus ja koulutukselliset interventiot tulevat olemaan tarpeellisia niin opettajien koulutuksessa kuin opettajien työssä.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I 1st phase interview questions

I. Teacher professional identity

a. Personal dimension of teacher identity

The following questions are related to the background and experiences in the of the teacher (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Also, it is related to the professional ideals, goals, interests, values, ethical standards, commitments (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), professional knowledge (Beijaard et al., 2004) and sense of professional agency (Soini et al., 2016).'

- Tell me the story of how you became a teacher. Why do you teach? Why do you work at your current school?
- What is meaningful to you as a teacher?
- What kind of teacher do you think you are?
- What do you think you feel confident about/good at doing at school?
- What do you think you do not feel confident/comfortable in doing?

b. Professional dimension of teacher identity

The following questions are related to how teacher identity is formed within multiple social, cultural, political and historical contexts (Buchanan, 2015).

- How do your family members and friends feel about your career?
- How do you think people/society in Hong Kong feel about teachers?

c. Tensions and discrepancies at the workplace

The following questions are related to the teacher's personal feelings, beliefs, values or perception regarding their professional interests and goals.

- What kind of teacher would you want to be at the school?
- Are you able to enact your professional values and beliefs, interests and goals at work?
- If not, how do you cope with or resolve the differences?

II. Relationship with students, colleagues and others

The following questions are related to the relationship with students, colleagues and other persons in the work organisation (Soini et al., 2016; van der Heijden et al., 2015).

- Can you describe your work and relationship with
 - i) *your students?*
 - ii) *your colleagues?*
 - iii) *any persons/groups closely related to your work?*
- How do you feel about this relationship?
- Do you think you can learn from your students and colleagues? If so, what? If not, why?

III. Teacher professional agency

a. Teachers as lifelong learners

The following questions are related to teachers' role as lifelong learners for work (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), as well as their endeavours to take creative initiatives and willingness to take risks in bringing about effective educational change (Buchanan, 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2015).

- How often do you reflect on your teaching in the classroom and work at school?
- How do you feel about trying out new, unknown things in practice?
- What kind of professional development activities do you participate in within school? Outside school?
- How do you feel about that? Are they useful/helpful to your development?

b. Teachers as change agents

The following questions are related to the teachers' influence on their own work, decisions and choices about their involvement at work and negotiations on their identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2013a; Vähäsantanen, 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2015).

- What do you think should be changed at your school?
- Do you have the influence to bring about changes at your school?
If yes, describe the situations.
If no, why not?
-

- What are the opportunities for your participation in decision making at your school?
What are the challenges at your work? How do you cope with the challenges at work?

IV. Future orientation

Related to how teacher identity is formed and re-formed constantly over the course of a career (Buchanan, 2015). Also, it is related teachers' orientation towards the future (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

- How do you see yourself as a teacher at your workplace over this 2-year time period? Why?
- What kind of teacher do you want to develop into in your teacher career? How will you develop that?
- What kind of changes would you like to see for your teacher career in the future?
- How long do you think you will continue to teach? Why?

Appendix II – 2nd-phase interview questions

I. Changes at work situation/position in general after 2 years

- Think about your work situation **NOW**: What are your **CURRENT** thoughts, views and feelings?
- Think about your work situation **2 YEARS AGO**: What has happened in your work? Have there been any **CHANGES** over these **2 YEARS**?

II. Professional identity

- What do you see as the most important and meaningful for your professional role or tasks **NOW**? **OR** What are your core professional values, goals and interests **NOW**?
- Do you feel that there have been some **CHANGES** in the opportunities to enact/realise your professional interests, values and goals over these **2 YEARS**?
- How do you see yourself as a teacher **NOW**? Do you think there have been any **CHANGES** for yourself as a teacher over these **2 YEARS**?
- What do others (family, friends and society) see your professional role **NOW**? Do you think there have been any **CHANGES** over these **2 YEARS**?

III. Relationship with students, colleagues and others

- How do you describe and feel about your work relationship **NOW** with...
 - i. your students?
 - ii. your colleagues?
 - iii. your management?
 - iv. any persons, e.g., parents, other professionals related to your work?
- Have there been any **CHANGES/ DIFFERENCES** with the above relationships over these **2 YEARS**?

IV. Teacher professional development

a. Teachers as lifelong learners

- What do you think about your professional development **NOW**?
- Have there been any **CHANGES** in your professional development over these **2 YEARS**?
- What do you think/how do you feel about trying new things or policies **NOW**? Have there been any **CHANGES** over these **2 YEARS**?

b. Teachers as change agents

- Could you discuss your **CURRENT** influence at the school **NOW**?
- Have there been any **CHANGES** in the opportunities to take part in the decision making and exert influence at your workplace over these **2 YEARS** (group and school levels)? (More, less, no change; Why?)
- What are the situations regarding challenges/difficulties at your work **NOW**? Have there been any **CHANGES** over these 2 years? How did you cope with that?

F. Future orientation

- As a reflection from your **PAST** experiences and the **PRESENT** situation, how do you want to develop your teaching career for the **FUTURE**?
- How do you see the teaching profession in Hong Kong in the **FUTURE**? How long do you see yourself staying in the profession?



ORIGINAL PAPERS

I

TEACHER'S IDENTITY TENSIONS AND RELATED COPING STRATEGIES: INTERACTION WITH THE CAREER STAGES AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

by

Josephine Lau, Katja Vähäsantanen & Kaija Collin, 2022

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Teachers' Identity Tensions and Related Coping Strategies: Interaction With the Career Stages and Socio-Political Context

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Abstract

When external requirements conflict with teachers' personal beliefs and values, the resulting internal struggles can lead to identity tensions. Contributing to discussion on teachers' identity development in a challenging context, this study investigated teacher identity tensions and related coping strategies in Hong Kong. We conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with qualified teachers and then performed a deductive thematic analysis of the data. We categorised the identity tensions as positioned on the micro or macro level, and distinguished the coping strategies as emotion-focused or problem-focused behaviours. The identity tensions and related coping strategies seemed to be associated with teachers' career stages. We further found identity tensions to be related to the school's sociocultural environment and to the specific political and societal forces in the region. The study demonstrated the need for continuous and differentiated support catering for teachers' needs, and highlighted the specific social-political influences on professional identity development.

Keywords

Career stages, coping strategies, Hong Kong, professional identity tensions, socio-political context, teacher professional development

Introduction

Teachers' professional lives are characterised by continuous educational and societal changes. Despite training opportunities, including practices to facilitate transformations and innovations, teachers face multiple challenges in their work within schools and from society. When teachers' personal beliefs and values conflict with the demands of their profession or with external changes, internal struggles may lead to identity tensions (Beijaard et al., 2004). Discrepancies between personal and professional elements can further have negative effects on teachers' learning, job satisfaction, career endeavours, and may lead to resignation from the profession (e.g. Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). Previous studies have pointed out the professional identity tensions of beginning teachers (Pillen et al., 2013) and different identity issues of experienced teachers (van der Want et al., 2018). To facilitate continuous teachers' professional development, identity tensions should be investigated in relation to the different stages in professional life and to the context, which comprises the school community (at the micro level), along with the societal expectations and top-down educational policies (at the macro level).

This interview study aimed to investigate the identity tensions and the coping strategies of teachers at different career stages in the Hong Kong context. The context serves as a significant case for investigating micro- and macro-level teacher identity tensions, bearing in mind that the region is eager to maintain a competitive edge and to nurture talents for future development.¹ The study was designed to contribute to a holistic and dynamic understanding of teacher-identity tensions at different sites within professional life, and to assist policymakers, administrators, and researchers in reflecting on appropriate support as professionals like teachers progress on their career path beyond initial professional training.

Literature review

Teacher identity development at different career stages, identity tensions, and the related coping strategies

Teacher identity encompasses the traditional professional assets of teachers in the school context, including teaching values and beliefs, subject knowledge, and other related competencies (e.g. Beijaard et al., 2004; Vähäsantanen et al., 2017). At the same time, personal variations in its motivational and affective aspects, such as efficacy and emotions, are significant components in its construction and preservation (Kelchtermans, 2009).

¹ "Nurturing Talents" has been the main theme of Chief Executive's Policy Address since 2017, except in 2019, when the Anti-extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement broke out.

Teachers' Identity Tensions and Related Coping Strategies

Teacher identity is not regarded as an inborn phenomenon; nor is it a static entity residing within the individual and separated from the environment. Rather, it is developed through a somewhat fluid, fluctuating, and subjective process (e.g. Akkerman & Meijer, 2011), and it is continuously negotiated with other actors and contextual factors within one's career trajectory.

As teacher identity is an ongoing developmental process of the professional self in relation to the different domains within school and society, it is important to analyse identity on different professional life phases of teachers' trajectory if one is to provide continuous differentiated support according to needs. There has been considerable research on the phases of teacher professional development (e.g. Huberman, 1993), and the career stages covered by the studies differ in number and definitions (e.g. Day, 2012; Graham et al., 2020). Regarding the operational definition of career stage in the present study, 0-7 and 8-15 years of experience are categorised as early and middle professional life phases respectively (Day, 2012). The early career life phase is further distinguished into the beginning stage (0-3 years) and the transitional stage (4-7 years), while 8 or more years is considered as the experienced stage. The rationale for such distinction is based on the wide acknowledgement of the first three years as the early career survival and discovery stage (e.g. Huberman, 1993), and also on the more stabilised career decisions in beginning teachers after the initial 3 years (Graham et al., 2020).

Identity tensions can emerge in the identity negotiation process, when teaching beliefs, values, or ideals in the personal dimension conflict with the requirements or expectations from the workplace, along with the sociocultural policy in school and society respectively (Beijaard et al., 2004; Day, 2012). Within the classroom, teaching is "emotional work" that requires whole-person involvement. Teachers must invest their authentic selves in understanding and caring for students' learning and growth (Day, 2018). At the school community and organisational level, teachers must engage in micropolitical negotiations with their colleagues related to actions, strategies, and practices, and do so within the conditions of their work environment (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Concerning the broader social and political dimensions, forces emerging from societal discourse and educational policies interact with both teachers' internal psychic disposition, and their immediate school context (Zembylas & Chubuck, 2018). According to the study of Pillen and colleagues (2013), beginning teachers in the Netherlands experienced various identity tensions with the change of role into a fully responsible teacher. These involved (desired or actual) support for students, along with conflicting teaching and learning conceptions with colleagues and mentors. All these could negatively impact the beginning teachers' professional development and well-being, with some of the issues from an early stage persisting throughout the individual's career (van der Want et al., 2018).

When teachers face identity tensions, they must therefore acquire appropriate coping strategies. The most common coping strategy used by beginning teachers is to speak with

significant others, while some search for solutions when feeling incompetent, or else they simply accept the status of novices (Pillen et al., 2013). It appears that experienced teachers, too, may be unwilling to talk about these tensions, and that they merely put up with the situations (van der Want et al., 2018). A study on English as a foreign language teachers (Raharjo & Iswandri, 2019) distinguished the strategies for dealing with teacher tensions according to whether the coping behaviours were emotion-focused or problem-focused. When external conditions are deemed unchangeable, one is more likely to adopt emotion-focused strategies, such as avoidance or distancing. In contrast, problem-focused coping behaviours are related to one's agency enactment in the situated context, with the possibility of actions to solve the tensions using the resources available.

Theoretical framework

Teacher identity tension in different contextual domains

Multiple factors in the external environment influence the development of the personal and contextual elements in teacher identity, and the balance between them (Beijaard et al., 2004; Ye & Zhao, 2019). A micro- and macro-level contextual framework can seek to capture the complexities of teacher identity tensions in the different domains within the context. The framework applied here was planned to identify the tensions emerging between, on the *micro level*, teachers' performance of their identity roles in classroom interactions, collegial relationships, and the school culture (Kayi-Aydar, 2015); and on the *macro level*, forces from the broader social and political dimensions, including societal discourse and political agendas (Zembylas & Chubuck, 2018). Further explanation of the various factors operating at the micro and macro levels in the teacher-situated context is presented below.

Micro level: Professional and social dimensions in the classroom and in the immediate work conditions

The micro level involves teachers' immediate working conditions engaging the professional and social dimensions. Teachers' everyday work consists of classroom interactions, cooperation with colleagues and school leaders, and communication with parents or with other professionals. As regards the classroom context and student relationships, teachers often encounter conflicts between the amount of support they desire to give students and the actual support they can give. This causes them to start to maintain an emotional distance and to adjust expectations of students' academic performance from an early stage in their career (Pillen et al., 2013; van der Wal et al., 2019). In addition, today's school environment requires constant collegial collaboration and active involvement in the teaching community. There are pressures to enhance teaching quality and implement changes, and various conflicts may arise among colleagues over teaching conceptions or the ways in which various tasks should be handled (Schaap et al., 2019). At the school management level, conflicting expectations between school leaders and teachers, changing priorities in instructional practices or administration policies, and a performance-driven

school culture can lead to clashes with teachers' internal beliefs and values. Outside the immediate teaching environment, teachers are increasingly engaged in communication bound up with factors such as home—school collaboration and enhanced technology. In line with this, van der Want and colleagues (2018) also found teacher-parent interactions to be a prominent identity tension issue for experienced teachers in the Netherlands.

Macro level: Societal and political dimensions of the specific region

The macro level encompasses the forces of authority, laws, rules, and traditions, plus the principles, rights, and responsibilities related to the teacher's position. It comprises factors in the societal and political dimension, including the implicit expectations, norms, and values assigned to teachers' roles. It also includes education policies and further, the institutional rules and regulations of the society in question. The societal image of teachers varies across cultures and regions, as does also their status. For instance, teachers are executors of state education policy in China (Ye & Zhao, 2019), while Finnish society has traditionally held the professional status of teachers in high regard (Sahlberg, 2014). In recent years, the demands of the "neoliberal cascade" (Connell, 2013) and of the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" in respect to technological know-how have induced the authorities to impose many educational changes and policies. These have been found to lead to overwhelming but meaningless workloads for teachers, with possibilities for harm to school morale (Davies & Davies, 2013). Moreover, when ideologically-oriented regimes or authoritarian contexts possess the power to penetrate through to frontline actors, a "politics of use" perspective can impel teachers to become larger political agents of central missions, and may override institutional and organisational structures (Schulte, 2018).

Research questions

To identify teacher identity tensions and related coping strategies, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What are the identity tensions perceived by qualified teachers at different career stages in the social-political context of Hong Kong?
- (2) What kinds of strategies do teachers at different career stages adopt to cope with these identity tensions?

Methods

The research context: Teachers' working conditions in Hong Kong

The study participants were qualified teachers in Hong Kong who worked at the primary or secondary level and taught various subjects. Hong Kong was a former British colony until its sovereignty was handed over to China in 1997. A series of education reforms were launched in the early 1990s, covering the political transition period. These were also seen as a response to globalisation, and they emphasised excellence, competition, and accountability.

The centralised-decentralisation approach in education governance positioned the government as the centre of reforms and changes, while schools were designated with managerial power to be the agent of policy implementation (Ng & Chan, 2008). The management and staff structure within schools were hierarchical. Teachers are ranked according to qualifications and years of experience, while the decision-making power often rests with the upper management and principals (Ko et al., 2016). In addition to increasing institutional demands leading to extremely long working hours, the changing political and societal sphere in Hong Kong has also influenced teachers' work (Tsang, 2018). Civic society has itself become a stronger force affecting educational issues, as demonstrated in the 2012 protesting the introduction of "Moral and National Education"².

Participants

In total, 21 teachers representing different schools, subjects and teaching experiences agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews for this study. The teachers were invited via email using the researchers' personal and professional contacts. Before the study began, we verbally informed the teachers about their rights as research participants and obtained their written consent. The teachers were working in different privately or publicly funded schools in Hong Kong. Table 1 illustrates the work profile of the participants. Pseudonyms are used to ensure privacy. The average age was 32 years. The gender ratio of the participants closely reflected that of teachers in Hong Kong, where female teachers comprise 76% and 56% in the primary and secondary education respectively (The World Bank, 2022). They also taught different subjects and were involved in various administrative duties.

² As part of the nation-building assemblage after 1997, the Education Bureau announced the introduction of "Moral and National Education" (MNE) as a compulsory subject in 2010. Yet, the issue remained controversial. This resulted in numerous public protests and 24 civic groups opposing the subject, which led to the subject's withdrawal in 2012.

Table 1. Background profiles of participants

	Participants	Gender	Years of Experience	Career Stage	School Level	Employment Term	Subject(s) Taught
1	Dortha	F	9	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	English
2	Gordon	M	4	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Mathematics
3	Peony	F	1	Beginning	Primary	Temporary	English & French
4	Felix	M	7	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Mathematics
5	Camelia	F	10	Experienced	Primary and Secondary	Regular	Mathematics, Integrated Science & English
6	Louis	M	8	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	Liberal Studies
7	Howard	M	8	Experienced	Secondary	Temporary	English
8	Xavier	M	3	Beginning	Secondary	Temporary	Mathematics
9	Nicholas	M	7	Transitional	Primary	Regular	Mathematics & English
10	Beatrice	F	8	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	English
11	Sophia	F	9	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	English Literature & English
12	Queenie	F	5	Transitional	Secondary	Temporary	Mathematics
13	Rosie	F	15	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	Biology, Integrated Science & Liberal Studies
14	Ian	M	3	Beginning	Secondary	Temporary	Liberal Studies
15	Opal	F	7	Transitional	Secondary	Temporary	Chinese
16	Elsa	F	0	Beginning	Secondary	Regular	Visual Arts
17	Violet	F	11	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	Chinese
18	Lisa	F	7	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Chinese
19	Karl	M	6	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Economics
20	Mathew	M	7	Transitional	Secondary	Regular	Mathematics
21	Terrance	M	11	Experienced	Secondary	Regular	English

Interviews

We collected the semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) to understand the current tensions encountered by the teacher participants and their respective coping strategies. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese by the first author in the summer of 2018, and held in venues where the participants felt comfortable and safe to express thoughts and feelings regarding their work situation. The interviews lasted 51 minutes on average. The following were discussed: (i) participants' professional values and beliefs, (ii) their perceptions of how family, social circles, and society comprehend their profession, (iii) their work situation, especially the struggles and obstacles encountered, (iv) their relationships with management, colleagues, students, and any interpersonal conflicts in the

workplace, (v) their professional prospects. In addition, the teachers were asked if they found any belief or value discrepancies in issues related to (ii), (iii), or (iv). When disagreements, conflicts, struggles, or tensions were mentioned, the researcher followed up by asking if the interviewee had devised any coping strategies to help deal with the situation.

Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse the identity tensions and the coping strategies from the interview data translated from Cantonese to English (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and utilised ATLAS.ti for analysis.

The initial coding of the data started with adopting the teachers' identity issues in previous research on beginning and experienced teachers in other cultural contexts (Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018), e.g. *time for teaching vs. time for other tasks*. Apart from using the codes in previous studies, new codes, which are mostly related to the macro level in the societal and political dimensions, e.g., *feeling more inferior to other professionals*, are generated from the current data. Then, the coded data were re-read according to each interviewee's context and discussed within the research group. Subsequently, the codes were refined for better categorisation. For the first research question, the codes related to identity tensions were reviewed and grouped within six domains at the micro and macro levels, such as student relationships and government policy.

For the second question, the codes were categorised under two main themes: emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies. All the codes were read again. At this point, some quotations associated with those codes were removed, as they merely illustrated conflicts occurring in the workplace without triggering any internal struggles or negative emotions in the interviewees. Next, all the subthemes under the main themes were discussed and modified by all researchers in the group to ensure comprehensiveness in covering the tensions and strategies described.

We then counted the number of teachers who mentioned a theme pertaining to either of the research questions. In this way we gained a picture of the themes in their totality, and their relative prominence within the data. Moreover, the thematic analysis gave a rich overview of the phenomena under investigation across the entire group of teachers. To illustrate those phenomena from the viewpoint of different career stages, we pick out extracts that had been noted during the thematic analysis (See Table 2 and 3). Additionally, we used narrative method (Riessman, 2008) to provide more details on how the identity tensions in different domains impact on the professional life phases. Three teachers, who encountered the largest number of identity tensions in the respective career stage group, were selected to further illustrate the phenomena.

Findings

Concerning the first research question, an overview of the identity tensions encountered can be found in Table 2. The tensions correspond to identity tensions experienced in (i) student relationships, (ii) the collegial community, (iii) the school organisation, and (iv) parent relationships (at the micro level), and further to tensions involving (v) society and (vi) government policy (at the macro level). Each theme pertaining to each level is elucidated by an example, and the number of teachers mentioning that tension is noted.

The analysis of teacher identity tensions in relation to the career stages showed that most teachers (14/21), regardless of career stage, identified with tensions related to the hierarchical structure, and experienced as a restraining expression from the bottom up (tension iii). By contrast, only a few teachers (4/21) across all the stages indicated tensions associated with parents (tension vi).

The number and domains of the tensions encountered varied between different career stages. Identity tensions were reported most among beginning teachers and least among experienced teachers. Over half of the beginning teachers in the present study encountered identity tensions in nearly all the themes, at both the micro and macro levels, except for those related to parents and social status. In contrast, many teachers at the transitional stage reported identity tensions associated with having an inferior professional status (tension vii). Nearly all the identity tensions at the beginning stage lingered on into the transitional stage; however, out of all the stages, the transitional group showed the fewest tensions related to the collegial community (tension ii). Regarding the experienced teachers, two identity tensions were demonstrated by most teachers in this category. These were related to the hierarchical structure (tension iii) and the collegial community (tension iv), with the former persisting throughout all stages, whereas the latter was an issue among beginning and experienced teachers but not so among those in the transitional stage.

Teachers' Identity Tensions and Related Coping Strategies

Table 2. Findings on teacher identity tension

Domains within the Context		Domains	Tensions and Examples	S1^	S2^	S3^
Number of teachers				4	8	9
Micro Level (Classroom & Immediate Work Conditions)	Social and Organizational Dimensions	Student relationships	i. Wanting to support students' intellectual and moral growth vs. feeling frustrated by students' attitudes and low motivation (7/21)	**	**	*
			<i>"If the students are being very unreasonable, they won't listen to me. It is very exhausting."</i> (Xavier, beginning stage, mathematics)			
		Collegial relationships	ii. Having teaching methods and working styles that conflict with those of colleagues (11/21)	**	*	**
			<i>"Working in the subject group is a mental battle. [I have to] know when to dodge, not to fall into traps or to be framed by somebody."</i> (Beatrice; experienced stage, English language)			
		School and organisation	iii. Wanting to express ideas and opinions vs. feeling restrained under the hierarchical school structure (14/21)	**	**	**
			<i>"Those with low seniority, [and who tell] in fact, a 'poor man's tale' cannot be heard."</i> (Mathew; transitional stage, liberal studies)			
			iv. Feeling exhausted by nonteaching duties and meaningless tasks (11/21)	**	**	*
			<i>"[The management] used a lot of government resources and manpower on school promotion, but not directly on our students with special education needs."</i> (Peony, beginning stage, English and French language)			
		Parent relationships	v. Wanting career development vs. feeling negatively towards the prospects (8/21)	**	**	*
			<i>"I didn't stay in the school and prepare for my lessons, even if I want to witness the students' growth. Because I needed to leave school and send job application."</i> (Howard; experienced stage, English language)			
Macro Level (Societal Expectation and Top-down Policies)	Societal and Political Dimensions	Society	vi. Wanting to be education partners with parents vs. feeling the need to give way to parents' demands (4/21)	*	*	*
			<i>"When parents want to protect certain rights for their children, they would despise teachers, and they don't believe in the [teaching] profession."</i> (Opal; transitional stage, Chinese language)			
		Society	vii. Being a professional with specified expertise in education vs. feeling that teaching is inferior to other professions (11/21)	*	**	*
			<i>"Other professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, may think teaching is a very ordinary job."</i> (Lisa; transitional stage, Chinese language)			
		Government policy	viii. Being expected to uphold extremely high moral standards and be accountable for social problems (8/21)	**	*	*
			<i>"You don't get away from teachers' moral obligations after work for 24 hours, 7 days a week."</i> (Elsa; beginning stage, visual arts)			
		Government policy	ix. The imposition to carry out top-down policies and changes vs. wanting to have a voice in educational matters (11/21)	**	**	*
			<i>"[The government] wants to push different policies into schools. They only give some money as support, and that's it. There is little information transmitted from the bottom up."</i> (Karl; transitional stage, economics)			

^S1= Beginning Stage, S2= Transitional Stage, S3= Experienced Stage

* Less than half of the interviewees encountered the tension

**Half or over half of the interviewees encountered the tension

Teachers' Identity Tensions and Related Coping Strategies

The teachers mentioned multiple ways to handle the identity tensions. The coping strategies were classified as either emotion-focused or problem-focused behaviours for the tensions and tension-causing experiences. Table 3 lists the strategies mentioned by the participants. Most teachers (11/21) were willing to tolerate the situation to avoid further conflict, and no other strategy was prominently mentioned over the different career stages.

Within the different stages, half of the beginning teachers mentioned *all* the emotion- and problem-focused behaviours in seeking to cope with the tension, while most of the experienced teachers coped by means of various strategies, including, for the most part, *tolerating the situation*, or *actively communicating about the problem*. However, less than half of teachers at the transitional stage indicated that they had adopted the coping strategies appropriate for each category.

Table 3. Findings on coping strategies

Emotion-Focused Behaviour	Example	S1 [^]	S2 [^]	S3 [^]
i. Tolerating the situation (11/21)	<i>"There's nothing you can do about it (meaningless tasks), just do it... or try my best to act in concert with it."</i> (Violet; experienced stage; Chinese language)	**	*	**
ii. Having and giving emotional support among close colleagues, or sharing with family and friends (4/21)	<i>"My family often listen to me talking [the issues in school], and they understand that teaching is hard work."</i> (Queenie; transitional stage, mathematics)	**	*	*
Problem-Focused Behaviour	Example			
iii. Communicating and negotiating actively (8/21)	<i>"I would try to accommodate or to explain to those colleagues who have different opinions, and try to make them understand."</i> (Camelia; experienced stage, mathematics, integrated science and English language)	**	*	**
iv. Reflecting on the self and the situation (6/21)	<i>"I was not a 'straight A' student, I understand the students struggle with their studying. It probably doesn't work by forcing them [to study]."</i> (Dortha; experienced stage, English language)	**	*	*
v. Finding spaces for one's individual voices and aspirations (6/21)	<i>"I would first fulfil the basic requirement and find some space to do something I want to do."</i> (Gordon; transitional stage, mathematics)	**	*	*

[^]S1= Beginning Stage, S2= Transitional Stage, S3= Experienced Stage

* Less than half of the interviewees encountered the tension

**Half or over half of the interviewees encountered the tension

Extended examples of teacher identity tensions and coping strategies at different career stages

To provide a close-up on how the identity tensions and different coping strategies play out in different domains on the teaching trajectory, three teachers were selected to illustrate the phenomena at the beginning, transitional, and experienced stages. These selected cases involved the largest number of identity tensions out of all the cases from the same career stage.

Ian (beginning teacher): An identity tension survival story

Ian was a beginning teacher in his mid-20s with three years of experience in three different schools. He started as a teaching assistant, then received a teaching position in the second school, and was now employed as an assistant again. Ian's core professional beliefs were based on the pedagogical aspect of assisting student growth.

Like other beginning teachers, Ian encountered identity tensions in most domains at the micro and macro level. Within the teaching context, Ian enjoyed working with students, but he described his experiences as "shallow" and "inadequate" to stimulate students with low motivation in classrooms (tension i). Furthermore, he had to chase after the examination-oriented progress like other colleagues (tension ii), and suppressed his professional inspirations. Also, Ian observed in different schools that teachers worked in isolation most of the time. He described school as a hierarchical organisation requiring teachers' obedience (tension iii). His opinion counted merely as a "poor man's tale" in which the upper level would not be interested. Despite being a qualified teacher, Ian had to change to a different school annually, and such instability worried him and his family. He felt passive and helpless regarding his career development, and he experienced an opaque and unfair employment mechanism based on favouritism (tension v). He was not even certain he would continue teaching in the face of the unstable situation. He might need to opt for a substitute position to accumulate more teaching experiences. At the macro level, although Ian felt teachers were respected in general, society depersonalised the profession and expected them to be role models around the clock. He described Hong Kong society as "conservative"—a location where teachers could not lay down their professional roles during their spare time, because they could easily be judged by the public (tension viii). Ian also found that government education policies and new initiatives did not necessarily make teaching and learning meaningful. He criticised the examination evaluation frameworks were being very inflexible, which was in contradiction to his professional training and beliefs in the open-ended nature of the subject (tension ix).

As regards coping with the difficult career path, Ian's friends contributed significantly to his willingness to persevere as a beginning teacher (strategy ii). His friends listened to his struggles and encouraged him not to give up his career goal.

Ian's story illustrated how a beginning teacher survived the identity tensions in the school environment—tensions that stemmed from complex tasks and requirements for fully responsible teachers. As he saw it, personal professional beliefs and values, and knowledge from initial professional training, were challenged and restricted by school reality—including students' motivation, school expectations on academic performance, and the organisational hierarchical culture. Furthermore, the temporary contracts and non-transparent employment mechanism negatively affected his well-being and professional aspirations. His

main support in enduring the tensions came from the encouragement given by his personal social circle.

Felix (transitional stage teacher): An identity tension story illustrating efficacy at risk

Felix was the vice-chairperson in his subject group, and he belonged to the discipline and guidance committee. He was in his late 20s, had taught for five years, and was a permanent staff member. His professional beliefs centred on his subject matter, and his didactic methods focused on improving students' academic grades. He liked interacting with and providing guidance for students.

Like other teachers in the transitional stage, Felix's tensions were mostly related to the organisational culture at the micro level, and societal educational expectation at the macro level. Felix had a mixed relationship with his colleagues. He had positive relationships with his teammates in the subject department, but he felt negative and restricted when working with colleagues in the discipline team who acted with hierarchical attitudes, did not listen to junior teachers, and expected them to merely follow the seniors (tension iii). The other organisational identity tension involved heavy non-teaching duties (tension iv). The exhausting teachers' work nowadays made Felix feel like an "administrative staff person" who could not perform his teaching role, not to mention his professional beliefs and values.

On the macro level, Felix believed that society did not recognise teaching as a professional job (tension vii). In the current education system and the problems facing the society, he felt what teachers could contribute was "very limited", and he personally could not see himself doing the things he wanted to do.

In dealing with the tensions, Felix chose to remain silent (strategy i) most of the time. He preferred to avoid conflicts and merely fulfilled orders, as he could not influence or change anything in the current situation.

Although Felix demonstrated higher confidence in didactic and pedagogical matters, had greater collaboration with colleagues, and even assisted the subject group, he perceived himself merely as a "passive follower" at the school. Being a more experienced staff member, he was expected to have more administrative tasks, tackle difficult student cases, and experience higher pressure from management to produce academic results from students. Felix's identity tension story was accompanied by reduced efficacy. Like Ian, who was at the beginning stage, Felix also described teaching as a challenging profession with an unstable environment. In fact, he asked himself if he would be competent for future demands, as he could be "washed out" in the waves of education changes and top-down policies.

Sophia (experienced stage teacher): An identity tension story involving unrecognised effort

Sophia had been teaching for over eight years, and she was a subject leader with a master's qualification. Her competencies lay in didactic and pedagogical aspects focused on students' understanding and the learning process.

Similar to other teachers at the experienced stage, the tension-infused domains involved collegial relationships and the organisation's hierarchical structure. As a subject leader, Sophia had to coordinate tasks and ensure the teaching quality of her teammates. Nevertheless, her teaching and working methods could conflict with those of her colleagues (tension ii), and she found her role in supervising and interfering with her colleagues' work to be difficult and even "heart-breaking" when the work did not meet her minimal expectation. Also, Sophia's experiences and duties led her to communicate more closely with the seniors and the principal. Although she understood more than others about management decisions, she recognised that she did not have any influence on them (tension iii). As a teacher holding multiple responsibilities and a heavy workload, she felt powerless in terms of requesting promotion within the structure. She was very disappointed when she was not promoted within the organisation. On the societal level, she felt that the teaching profession was not well recognised and highly trusted by society; this was because no autonomous and strong trade union or professional association existed to represent the profession (tension vii).

As a coping strategy, for most issues she tried to communicate with and suggest ideas to the seniors and the principal (strategy iii). Sophia also took active initiatives in trying to provide emotional support to her colleagues' teaching (strategy ii).

In reflecting on her current situation, Sophia preferred to maintain her core beliefs in quality teaching and learning. Despite the identity tensions in her role as subject leader, Sophia demonstrated her coping skills via active communication. Moreover, her experience led her to recognise that the politics in the school restricted her promotion. She therefore diverted more of her focus from her professional to her personal life.

Discussion

Consideration of differentiated support for identity development at different career stages

Findings showed that teachers at different career stages vary in the number and domains of identity tensions. Teachers at the beginning stage encountered identity tensions in most domains, and many tensions persisted to the transitional stage. Yet, experienced teachers noted the least tensions, except those related to the collegial relationship. Thus, the present study calls for differentiated support for identity development at different career stages.

Teachers' Identity Tensions and Related Coping Strategies

As in earlier research (e.g., Pillen et al., 2013; Ponnock et al., 2018), teachers at the beginning stage, who were relatively lacking in practical experiences, had to struggle with challenges including but not limited to changing roles and expectations from student-teacher to full-time teacher, relationship with students and colleagues (Pillen et al., 2013). All these aspects could negatively affect a person's professional identity, career development, and psyche. In line with previous studies (e.g., Sarastuen, 2020), appropriate support, including mentoring and induction practices, is needed to facilitate beginning teachers so that they can recontextualise their knowledge from professional training to school reality, engage in steep learning in teaching, discover potentials, and realise their aspirations in the profession.

As regards teachers in the transitional stage, the study revealed (as with beginning teachers) the persistence of identity tensions related to students, non-teaching tasks, and career prospects. These teachers required continuous support to further polish their professional skills, despite of fewer identity tensions associated with colleagues after the induction phase. Transitional teachers are given more administrative tasks and responsibilities than their beginning counterparts; hence, at this career stage, heavy workloads and excess accountability for students' academic performance could potentially affect well-being, lessen job satisfaction, and make work seem meaningless (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017). The conflict between work and private life can persist from early to mid and late careers (van der Want et al., 2018). Another interesting point is that many of the transitional teachers in the present study showed identity tensions regarding their status and voice in society—a factor which was not obvious in the other stages. Ponnock and colleagues (2018) found that teachers who survived the beginning stage may have greater motivation and a heightened sense of self-efficacy. To take advantage of this, and to sustain transitional teacher development into the mid-career phase, school leaders should open channels for teachers to contribute opinions for organisational development, facilitating as far as possible negotiation for agency with the larger forces influencing educational policies in the immediate school environment (Zembylas & Chubuck, 2018).

Teachers at the experienced level demonstrated the fewest identity tensions relative to the other teaching stages. As in the Dutch context (van der Want et al., 2018), the identity tensions related to pedagogical expertise and to student relations diminished when the experienced stage was achieved. Most of these teachers were assigned more duties and responsibilities at the school, and they became more sophisticated in optimising their resources, prioritising the time spent on tasks (Philipp & Kunter, 2013), and negotiating their workload with the management. However, most of the experienced teachers showed identity tensions relating to collegial collaboration. Being trusted with leading positions, they had to manage new roles and negotiated their identity with other colleagues and the environment. Apart from having expectations for the teaching community, management needs to pay more attention to teachers' career aspirations, particularly the experienced

ones. The absence of promotion and leadership opportunities could lead teachers to disappointment and shift their life focus from professional to personal matters as demonstrated in Sophia's case. Thus, communication skills and leadership development may be crucial in sustaining the commitment and engagement of teachers over the longer term.

When coping with identity tensions, strategies like tolerating situations, speaking to significant others, and communicating problems were mentioned, as has been found in previous studies (Pillen et al., 2013; van der Want et al., 2018). It appears that putting up with the situation is the most prevalent coping strategy, regardless of the career stage or the geographical context. Depending on personal and workplace affordances, some teachers in our study were able to communicate their tensions, reflect on themselves, and find spaces to implement their pedagogical ideas. However, the study revealed that most teachers tolerated the tensions without active orientation or special activities, seeking merely to avoid further conflicts. Their perception was that top-down decisions could not be influenced under the existing hierarchical management culture. It would be interesting to discover whether such toleration of difficult circumstances is a universal coping strategy for teachers, or whether it is only prevalent in certain sociocultural contexts, also including epochs and generational experiences.

Specific sociocultural and political forces within the schools and society of Hong Kong

In addition to underlining the teacher identity tensions within the prevalent school environment, the present study also demonstrated how specific identity tensions are related to the societal-political situation in Hong Kong. First, the findings showed that the major identity tension for teachers at all career stages was the hierarchical structure that restrained expression from the bottom up. The hierarchical school structure made teachers feel restricted in communicating ideas and problems. Discouraged by predetermined decisions and by the neglectful attitude of management, teachers responded with inaction, silence, and acceptance of their powerlessness within the profession (Tsang, 2018). For example, Ian and Felix described their professional identity as one of "being obedient", involving a position of being "a passive follower". To facilitate teachers' development and encourage collegial collaboration, school leaders and policymakers should encourage more effective and evenly distributed leadership (Tian et al., 2016). This would further involve greater recognition of teachers' voices and the granting of resources to facilitate the enactment of professional agency.

Secondly, under the centralised-decentralisation system, the locus of control in educational policies is currently in the hands of the government rather than a professionalised teaching force. Top-down educational changes and initiatives are often imposed on schools, and bottom-up channels are limited or non-existent, with no means for teachers and schools to voice concerns and criticism. In the absence of recognition of teachers' professional agency

or of interactive communication in the formation and evaluation of the region's educational issues, teachers cannot interpret the meaningfulness of new policies or work towards genuine pedagogical changes. The identity tensions in this domain are likely to be intensified in the region, due to stricter political control after the 2019-2020 protests. With the disbanding of the largest pro-democracy teachers' union in 2021, individual and collective professionals' voices became vulnerable and even muted, owing to a fear of prosecution based on the newly enforced national security law in 2020.

Thirdly, regarding societal cultural aspects, teachers' identity tensions are rooted in the region's high expectations regarding teachers' performance and moral standards. Academic achievement is heavily enshrined in regional values, to the extent that low-achieving students and weak university acceptance rates remain a source of pressure for teachers. As teachers are viewed as role models for subsequent generations, the beginning teachers in our study were particularly uncomfortable and depersonalised, because of the extremely high moral expectations imposed. However, the high expectations were not accompanied by high status or respect for the profession. The perception of an inferior status among transitional teachers, regardless of their specialised educational skills, is in line with the study of Morris (2004), who noted the extent to which teachers were treated as semi-professionals and criticised by persons outside the field.

Fourthly, in contrast with other cultural contexts (van der Want et al., 2018), identity tensions associated with parents were not equally prevalent across all the career stages in the Hong Kong context. One explanation could be that Hong Kong is a Confucius-heritage society, with teachings emphasizing the notions of respecting teachers and obeying seniors to maintain societal order and relational harmony. Moreover, beginning teachers were not usually assigned major classroom teacher roles; hence, relationships with parents were mainly handled by more experienced staff to strengthen parents' trust in the school.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the data in the present study was based on 21 teachers who voluntarily shared their feelings and thoughts regarding their own career experience. Due to personality and character differences, not all the teachers experienced the tensions most typical of a given teaching level. Secondly, the interviews were conducted face-to-face at the end of the 2018 academic year; hence, this study could only explore the internal tensions presented at the indicated time point and might now be superseded by other positive or negative factors.

This study indicates the need for further exploration of qualified teachers' identity tensions in terms of career stage, the school climate, teaching positions, and the socio-cultural and regional context. It is worthwhile to explore the identity tensions experienced by teachers in different regional environments and enhance the understanding of the challenges and support of the development of positive teacher identity related to the school organisational

structure and the specific political socio-cultural contexts. Furthermore, a longitudinal study, along with other research methods such as observation or learning diaries, would delve deeper into the topic, contributing to a better understanding of changes in identity tensions, with possibilities also to design better support for teachers.

Implications and conclusion

The present findings demonstrate that teacher identity tensions are not limited to the early stage of the teaching career, and do not emerge only in response to educational reforms. Many of the struggles and tensions mentioned have existed for over a decade. On the macro level, policymakers should pay more attention to teachers' voices and research recommendations, and address teachers' needs at the forefront of educational policy. Within schools, supportive leadership and a collegial collaborative culture need to be cultivated, as these would prompt teachers to become active agents in improving the school. The study itself contains a framework that offers teachers, researchers, and policymakers a way to identify the locus of tensions in teachers, with implications for strategies that will support teachers at different professional life phases and promote their well-being in the relevant contexts.

The current working conditions for teachers in Hong Kong are characterised by high or even harsh societal expectations regarding teachers' abilities and personal lives. As Hong Kong has been undergoing dramatic societal and political changes, further research should address the vulnerabilities that currently exist in the professionalism of teachers in the region.

Disclosure statement

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II

TEACHER'S PROFESSIONAL AGENCY IN A CENTRALISATION-DECENTRALISATION SYSTEM AND A HIERARCHICAL CULTURAL CONTEXT: THE CASE OF HONG KONG

by



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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.¹ 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.

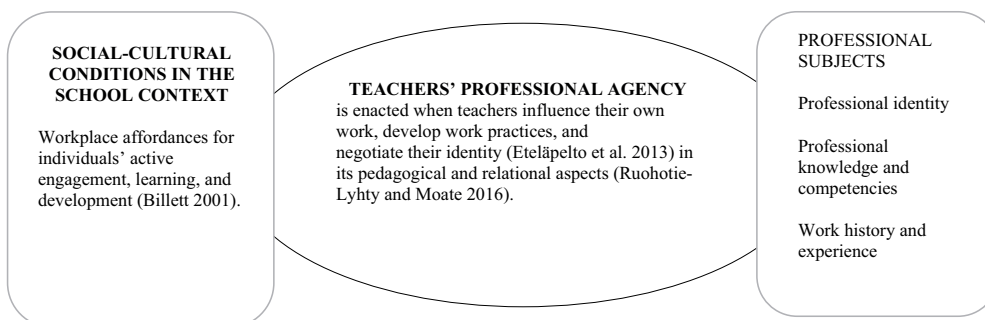


Figure 1. Teachers' professional agency from a subject-centred socio-cultural perspective in the present study.

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.² 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 others 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

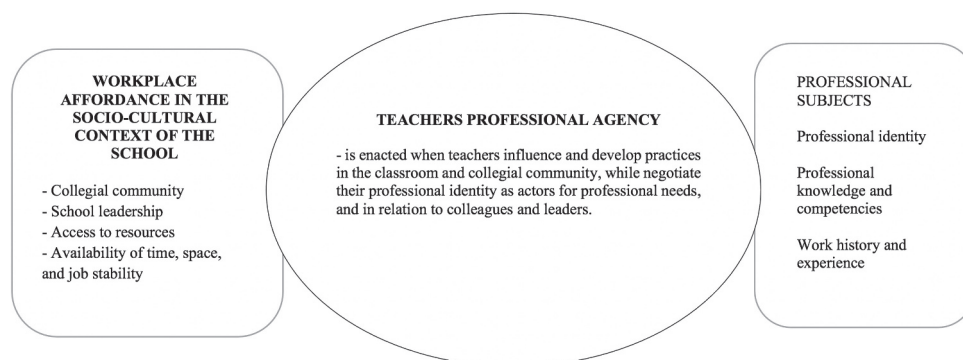


Figure 2. Teachers' professional agency and related workplace affordances in the socio-cultural context of the school.

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), 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).
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) does not refer to any aspect of teacher agency.

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III

THE CHANGE AND CONTINUITY OF TEACHER'S PROFESSIONAL AGENCY: A TWO-YEAR LONGITUDINAL STUDY IN THE CASE OF HONG KONG

by

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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.

Table 1. Narrative types of changes and continuity of professional agency.

Agency Types	Expanding	Strategic	Exploring	Withering
Description from the professional agency dimensions	Exerting growing influence at work and increasing engagement in developing work practices. Being eager to acquire skills and knowledge to improve the organization and work. Actively negotiating the leadership dimension of the professional self with the work environment.	Exerting stable influence at work Enacting agency strategically. Recognizing well that influences in certain areas are restricted within the structure. Being willing to collaborate, learn skills, and experiment with methods that were meaningful for work. Perceiving a stable identity	Exploring and experimenting with areas to enact agency. Recognizing that influences in certain areas are restricted within the structure. Being eager to acquire the skills and knowledge to improve the professional self. Negotiating the professional self with the environment through practices and learning.	Exerting no influence at work Feeling restricted within the structure. Being disinterested and sceptical towards professional development. Perceiving the professional identity with negative sentiments, such as frustration, helplessness, and hopelessness.
Teachers' positions and related socio-cultural conditions	Inflential position Being promoted or preparing for promotion to a leadership position with influential power in the new or serving organization. Accumulating experience and skills for the leadership position through interactions with the personnel and duties at the management level	Established position Having a stable work position in the organization. Possessing autonomy in certain areas. Being co-ordinators of small- and medium-sized teams in the organization. Having familiarity with their own position and work environment.	Establishing position Being relatively new to the teaching profession or to the organization. Experimenting with different areas to exert influence and make suggestions. Accumulating more experience and familiarity with their own position and work environment.	Languishing position Being assigned meaningless, stressful orders and tasks in the position. Being held accountable in the organization. Not voicing out and taking actions to avoid negative consequences. Feeling great pressure and frustration in the position and even helpless towards the profession.
Participants	Supportive management and work community Being trusted and listened to by management and in the work community. Being expected to represent frontline opinions to senior-level personnel.	Ostensible democratic management Being trusted and listened to by management and the work community in relation to certain areas. Being able to express opinions through available channels. Yet, teacher voices not necessarily being considered by senior-level personnel.	Authoritarian and repressive management Sensing strong control and monitoring from upper management. Being neglected or negatively criticized when voicing issues.	
	T04 Camelia T13 Mathew	T01 Dortha T07 Nicholas T08 Queenie T09 Rosie T12 Lisa	T02 Gordon T06 Howard T10 Elsa	T03 Felix T05 Louis T11 Violet T14 Terrance

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 policies 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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