EDUCATION REFORM AND TEACHER AGENCY

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The rapid change of technology, society, and economy creates pressure for education reform on a national level. In respond to the demand for quality improvement, educational organizations are engaging in educational innovation including curriculum, teacher competency, and effective teaching. Nevertheless, this top-down approach for change is likely to fail and lead to an unintended consequence if teachers are antithetical to the reform policy. As institutional agents, teachers make instructional choices to shape implementation of reform and thus influence the educational change in institutionalized practices (Bridwell-Mitchell, 2015). Briggs, Russel, and Wanless (2018) point out that teacher buy-in is a critical factor in educational change. As "an alignment between teacher beliefs and the goals of a change or reform, as well as feelings of competence in implementation" (p. 126), teacher buy-in for reform plays a crucial role in times of change. Teachers' receptivity to reform is closely related to how they perceive the policy-level change. In addition to meeting the external demands, teachers characterized as real change agents are willing to change from the internal drive to reflect and learn (van der Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard, & Popeijus, 2015).

In recent years, professional agency has become a focus of international research in teacher education (Vahasantanen, 2015). In the accumulated literature on educational change, many studies reveal that teachers' agency manifests a range of orientations towards reform. Teachers exert endeavor in learning, teaching and research in the new curriculum when they have sense of being able to practice agency (Tao & Gao, 2017). Agency, conceptualized by ecological theory, emphasizes the importance of both agentic capacity and contextual conditions. Rather than a capacity of the individual, agency is achieved in the interaction between individuals and contexts. It is developed over time through a continual process of engagement and emergence within contextual conditions (Priestley, Biesta, Philippou, & Robinson, 2016; Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012).

Teacher agency in curriculum matters involves initiating the creation or critique of curriculum and alternatives to established curriculum practices through ongoing individual and collaborative research. Ideally, teachers make curriculum decisions in response to their evaluation of the needs and interests of their students for educational excellence (Paris, 1993). Nevertheless, there is a mismatch between teachers' beliefs and wider institutional discourses and cultures. Based upon certain environmental conditions of possibility and constraint, teachers need to creatively adopt and adapt policy requirements into acceptable teaching practices in the school (Robinson, 2012).

Promotion of teacher agency does not just rely on the beliefs that individual teachers bring to their practices, but also requires collective development and consideration (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). Therefore, we list following suggestions for teachers and administrators to develop their professional agency.

First, cultivate learning community. The ways in which teachers talk in and about education is an important resource with regard to their achievement of agency. Teachers' discussion on the nature and purpose of education will help to articulate their values and visions about education reform (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2017; Philpott & Oates, 2017). Vahasantanen (2015) claimed the need to support identity work at the initial stage of a reform.

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A learning community could offer opportunities, social dialog, and time for teachers to make sense and become aware of their transformed work.

Secondly, social model with technology. In social cognitive theory, collective agency is exercised through socially coordinative and interdependent effort (Bandura, 2001). Acquisition of knowledge and competencies through social modeling with communication technologies or pervasive mass media can raise participants' beliefs in their efficacy and thus lead to exercise both individual and collective agency (Bandura, 2018).

Thirdly, encourage innovation. Van der Heijden et al. (2015), found the characteristics attributed to teachers as change agents as lifelong learning, mastery, entrepreneurship, and collaboration. Among them, entrepreneurship refers to being innovative and take necessary risks to bring about an effective educational change. If competitive grants or awards can be offered to support teachers' innovation at schools, teachers or schools selected as the super teachers or exemplar schools will receive honors and identities in the professional community, which is beneficial for teacher agency.

Teacher agency is gradually recognized as an important force to improve education reform in accordance to policy intentions. In order to understand the relationship between teacher agency and school reform, researchers should give an insight into teachers' past experiences and the projective aspirations, as well as the possibilities of the present (Priestley et al., 2012). Even though with substantial capacity, teachers may encounter a context in which innovation may simply prove to be too difficult or too risky to enact (Priestley et al., 2016). Therefore, teachers' buy-in and implementation of new practices need to be considered before reform. Also, teachers need to develop their agency and make decisions about appropriate practice to keep pace with change.

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