

## Teacher agency: A systematic review of international literature

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Teacher agency (TA) has been increasingly supported as an influential factor for teacher professional learning, school improvement and sustainable educational change. Previous studies, however, feature a variety of discrepancies in their conceptualisation and approaches to examining teacher agency. A systematic review is essential to map the field, refine our understanding of the concept and inform relevant stakeholders of useful insights for policy making and further research. After being screened against a number of inclusion criteria, 104 empirical studies were selected to be included in this review. Thematic analysis was adopted for the data analysis of these papers. Findings indicate an imbalance in geographical, theoretical, methodological and thematic distributions in previous studies. Six major themes were identified from the literature: (1) TA enactment, (2) the role of teacher cognition, (3) influential factors, (4) implementing professional development interventions, (5) TA outcomes and (6) TA change trajectory. TA can be extrapolated in terms of its source, enactment and outcomes. Teachers' capacities, implementation strategies, and contextual factors jointly determine the achievement of their professional agency. A conceptual framework for accounting teacher agency holistically is proposed and implications for relevant stakeholders are discussed.

### Introduction

As educational reforms are unfolding around the globe, the role of teachers in such change efforts is increasingly examined. It is widely acknowledged that teachers are not merely policy actors but are active agents in adapting or even resisting policies (Chaaban & Sawalhi, 2020; Liu, Wang & Zhao, 2020). The capacity of teachers in making choices and implementing actions to realise changes is commonly referred to as *teacher agency* (e.g., Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2013; Tao & Gao, 2017). The need to examine teacher agency is increasingly recognised, especially in contexts where new standardisation and accountability schemes increase the demand on teachers' work while reducing their professional autonomy. As Chisholm, Alford, Halliday, Leah and Cox Fannie (2019) put it,

[T]eacher agency is gaining traction globally as educators speak back to the proliferation and intensification of the aspects of teachers' work that take them away from creative planning that is responsive to their own sense of teacher identity and their learners' experiences, needs and interests (p. 125)

Teacher agency is increasingly embraced as an important quality of teachers for making meaningful changes to their living and professional environment (Fu & Clarke, 2017; Nguyen & Bui, 2016), starting with their classroom teaching (van der Heijden et al., 2015). The importance of teacher agency lies in the fact that teachers have the capacity to agentively adopt, adapt or even resist newly implemented policies and programs

(Severance, Penuel, Sumner & Leary, 2016), thereby determining the results of change efforts at institutional and national levels (Tao & Gao, 2017).

Recent years have witnessed a substantially increased number of publications on teacher agency. However, the engendering literature also features a divergence in conceptualisations and empirical findings on teacher agency. Teachers were found to enact their professional agency differently across educational contexts and even among teachers within the same contexts (e.g., Bao Ren & Wang, 2020; Ruan & Zheng, 2019; Tao & Gao, 2017; Vähäsantanen, Saarinen & Eteläpelto, 2009). Accordingly, previous researchers have called for effort to review and synthesise findings from previous studies so as to inform future research and policy agenda (Hinostroza, 2020).

Although there have been a few reviews on teacher agency, they are limited in scope, focusing on language arts teachers only (Chisholm et al., 2019), university lecturers (Hinostroza, 2020) or inclusive education (Miller, Wilt, Allcock, Kurth, Morningstar, & Ruppap, 2020). Also, they are scoping reviews rather than systematic reviews with the number of involved papers for review being rather limited, ranging from 11 to 28 papers. This may result in the authors overlooking important studies on teacher agency, thus failing to provide more comprehensive and holistic insights. Besides, these reviews tend to report on what has been researched rather than how teacher agency has been explained as a phenomenon.

To address these gaps, a systematic review was conducted utilising a large number of empirical studies, seeking to address two questions: (1) What are the emerging themes in the research area of teacher agency? and (2) To what extent has teacher agency been explained in the previous literature? Compared to existing reviews, this paper draws on literature across disciplines and educational levels to provide a more holistic and evaluative overview of teacher agency. By doing so, findings in this review are expected to refine the theorisation of teacher agency, identify emerging themes in the field, locate existing literature gaps, and provide educational implications for relevant stakeholders.

## **Method**

### **Literature searching, inclusion and exclusion criteria**

An extensive search for literature on teacher agency was conducted on *Web of Science* and *Scopus* databases. Figure 1 depicts the flow chart with implementation stages in this review. The main keywords used in our search involve “agency”, “teacher agency”, “teacher education”, “professional development”, “professional learning”, and “teacher learning”. In addition, these keywords were combined with operators such as AND and OR to refine our search with more relevant results.

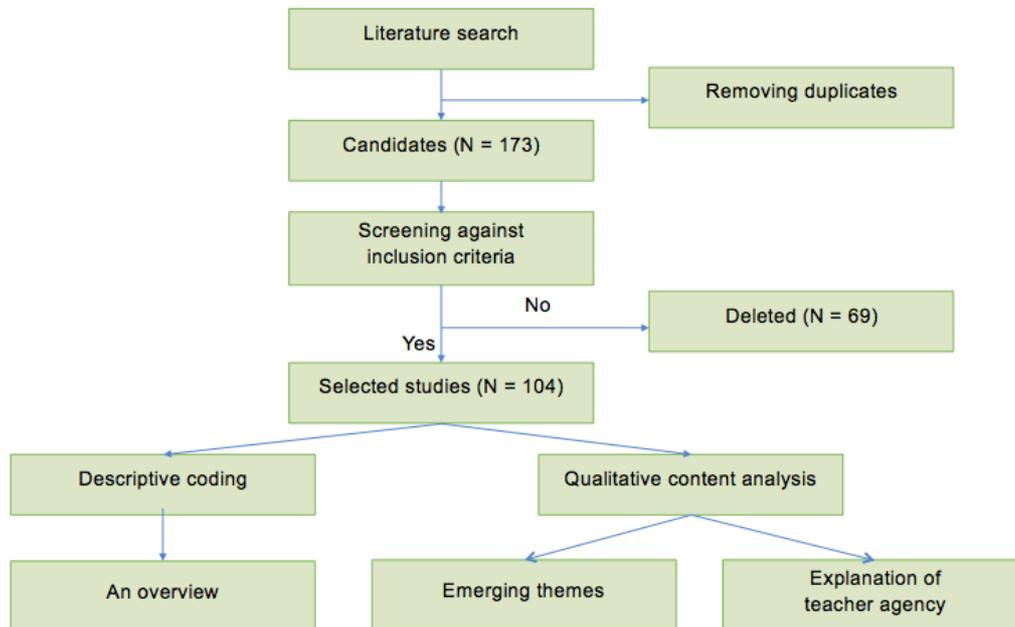


Figure 1: Flow chart for the stages in the literature review

A set of inclusion criteria was utilised to screen for eligible studies, which are as follows:

1. published as journal articles;
2. published in English language;
3. reported empirical research;
4. recruited teachers as participants;
5. focused on teacher agency;
6. provided a clear conceptualisation for teacher agency.

Since the concept of teacher agency has been used divergently among researchers, it is essential to clarify our criterion for selecting papers that demonstrated a focus on teacher agency. This required the paper to satisfy two requirements: (1) having “agency” as a key term in their title or abstract; and (2) conceptualising teacher agency in their theoretical framework section. These requirements are to ensure that the selected papers actually investigated teacher agency as a research construct rather than merely mentioning it in a general sense.

As for the exclusion criteria, other non-journal types of publications (e.g., conceptual papers, book chapters, proceedings, theses) were excluded from the review as well as those failing to conceptualise teacher agency in their papers. To supplement the collection of candidate articles, a manual search was performed on major journals in the field of teacher education and training, including *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, *European Journal of Teacher Education*,

*Journal of Education for Teaching, Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, and Teacher Development.*

The initial retrieved records from our extensive search were cross-examined for duplicates, the removal of which resulted in 173 candidate papers. Next, the authors screened the titles and abstracts of these candidate articles against the inclusion criteria and removed the explicitly ineligible ones. Full-text retrieval was subsequently conducted for the remaining papers, whose content was carefully reviewed before we made the final decision on their eligibility.

After the screening process, 104 journal articles meeting all the inclusion criteria were selected for inclusion in the review. In the following, we discuss the data analysis process.

### **Data analysis**

The collected papers were analysed with thematic analysis, which is “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). The approach was chosen for affording a systematic coding of the content of the papers as data in this study. The process of data analysis was both inductive and deductive. It is inductive in that the emerging themes are selected from the analysis of the collected papers. Yet, it is also a deductive process for being guided by the two research questions. As Braun and Clarke (2012) put it, “[n]umerous patterns could be identified across the data set – the purpose of the analysis is to identify those relevant to answering a *particular* research question” (p. 57, emphasis in original).

The data analysis followed the six steps proposed for thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2012). First, the authors familiarised themselves with the data by skimming through the content of the selected articles. Next, a careful reading of each paper was performed with initial codes generated for each paper. The third phase was concerned with identifying themes, which captured “something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82, emphasis in original). The fourth stage featured a recursive process whereby the authors ensured the potential themes were reflective of the findings presented in the selected journal articles as well as considered generating or relocating categories under each theme so that it demonstrated the data from the papers more meaningfully. The fifth stage was to define and label the selected themes as well as verify that they were relevant but not overlapped before writing up the report in the last phase. The themes and other findings from the data analysis are reported in the following section.

### **Findings**

This systematic literature review was conducted to accomplish two fundamental goals: (1) identifying major themes from previous literature and (2) evaluating the extent to which teacher agency has been explained in previous literature. This section first presents a

descriptive overview of the selected papers in terms of the publication trend, geographical distribution, theoretical frameworks and methodology. Next, the emerging themes distilled from the data analysis are reported, followed by a critical discussion of how previous studies have contributed to extrapolating the concept of teacher agency. Finally, a conceptual framework is proposed to account for teacher agency more holistically and effectively.

### Overview of teacher agency literature

In this section, an overview of teacher agency literature is presented involving the publication trend, geographical distribution, theoretical perspectives and methodologies. Firstly, as indicated in Figure 2, there is a sharp increase in the number of publications on teacher agency over eleven years from 2009-2020, indicating a surging interest among researchers for the topic. The five-year increasing rate (2015-2020) is 107.7%.

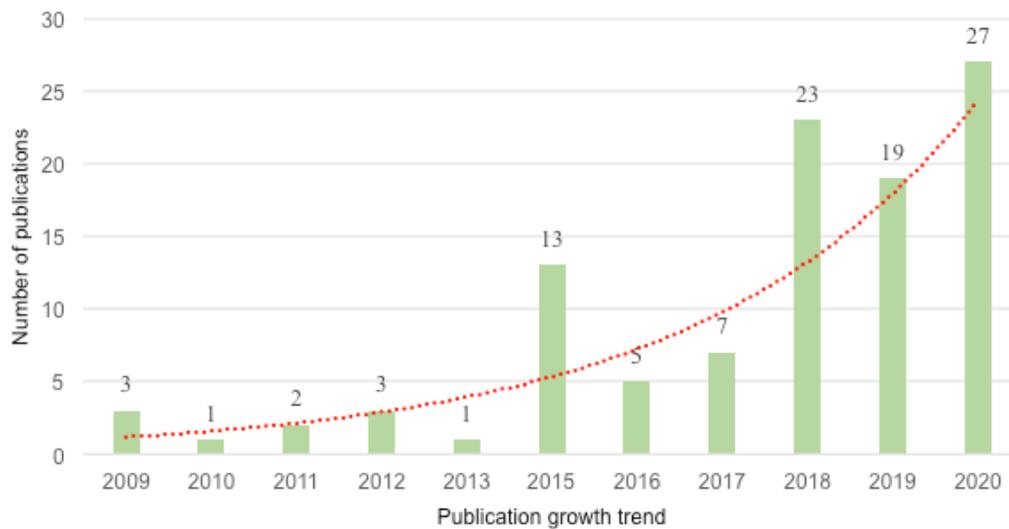


Figure 2: Growth in publications on teacher agency

Secondly, the geographical distribution of contexts of the reviewed studies is subsequently demonstrated in Figure 3.

The highest number of publications on teacher agency is from North America ( $n = 32$ ) with the second most productive area being Europe ( $n = 26$ ), then Asia ( $n = 24$ ) and Australia and New Zealand ( $n = 13$ ). In short, the majority of studies on teacher agency are accomplished by researchers in Western developed countries (e.g., USA, UK, Finland, Australia). This indicates the need for more studies about teacher agency to be conducted in developing countries and other contexts such as Asia, Africa and Latin America, thereby contributing richer insights into teacher agency enactment across different educational settings and practices.

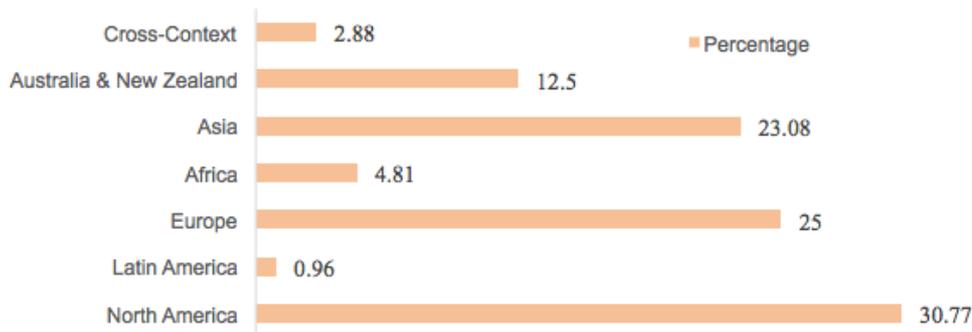


Figure 3: Geographical distribution of previous research on teacher agency

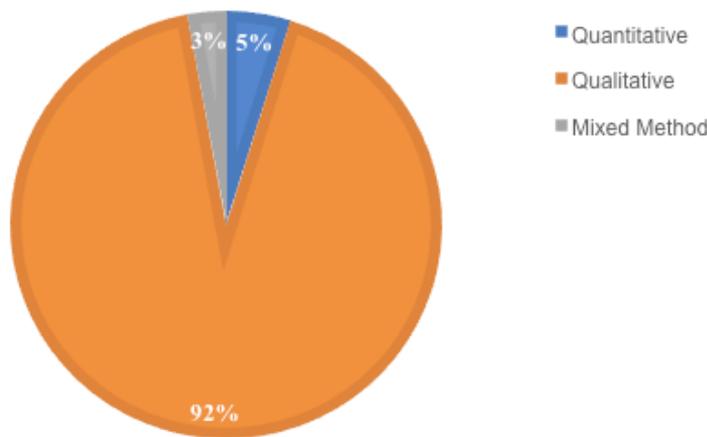


Figure 4: Distribution of methodologies in teacher agency studies

As for the research methodology, up to 92.3% of the reviewed papers ( $n = 96$ ) adopted a qualitative approach to examine teacher agency (Figure 4). Only five studies (4.8%) utilised a quantitative research design and three others (2.9%) employed a mixed methods approach. The imbalance in research methodology, on the one hand, implies the complexity and context-dependent nature of teacher agency which needs to be examined with qualitative methods. Nevertheless, qualitative findings are highly context-bounded (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), which means they may not be appropriate for generalisation to other contexts. In addition, the subjective nature of qualitative research with the researchers being the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) warrants further quantitative/mixed methods studies, thereby contributing more substantially to the field.

The complexity of teacher agency is also reflected in the divergent selection of theoretical perspectives among previous scholars. As indicated in Figure 5, the majority of previous studies ( $n = 42$ ) chose to combine different perspectives (i.e., the category of *combination of frameworks*) instead of relying on any specific framework, accounting for 39.4% of all studies. The most dominant framework is the *ecological perspective* ( $n = 46$ ), making up

34.6%. This approach views teacher agency as an outcome of “the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137) and defines teacher agency as actions, i.e., “something that people *do*” (Biesta et al., 2015, emphasis in original).

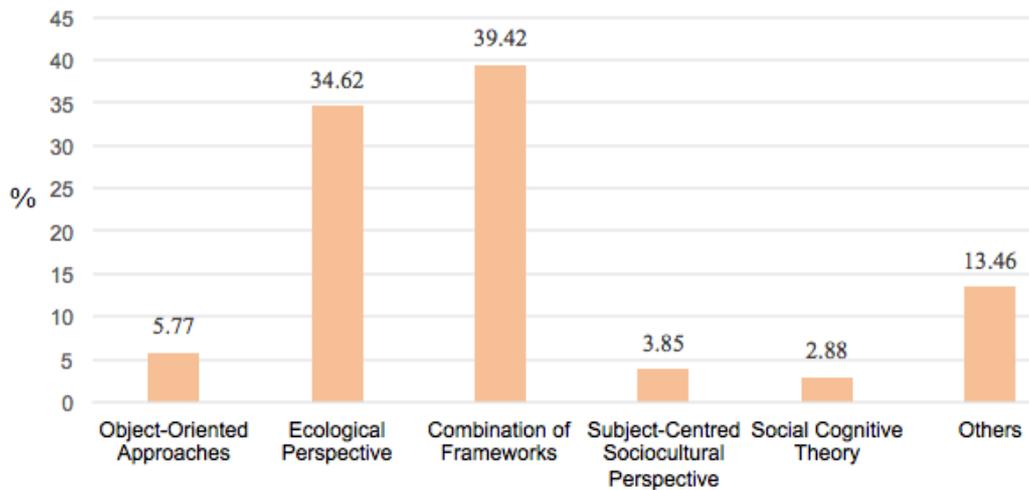


Figure 5: Theoretical approaches to teacher agency in previous studies

The category of *others* involves a number of less popular theories and positions (e.g., post-structuralism, self-positioning theory, figured worlds), constituting 13.5% of the total studies. The fourth influential theoretical basis is *object-oriented activity theory*, which views human activities as being object-oriented and mediated with mental, relational and cultural means (e.g., Engeström, 2001; Kitade, 2015; Liyanage et al., 2015; Yang & Clarke, 2018). This approach is, however, criticised for its prioritising the role of collective activities, viewing individuals “as subservient to the social” (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, p. 57). Finally, the *subject-centred sociocultural approach* (n = 4) and *social cognitive theory* (n = 3) enjoy a similar level of influence in previous teacher agency research. While the former counters the object-oriented activity approach arguing for the need to study individual agency with its subjectivity (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), the latter, as a psychological theory, focuses on the mental dimensions of agency, i.e., intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2006).

The divergence in the use of theoretical frameworks and the fact that most researchers opt to combine existing concepts and theories suggests that teacher agency remains an under-theorised concept urgently requiring further theorisation and that there is a lack of a general unifying framework for researching teacher agency. The next section discusses major themes emerging from the empirical literature.

### Emerging themes in the literature

Six major themes were identified from the previous literature on teacher agency (Figure 6), including (1) interventions for developing teacher agency; (2) agency change trajectory; (3)

outcomes of teacher agency; (4) influential factors on teacher agency; (5) teacher agency enactment; and (6) teacher cognition.

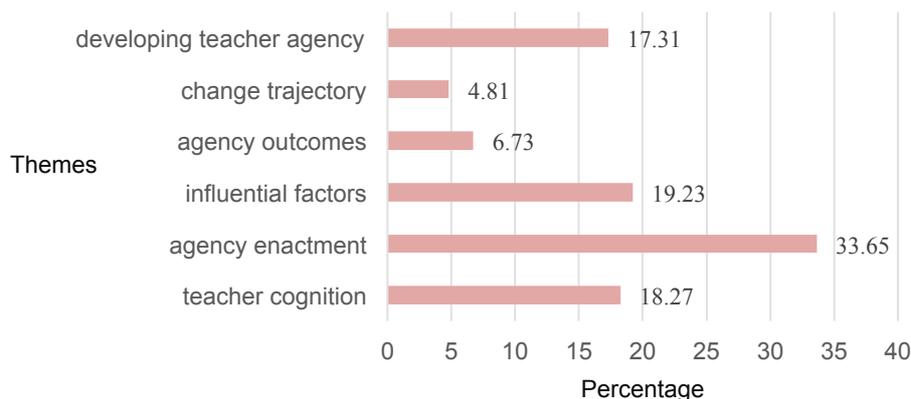


Figure 6: Main themes in teacher agency research

Table 1 presents descriptive information concerning the distribution of these themes. The categorisation of each study into one of the themes is mainly for the analytical and theme mapping purpose and should be considered as relative only, since each study may feature more than one theme (see also Avalos, 2011).

Table 1: Summary of research themes (N = 104)

No.	Theme	No. of studies	Percentage (%)
1	Enactment of teacher agency	35	33.65
2	Teacher cognition	22	18.27
3	Influential factors	20	19.23
4	Interventions to develop teacher agency	16	17.31
5	Outcomes of teacher agency	6	6.73
6	Change trajectory	5	4.81

The most popular theme (n = 35) is concerned with teacher agency enactment, i.e., how teachers perform their agency, making up 33.65% of the total studies. It has been consistently demonstrated in the literature that teachers are active agents who navigate through contextual constraints to realise their agency. Previous researchers have investigated how teaching professionals address curricular changes (e.g., Chapman et al., 2020; Dubiner et al., 2018; Jenkins, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Priestley et al., 2012), implement new practices (e.g., Lockton et al., 2020; Loretto, 2019), design teaching materials (e.g., Hogan et al., 2018), tackle social issues (e.g., Leal & Crookes, 2018; Martin & Carter, 2015; Pantif, 2017; Rose, 2019), carry out formative assessment (e.g., Verberg et al., 2016) and realise their agency strategically as individual and collective activities (e.g., Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Mifsud & Vella, 2018; Ruohotie-Lyhty & Moate, 2015; Ryder et al., 2018). Another prominent conclusion from these studies is that teachers exercise their professional agency in highly individualised ways (Ashton, 2021; Ryder et al., 2018; Tao & Gao, 2017).

The second theme is associated with teacher cognition ( $n = 22$ ), commonly defined as “what teachers think, know, and believe and the relationships of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the language teaching classroom” (Borg, 2003, p. 81). Within this stream, teacher agency is examined in light of teachers’ beliefs (Adebayo, 2019), perception (e.g., Balgopal, 2020; Colegrove & Zúñiga, 2018; Eteläpelto et al., 2015; Namgung et al., 2020), experiences (Bao et al., 2020; Feryok, 2012), positioning (Kayi-Aydar, 2015b; Martin, 2020) and decision-making (Wagner et al., 2019). In addition, the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and behaviours is also explored in a number of studies (e.g., Babino & Stewart, 2018; Bonner et al., 2020; Clark, 2015; Elwick & Jerome, 2019; Ray, 2009). A conclusion conceived from these studies is that the extent to which teachers enact their agency depends on their beliefs, knowledge of and personal interpretations of the new policies or practices (e.g., Newcomer & Collier, 2015; Nguyen & Bui, 2016; Ollerhead, 2010; Phan & Hamid, 2017). Overall, a cognitivist approach to understanding teacher agency is dominant in these studies, with only a few studies exploring the role of teacher emotions as the impetus for agency practices (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018).

The third theme in the literature investigates factors influential on teacher agency enactment ( $n=20$ ), accounting for 19.23% of the reviewed studies. These papers discussed a wide range of variables intervening with teachers’ capacity to accomplish their agency, which can be divided into three groups: personal, social/relational and contextual factors. First, at the individual level, commonly reported factors include personal beliefs, values, background, identities and emotions (e.g., Benesch, 2018; Biesta et al., 2015; Kayi-Aydar, 2015a; Mifsud & Vella, 2018; Miller & Gkonou, 2018). Importantly, teachers’ knowledge, skills, and prior experiences significantly mediate the capacity to realise their agency (e.g., Ishihara et al., 2018; Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). At the social level, the mode of teacher agency, i.e., whether they enact agency individually or collectively (e.g., Lennert da Silva & Mølsted, 2020), the relationships with colleagues and learners (e.g., Jenkins, 2020; Yangın Ekici et al., 2019) and local social discourses (Rostami & Yousefi, 2020; Vitanova, 2018) are identified as other major factors influencing teacher agency. Finally, the extent to which teacher agency can be accomplished is further contingent on contextual factors, involving institutional policies (e.g., Connors & Bengtson, 2020; Poulton, 2020; Taylor, 2019; van der Nest et al., 2018), power relations (e.g., Lai et al., 2016), sociolinguistic backgrounds (Tsang, 2020) and cultural values (e.g., Wang et al., 2017). These personal, social and sociocultural factors interplay dynamically to determine the manifestation and outcome of teacher agency (e.g., Woodhouse & Pedder, 2017; Yangın Ekici et al., 2019).

The fourth research strand is concerned with interventions to develop teacher agency ( $n=16$ ), including (a) professional development; (b) professional collaboration; and (c) reflexive practices. Professional development for teachers has proven to be one of the effective methods to enhance teacher agency, which can be provided in the forms of coaching (Insulander et al., 2019; Reichenberg, 2020), seminars or training sessions (King & Nomikou, 2018; Rivera Maulucci et al., 2015), supporting teachers in conducting research (Cloonan et al., 2019; Heikkilä et al., 2020), cultivating reform ownership (Godfrey & Olson Carol, 2019) and developing technological skills (e.g., Kitade, 2015; Watulak, 2018). Next teacher agency can be initiated through professional collaborative

practices such as curricular co-designing (Severance et al., 2016) and having professional dialogues (Wallen & Tormey, 2019). Teachers' self-reflections on their teaching practices have also been found to be powerful for fostering their agency, which can be supported by employing artefacts such as instructional videos (e.g., Engeness et al., 2020) and facilitating teachers' inquiry into their own conceptions and prior experiences (e.g., Jensen, 2019; Hernández Varona & Gutiérrez Álvarez, 2020; Vu, 2018, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). The transformation in teacher agency, as indicated by these studies, commonly starts with the teachers investigating their own pedagogical beliefs and conceptions, as well as their sense-making of prior experiences.

In the fifth theme, namely outcomes of teacher agency (n=6), previous researchers have explored how the mobilisation of teacher agency results in change and development of teachers' identity and professional competencies. How teachers invest their agency is empirically supported as decisive for the outcomes of their professional learning (e.g., Kauppinen et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2016; Tao & Gao, 2017), as well as change in their professional identity (e.g., Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Teng, 2019; Varghese & Snyder, 2018). A few scholars have probed into the achievement of teacher agency beyond conventional teaching, to embrace teachers' role in promoting social cohesion (e.g., Halai & Durrani, 2018) or school safety (e.g., Hanaya et al., 2020).

Finally, several studies (n = 5) investigated the change process or the evolving trajectory of teacher agency over time. The source of change in teacher agency is associated with change in teachers' pedagogical beliefs (e.g., Malmberg & Hagger, 2009), professional identities (e.g., Olitsky, 2021; Varghese & Snyder, 2018), and insights from engagement in collaborative activities (e.g., Spicer, 2011). A key conclusion from these studies is that teacher agency is a developmental phenomenon, manifested differentially due to change in teachers' capacities, change in the context, or both (e.g., Bamber et al., 2019; Spicer, 2011; Wagner et al., 2019).

In a nutshell, the extensive literature on teacher agency can be conceived into the six themes as presented above. The majority of the studies are descriptive in their findings, reporting on teachers' behaviours in response to policies or practices in the new context. Also, they are primarily cognition-focused, examining teachers' knowledge, beliefs and their relation to teachers' practices, which makes many studies on teacher agency seemingly convergent with the well-established research on teacher cognition. As such, researchers may be prone to reinventing the wheel if the concept of teacher agency is not well-theorised and established within or in relation to the area of teacher cognition.

### **The extent to which teacher agency has been explained**

The second purpose of this review is to critically assess the extent to which teacher agency has been explained with empirical findings. Overall, previous research has contributed to refining our understanding of teacher agency in terms of its sources, manifestations and explanatory mechanisms.

First, teacher agency has its source tracing back to personal and social drivers. Several factors are involved at the individual level, including beliefs, identity, emotions, background, self-reflection and interpretation of the situation (e.g., Heikonen et al., 2020; Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Vähäsantanen et al., 2009; Wei & Chen, 2019). For instance, Leal and Crookes (2018) reported on the case of “Jackson”, whose identity as a queer teacher motivated her to adopt social justice pedagogy in teaching students. Likewise, Vähäsantanen et al. (2009) found that their participants, 16 vocational teachers, all “exercised agency actively in terms of making decisions, based on their individual interpretation of the resources and constraints pertaining to their work” (p. 402). In Kayi-Aydar’s study (2019), “Paloma”, a Latino language teacher, was found to engage in different agentic actions corresponding to her developing identities over time, from a teacher with a professionally marginal identity to an active agent against racial discrimination. In other studies, professional tensions and conflicts are the driving force for teachers to mobilise their professional agency (e.g., Babino & Stewart, 2018; Bergh & Wahlström, 2018; Pappa et al., 2019; Vaughn, 2013).

Social activities are also found to be a driving force for teacher agency. In particular, collaborative projects and professional dialogues afford a mediational space for enhancing teacher agency (e.g., Charteris & Smardon, 2015; Insulander et al., 2019; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Severance et al., 2016; Spicer, 2011). For example, Charteris and Smardon (2015) implemented a professional development project on dialogic feedback for seven primary school teachers, concluding that such interactional space engendered participants’ agentic thinking, decision-making and classroom practices.

Secondly, previous scholars also attempted to understand teacher agency by categorising it into different types of its manifestations or approaches: adoption, adaptation, transformation and resistance (e.g., Heikkilä et al., 2020; Jenkins, 2020; Robinson, 2012; Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). Adoption means that teachers comply with and implement new policies as they are instructed, whereas adaptation indicates teachers’ active efforts to make necessary changes to suit local conditions, for instance, to meet their students’ needs (Babino & Stewart, 2018; Willis et al., 2019). In resistance orientation, teachers tend to disregard the policies or implement in a superficial way. Transformation manifests when teachers create new, innovative teaching materials or practices (e.g., Bao et al., 2020). However, more than one type of approach or orientation is. As found in Tran’s (2019) study of language teachers transitioning to teaching English, “[t]eacher agency was not simply an action of resistance or accommodation to the change, but rather was dynamic and more nuanced” (p. 544).

As for its explanatory mechanism, few scholars try to explain teacher agency in terms of active or passive behaviours, or latent or manifested phenomenon. Drawing on the social cognitive theory, Jenkins (2020) extrapolated high school teachers’ agency in three mechanisms: being proactive when teachers perceive trust and collegiality; being reactive when facing frequent change and heavy workload; and being passive when lacking personal or social resources. On the other hand, student teachers’ agency was examined in Chaaban and Sawalhi’s (2020) study as existing in three forms, namely latent (i.e., not yet developed), maturing and developed, i.e., manifested with expected actions.

Bridwell-Mitchell (2015) theorised teacher agency achievement as determined by three bipolar mechanisms: (1) innovation versus socialisation; (2) cohesion versus diversity; and (3) cognitive/normative divergence versus convergence, which correspond to three domains of peer learning, interactions and shared professional practices. She argued that it is the outcome of these forces that regulates whether institutionalised instructional practices are maintained or transformed. A rare large-scale quantitative study on teacher agency was conducted by Hadar and Benish-Weisman (2019) with the participation of 1197 teachers. Based on the findings from their structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis, the authors concluded that teachers' capacities mediated the relationship between teachers' personal values and agentic actions. In other words, it is crucial for teachers to possess certain knowledge or skills to realise their agency, without which their agency may remain only underdeveloped or latent.

In summary, previous research has contributed significantly to refining our understanding of teacher agency as a situated and developmental process, defined in three main stages: source, enactment and outcomes. The sources or drivers of teacher agency are underpinned by personal or social factors such as beliefs, reflexive insights and collaborative activities. Next, the achievement of teacher agency is jointly determined by the interplay of teachers' mentality (i.e., capacities, motivation, goals, choices), teachers' instrumental actions (i.e., orientations, mode of agency and self-regulation) and contextual factors (e.g., regulations, division of labour, culture and resources). Additionally, it has been established that relational/collective agency helps generate systemic institutional changes (e.g., Severance et al., 2016; Wild et al., 2018). Figure 7 depicts a conceptual framework for understanding and researching teacher agency based on the finding and insights in this review.

## Conclusion

This systematic review was conducted to map the field of teacher agency with major emerging themes, as well as examine how the phenomenon has been accounted for in the previous literature. The analysis revealed imbalances in geographical distribution, use of theoretical frameworks, and methodologies. Prior empirical research has contributed significantly to further the theorisation of teacher agency as a dynamic, situated and developmental phenomenon, with its outcomes conditioned on personal capacities, ways of implementation, and contextual factors. A theoretical framework proposed in this article (Figure 7) accounts for teacher agency as a holistically mental, behavioural and sociocultural phenomenon.

This review has several implications for educational stakeholders. Policymakers and teacher trainers can be informed of ways to support teacher agency development, such as providing contextually informed professional development and creating a mediational space for teachers to engage in self-reflexive or collaborative practices, which in turn promotes their agency for change and development. Teachers also gain advantages from findings of the review through having a higher awareness of how their agency can be enhanced for more impactful outcomes, for example, through collective practices.

Researchers can capitalise on the literature gaps pointed out throughout the review and the proposed conceptual model to study teacher agency more effectively and meaningfully.

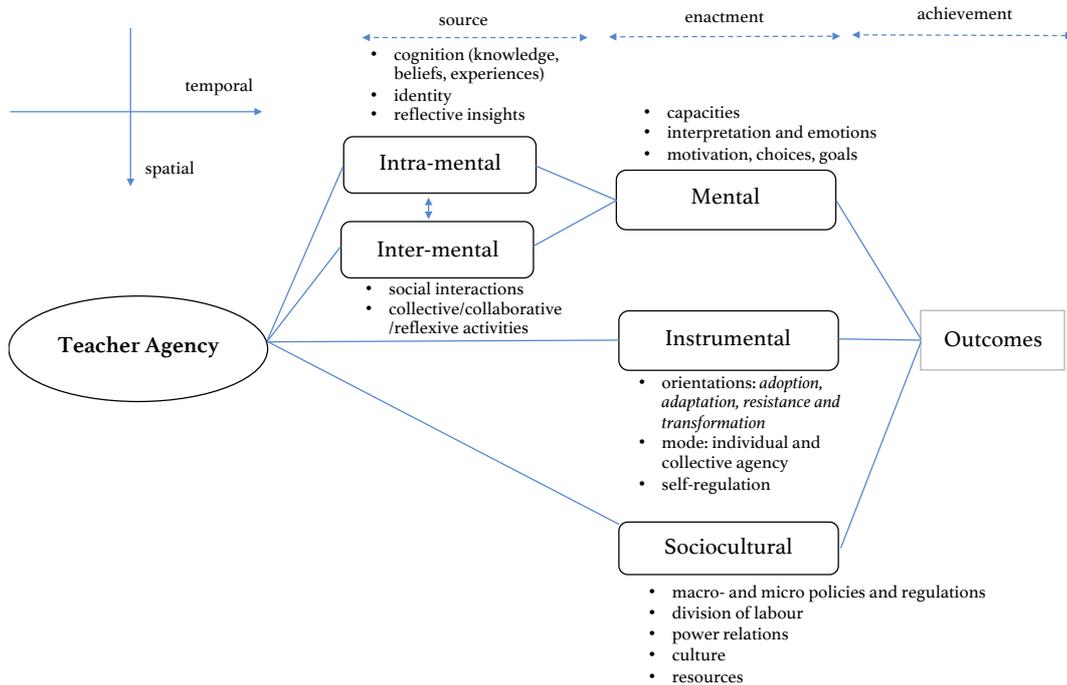


Figure 7: An integrative framework for teacher agency  
(Use web reader 'zoom in' function to facilitate reading)

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