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Moral and Relational Teacher Agency for Social Justice

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

ESRC Seminar Series on Teacher Education for the Changing Demographics of Schooling: policy, practice and research

3rd Seminar, University of Edinburgh, 8th December 2014

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Outline

- Teacher agency for social justice

- Moral agency

- Relational agency

- Implications for teacher education

Background

- International calls for teachers to be prepared as **'agents of change'**

e.g. *Teaching Scotland's Future (TSF) -* Transformative professionals 'prime agents of educational change' (p.4)

AGENTS OF CHANGE FOR WHAT? e.g. Scottish change agenda:

- social justice
- inclusion
- closing the achievement gap

'all new teachers should be confident in their ability to address underachievement, including the potential effects of social disadvantage' (TSF, p. 36).
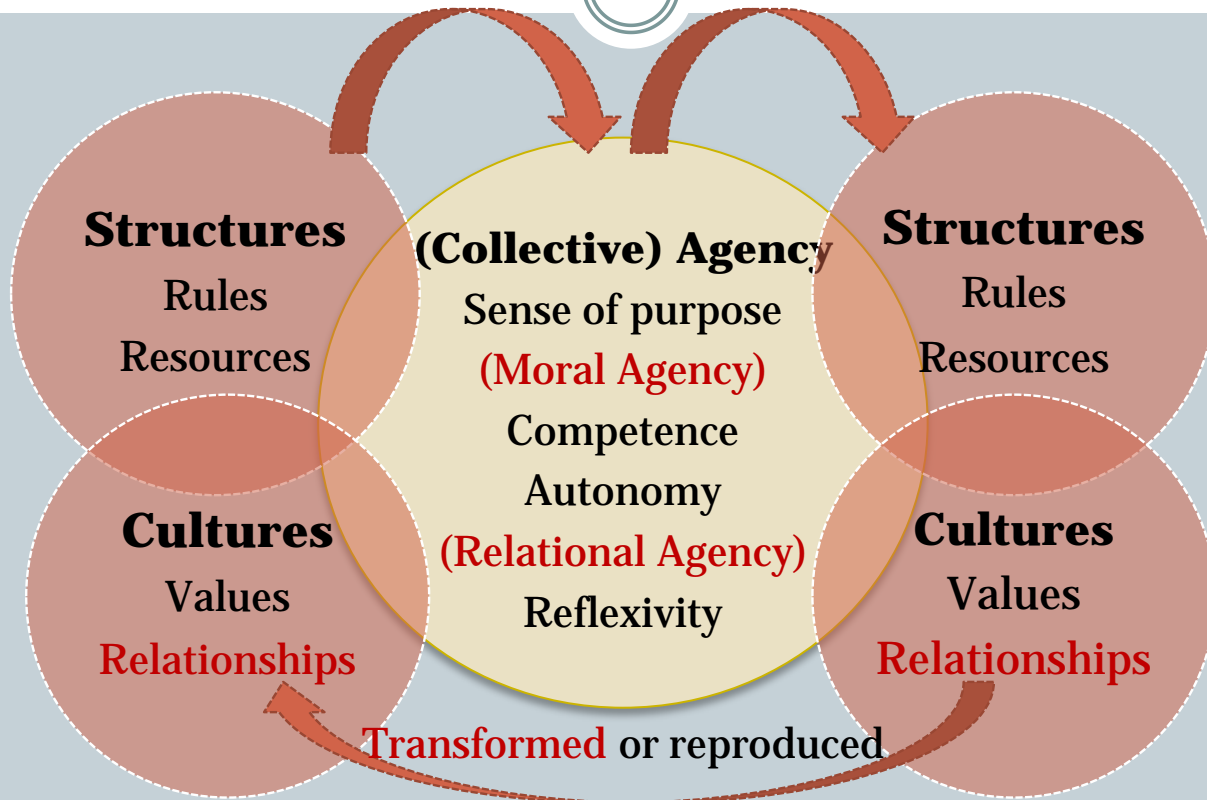
Teacher Agency for Social Justice

Making a difference in addressing risks of exclusion and underachievement of vulnerable students

- Improved attainment and *relationships with responsive adults* - key 'protective factors' for children at risk of exclusion

- Schools that make a difference in improving attainment of all students are saturated with *substantive professional conversations and collegiality*

- …

- **Also,** *relationships are important in themselves* (e.g. Kant's universal guide to moral conduct – treating others as ends, not means)

Transformative Agency – The Bigger Picture

Structures
Rules
Resources

(Collective) Agency
Sense of purpose
(Moral Agency)
Competence
Autonomy
(Relational Agency)
Reflexivity

Structures
Rules
Resources

Cultures
Values
Relationships

Cultures
Values
Relationships

Transformed or reproduced

Theories of human agency (Archer, 2000; Biesta & Tedder's, 2007; Giddens, 1984)

Big Questions

- What is moral agency?

- What is social justice?

- How could teachers be prepared as 'agents' (rather than role-implementers)?

What is moral agency?

Moral Reason as Practical Deliberation

- Western philosophers from Socrates onwards have generally held moral agency to be a matter of action guided by reasons.

- Following Aristotle, western philosophers have distinguished practical from theoretical reasoning. Broadly, whereas the latter is reasoning to what is true, the former is concerned to determine what is (technically or morally) good or beneficial.

- Insofar as deliberations about what is just or fair are concerned with determining what is morally best in human affairs - or what conduces to human flourishing - they are forms of practical reasoning.

What is social justice?

- Justice would seem to be fair or equal treatment, or giving to others what is due to them: perhaps, more particularly, of ensuring that people are not unfairly favoured or disfavoured over others for no good reason.

- However, in his *Politics*, Aristotle held that it is no less unjust to treat unequals equally than to treat equals unequally.

- But different views of how, or in what respects, people are equal or unequal have been held at different times and in different places.

- Whereas for some a just society is one in which people recognise and accept their given (superior or inferior) places, others have held that it is one in which all such inequalities of status are absent.

- So what is being fair to others or giving them their due?

Liberal (Democratic) Tolerance

- One way of addressing the evident diversity of conceptions of fairness and justice in modern culturally pluralist societies proceeds by way of liberal democracy.

- A liberal democracy seeks reasonable balance between acceptable (harmonious) social order and individual liberty of thought, conscience and choice.

- It seeks the former through democratic consensus: only those values and viewpoints supported by the majority of citizens find their way into state policy and legislation.

- It seeks the latter through liberal tolerance: dissenting moral and political views are not just tolerated but protected as long as they do not threaten the security or well-being of other citizens.

MacIntyre's Idealist or Social Constructivist Conception of Justice

- On the other hand, according to the British moral and social philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, human moral perspectives are historically divergent products of widely variable social and economic circumstances and pressures.

- On this view, there are 'rival traditions' of morality and justice which are often incompatible to the point of incommensurability. There is no 'view from nowhere'.

- More strongly, since these are also supported or underpinned by different canons of reason or rationality, there can be no neutral or independent perspective from which one might be considered superior.
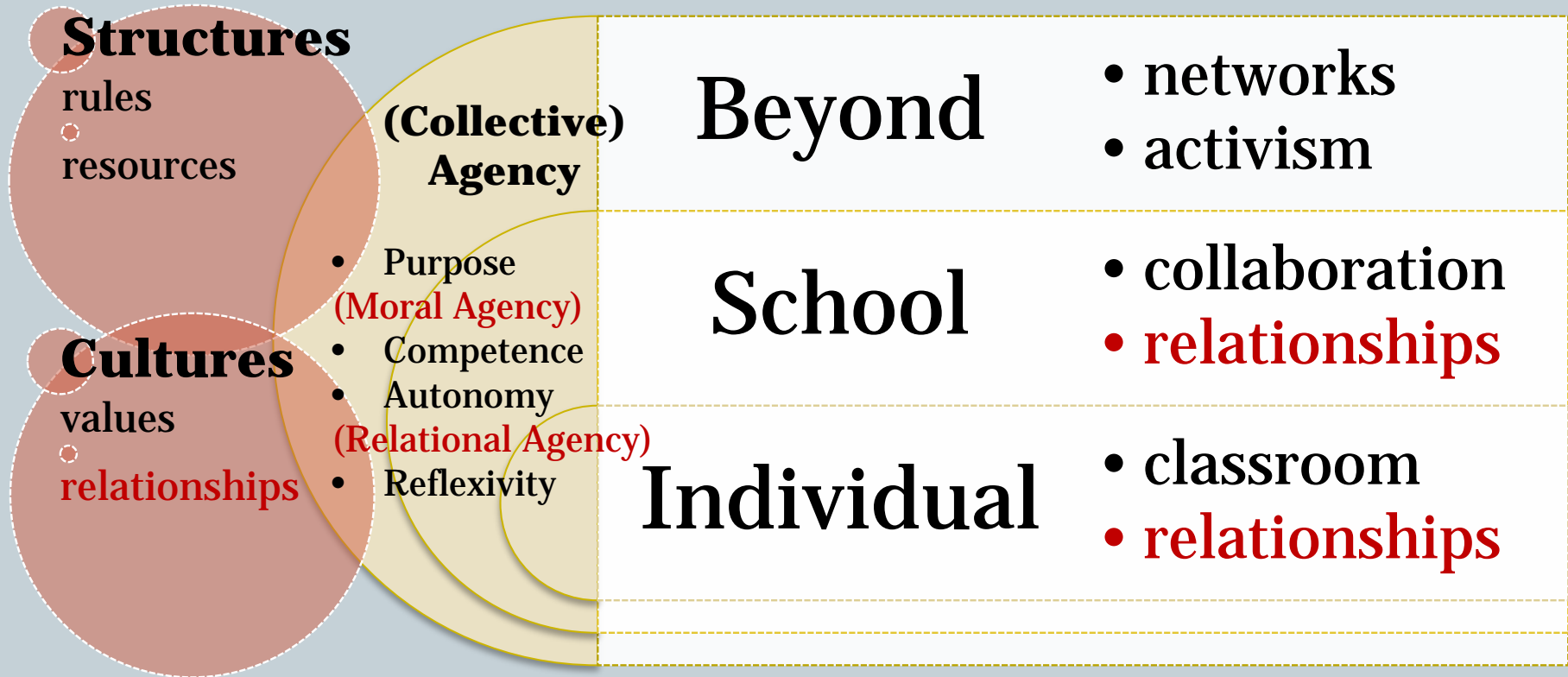
Professional Preparation

The Need for Professional Virtue

- The trouble is that while professional practitioners might well benefit from some grasp of the principles, complexities and problems of ethical theories, their general application is actually consistent with a range of social conditions we should ordinarily regard as unjust.

- From this viewpoint, in order for teachers and other professional practitioners to be agents of social or other justice, one might require them to be capable of the complex deliberations of just agents rather than simply ethically knowledgeable - or even performers of just actions.

- In this respect, Aristotle's conception of moral deliberation differs from other (especially later) conceptions in focusing primarily on the development of justice and other virtues as qualities of *character*. The virtuously just agent is not (s)he who performs just actions: rather, just actions are those that the virtuously just are disposed to perform.

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Teacher Agency for Social Justice

Structures
rules

resources

Cultures
values

relationships

(Collective) Agency

- Purpose (Moral Agency)
- Competence
- Autonomy (Relational Agency)
- Reflexivity

Beyond
- networks
- activism

School
- collaboration
- relationships

Individual
- classroom
- relationships

A model of teacher agency for social justice (Pantić, in press)

Teachers' Relational Agency

- A capacity to atune purposes and actions to those of others in professional relationships (Edwards, 2010)

- Communities of professional practice (Wenger, 1998) facilitate reciprocity, respect, collaboration, supportive of teacher agency (Priestly et al, 2012).

- …

BUT

- Communities of practice can have tight relationships, which might not focus on transforming student experience (e.g. Hayes et al., 2005).

- Caveat of conceiving schools as homogenous organisations (e.g. Priestly & Miller, 2012)

Teachers' Moral Agency and Relationships with Students

Scale/dimention	Reliability (Cr. Alph)	Sample Questionnaire Item
Paternalist - moral agency integral to educational role	.70	'Teachers should exemplify proper models of behaviour at all times'
Liberal - moral values the responsibility of home	.71	'Values are a matter of personal choice'
Control - strong leadership, high standards	S .86 T .79	'This teacher is strict' (students' version)
Affiliation - listening to students, responsive, encouraging	S .96 T .80	'I trust my pupils' (teachers' version)

- The more teachers viewed moral agency as part of their role the more control they perceived in their relationships, but only in teachers perceptions! ($r=.25$, $n=67$, $p<.05$)
- The more teachers agreed with the liberal views of their roles, the less affiliation students perceived in their relationships ($r=-.25$, $n=78$, $p<.05$).

(Pantić & Wubbels, 2012)

Moral agency & relationships

Pilot study – exploring alignment of teachers' sense of purpose and relationships (with each other, with other professionals, with families)

- How does teachers' moral agency relate to their practices for addressing risks of exclusion and underachievement?

(e.g. are teachers who conceive of themselves as agents more likely to develop relationships of *influence* and *trust* with other agents?)

- What are the patterns of (in)congruences between individual and collective agency in a given school environment?

Research Tools

For exploring teachers' (collective) agency for social justice over time and across contexts

Scale/dimention	Sample Questionnaire Item	Complementary tool
Moral agency	'Distinguishing what is appropriate for my pupils'	Interview
Role implementation	'Applying the agreed standards of professional behaviour'	Interview
(Collective) Efficacy	'How much can you do to get through to the most difficult students?'	Interview
(Collective) Practice	'How often do you discuss student's learning and development?'	Observation, digital log
Perceived structures & cultures	'Teachers can decide some things in this school'	digital log, interview
Influence	'I can influence others' (teacher version)	Observation, interview
Trust	'...is someone you can trust' (colleague & parent version)	Observation, interview

Teachers' voices

'I don't really care what document the give me to work with...what I do on paper... It's who I am as a **teacher**...'

'It is difficult to speak up for fear of being shut down on by the **management**, but when a child is affected I would speak up. That boy not being allowed to be in the playground – that really annoyed me! There were other issues with forward planning, I had to do a couple of hours extra – that did not bother me...'

'I think they [**parents**] trusted me because they realized that I cared...that this was all for their child, rather than for the school'

'The **staff** moral was very low and I got sucked into it, because when you have people around you who are constantly moaning and making comments, you do get sucked into it'

'You can sometimes get a meeting with them [**support services**] to see how to implement things in your classroom, but it does seem very disjointed at the moment...'

Implications for Teacher Education

1) cultivating a sense of *purpose*, e.g. teachers' perceptions of themselves as transformative agents?

2) broadening the scope of teacher *competence*, to include 'system thinking', and a capacity to negotiate shared purposes and practices?

3) building a capacity to affect the conditions for all students' learning in interactions with other actors as part of professional *autonomy*?

4) systematic professional *reflection* on their practices and environments, e.g. on patterns of purposes and relationships?

Thank you!

- Contact

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