

Teacher agency: perspectives and limits

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Abstract

Sebbene molte delle componenti del concetto di agency siano da tempo presenti nel dibattito scientifico in lingua italiana, la letteratura internazionale sta condensando in modo integrato riflessioni che consentono di rianalizzare criticamente la figura dell'insegnante in termini sostanzialmente nuovi: secondo una prospettiva che appare preziosa alla luce dell'attuale apertura di nuove direzioni di lavoro sulla formazione iniziale permanente in servizio dei docenti. Il contributo, che riprende e discute 17 articoli sul tema dell'agency nello sviluppo e nell'apprendimento professionale del docente selezionati nella letteratura internazionale, si articola in due parti. La prima propone una lettura pedagogica dell'agency all'interno di un continuum nel quale questo termine può essere interpretato in termini problematici sia come caratteristica individuale del docente, sia come processo relazionale e collettivo. La seconda parte, invece, riflette sull'agentività del docente considerando le interazioni di questo costrutto con lo sviluppo della formazione professionale individuale/collegiale e il sistema scolastico e territoriale complessivo.

Although many of the elements of the concept of teacher-agency have been present in Italian-language scientific debate for some time, the related international literature appears to be wholly refocusing its reflections to critically analyse the figure of the teacher in substantially new terms: according to a precious perspective in the light of the current opening to new areas of development of both initial and lifelong in-service teacher training. This paper, that discussed and referred to 17 articles on the issue of agency in teachers' professional learning and development by selecting of the international literature, is divided into two parts. The first offers a pedagogical understanding of agency within a continuum in which this term can be interpreted in problematic way both as a teacher's individual and collective characteristic and as a collective relational process. The second part, instead, reflects on teacher agency considering the interactions of this construct with individual and collective professional development and the school and community system as a whole.

Parole chiave: agentività docente, professionalità docente, formazione, collegialità, scuola-territorio

Keywords: teach-agency, teacher professionalism, training, collegiality, school-community

Introduction¹

At least in Italy, the issue of “agency” is a relatively recent approach to the complex dimensions of teachers’ professionalism. Although many of the elements of the concept of agency have been present in Italian-language scientific debate for some time, the related international literature appears to be wholly refocusing its reflections to critically analyse the professional figure of the teacher in substantially new terms: according to a precious perspective in the light of the current opening to new areas of development of both initial teacher training and lifelong in-service training. This contribution aims to investigate some elements of the referred literature to offer a problematic interpretation of the issue of agency in its relation to teachers’ training and professional development.

The contribution is divided into two parts. The first offers a pedagogical reading of agency within a continuum in which this term can be interpreted in problematic terms both as a teacher’s individual characteristic and as a collective, relational process. The second part, on the other hand, reflects on teacher agency (both intellectual and as a researcher) considering the interactions of this construct with individual and collective professional development and the school system and local community as a whole.

A problematic pedagogical interpretation of the concept of Teacher Agency

Pedagogical thought on teacher agency necessarily comes up against a series of problems (starting from the difficulty to translate it into the Italian language), the most significant of which would appear to be: does Teacher Agency indicate a skill set relating to teachers’ assertion of their (also contrasting) subjectivity or their being an effective implementer of the professional demands of the school organisation? Does Teacher Agency allude only to individual or also collective teaching skills? How does Teacher Agency relate to potential Student Agency?

Teacher Agency: a system of individual and institutional professional skills

The analysis of international literature underlines some very differentiated positions: in some countries, opportunities for teachers to exercise subjective “assessments” and “monitoring” of their own work are limited, while in others they are fostered institutionally. Some realities interpret teacher agency as a potentially critical element in the development of learning activities in schools, controlling (or in any case circumscribing) it through national regulations which monitor and develop school curricula based on objective empirical data and evidence; others, on the contrary, state that, due to the complexity of educational practices and their objective differences in individual situations, teacher agency is an indispensable element that can significantly increase the quality of education (Biesta et al, 2016). In this regard, we should in any case remember that educational reform based on the adoption of regulated standards is a technical choice as well as a predominantly political perspective in many countries (Bodman & Morris, 2012): evidently, this type of choice has serious implications and effects on teacher agency. For example, how can we support and foster teacher agency if the structure (in this case the technical and political decision-making system) is a rigid container or even a barrier hindering the teacher’s capacity for action? Which on the other hand could be the consequences for the school system if teachers are put in the condition to be able to produce wholly subjective behaviour (indeed capable even of “subversive” attitudes) towards the dominant policies and cultures? (Lopes & D’Ambrosio, 2016).

If agency is understood as teachers’ ability to act deliberately and constructively to manage their own professional growth and influence that of others (Calvert, 2016), we must necessarily reflect on the ways in which the interaction between the agent (the teacher) and the structure (the school, the policies) takes place, and on the consequences of such relationship, and the extent to which teacher agency can be promoted in a relationship of mutual benefit with the institution, intervening, from the indicated problematic viewpoint, either to limit or increase the constraints placed on individual agency.

Teacher Agency: the individual and collective dimension

A further dialectic tension, linked to the one described above, emerging from both reality and the consulted literature lies in the relationship between individual

and collective agency. In this sense, some research works understand agency as an individual characteristic, linked to the professional behaviour of individual teachers. From this viewpoint, agency is therefore considered an internal quality of the teachers: an issue linked to the personal ability to act (Priestly et al., 2012), usually in response to the stimuli offered in the learning environment (Gerstein, 2013). Clearly, agency seen only as a teacher's individual characteristic does not sufficiently consider the so-called culture of organisations, and therefore the many ways in which agency is constructed jointly as a professional skill in a relational context. We should therefore recognise that “the achievement of agency will always involve the interaction between individual efforts, the available resources and the contextual and structural factors all condensed within unique situations” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137).

Hays (1994) offers a vision of agency as a continuum between reproductive and transformative agency. Structurally reproductive agency confirms or reproduces the existing structures; structurally transformative agency creates new structures (Sloan, 2006): both cases pass through the construction of professional communities. The issue is obviously of particular interest in schools such as those in Italy in which the regulatory framework has for a long time been moving in the direction of autonomy, guaranteeing educational quality for schools through the prescriptive requirement of acting jointly to design and plan interventions.

Teacher Agency: between teacher and students

A third level of problematic dialectic relationship can be seen in the relationship between teacher agency and student agency. In this sense, the selected international literature highlights the importance of considering the “student voice” element in the construction of agency. In this perspective, it is important to understand how to support and foster agency in teachers, considering their professional conduct also in relation to the role of empowerment played by teachers towards students (Obraian, 2016). Certainly, student agency is developed when the learners are involved in the whole learning process - including decisions on the curriculum – and when they are involved in everyday choices concerning how and why they are learning what they are learning (Wenmoth, 2014). In this sense, we must design and implement methods of collective and transformative agency which structurally involve the promotion of agency among the students themselves. Although it is impossible to generalise, we must “recognise [...] the strategic importance of the teachers' voice and agency in professional development, above all when opportunities for talking about learning and teaching (among teachers and between teachers and students) are facilitated” (Strahan, 2016, pp. 667-668).

Again, if teacher learning of professional agency in the school community consists of several elements - including “skills, awareness of efficacy and motivational factors leading to the transformation of their own teaching practices, experimentation of collective efficacy, construction of positive interdependence, appreciation of finding mutual agreements, and the use of active help seeking strategies” (Pyhäältö et al, 2015, pp. 811) - in the perspective of schools designed as an overall community, we must recognise that all these elements must also involve the students.

Teacher agency: teaching quality, teacher training and the school/community education system

As a consequence of the reflection on the problems described above, it is important to consider the possible effects of teacher agency on schools, examining the potential interactions this can have in the planning of individual and collective teacher training and in their participation in the construction and management of school curricula between the school and the community, in a perspective of an integrated education system.

Teacher Agency: which teacher training

Every teacher able to exercise their own agency should – through pre-service and in-service training paths – develop consolidated skills relating to the knowledge of the subjects they have to teach, allowing them to be an intellectual who not only reproduces that which he learned during the pre-service training, but who can also participate in the development of research works in the subject areas taught, in both a disciplinary and interdisciplinary key. At the same time the contemporary teacher is increasingly required to possess skills which go beyond those of the subject matter and which may be summarised, though not exhaustively, as:

- Consolidated skills relating to the knowledge of the subjects they have to teach, allowing them to be an intellectual who not only reproduces that which he learned during the pre-service training, but who can also participate in the development of research works in the subject areas taught, in both a disciplinary and interdisciplinary key.
- Advanced teaching skills related to knowledge of the subjects taught, in the more general context of development of research on learning and teaching methods.

- Technological skills referred to both the vehicular use of new technologies in teaching specific subjects and the current contribution of the digital world as a new general dimension of the construction and dissemination of knowledge, with both the consequent positive prospects and risks of the virtual reality.
- Psychological and anthropological skills relating to the current profile of adolescents and young people in the context of the cultural and intercultural processes characterising contemporary society, also with attention to gender issues.
- Pedagogical and psychological skills making them able to establish appropriate relations with pupils and their families and stimulate cooperative learning within the class group.
- Inclusive skills making them able to understand the differences of individual students through appropriate strategies of individualisation and personalisation, actively participating in the construction of appropriate remedial and support activities.
- Skills relating to school and careers guidance allowing them to participate directly in work placement schemes, education to entrepreneurship and active citizenship as required by law.
- Skills relating to the inclusion and in-service training of new teachers according to the new teacher training model.
- Planning and assessment skills not referred only to students' learning but also the assessment of the school system where required by the laws in force.

The dialectic tension identified in this point is that between what is described by research as how professional learning should be (continuous, incorporated, linked to practices, aligned with the purposes of the school, collaborative) and that which on the other hand is experienced by teachers. O'Brien (2016), for example, states that “for many educators professional development has long been an empty exercise in compliance [...]. One way of increasing teacher agency [is that of focusing] on the school's structural conditions for professional learning. It calls for systems to tap into teachers' intrinsic motivations, giving teachers the opportunity to construct solutions to the real challenges they face in the classroom (rather than sit in generalized professional development sessions)”.

How can schools and systems create a bridge to reduce the gap between teachers' formal professional learning and the problems that they are actually facing? According to Gabriel (2004) professional development should not be considered as an administrative duty, but rather, within a career, a way of discovering the factors contributing to the success of all students and teachers. Compulsory profes-

sional development, offered only when bound to institutional obligations, offers teachers little.

An agent teacher should consider himself and be considered in institutional and political terms as an intellectual, and consequently as a researcher. He should therefore possess advanced competencies for the continuous construction of knowledge of the subjects taught, in the more general context of development of research on learning and teaching methods. In this second point, the dialectic tension we identify lies both between the teacher-researcher and the teacher-improviser, and between the teacher-researcher and the teacher-reproducer/custodian. Some conditions which may facilitate the recognition of the teacher as an intellectual and researcher within the school are described by Gerstein (2013):

1. “Teachers need to feel that they can really have a voice, empowerment, and support in autonomously planning their professional development.
2. Teachers should have the time, resources and ideas to establish their own professional learning objectives which, in turn, steer their own professional development.
3. [It is] necessary to define a system of recognition in which teachers are responsible for pursuing and obtaining appropriate credits and recognitions for the work done.
4. Isolated teachers (who seek professional ideas only through conferences or workshops organised by the school...) very often bring no changes to school practices”.

We may add, with Calvert (2016), that “for years teachers and political leaders have understood teachers’ lifelong learning as “professional development” that teachers “receive”. We should instead use the term professional learning as this recognises teachers as agents of their own growth and because it underlines the fact that learning is an experience led greatly by the learner. The level at which teachers act with agency in their professional learning depends on a series of factors, including: the teacher’s intrinsic characteristics, such as their motivation to commit to professional learning, as well as the school’s structural conditions for professional learning, including the extent to which the system involves teachers in decisions on what and how they learn (Calvert, 2016, p. 4).

Agency between school and the community. The teaching profession, between the cultural role and social role of education

To foster agency which can be defined as “social”, we must recognise the mutual dialectic between the school as an institution that is a conscious part of a spe-

cific territorial system, and the role of teacher agency (or rather teaching community agency) in the co-construction of professional learning paths aiming to qualify the social role of teachers and together the social role of the school, in a perspective of horizontal continuity between the school and beyond school. This horizontal continuity concerns the construction of knowledge of and cooperation between the formal education system (the school) and the non-formal system (the family and the community: the local system of intentionally educational opportunities and services), but also, while using the utmost prudence, between these two systems and the informal system constituted by the culture and leisure market. Wholly ambiguous relations have existed historically among these different systems: at times fully authorised, at other times totally disregarded, more often than not filled with mutual mistrust. It is certainly not a novelty to state that today these relations must change, according to actual data in hand (first and foremost, the explosion of the education system: that big bang leading to the objectively shrinking role of the school), but also according to perspective data based on a necessary synergy between all players dealing directly or indirectly with education. In this context, the need for horizontal continuity coincides with the need to design an integrated education system able to create a resource from that which initially appears more as a problem: the changing roles (the changing presence, and the changing ability to affect) within the educational panorama, the explosion of new cultural opportunities, the birth of an authentic education “market” in the traditional real community and in that new reality represented by virtual environments. This is possible in a system which becomes aware of the impossibility of fencing off education within the school walls and which recognizes the existence and equal dignity of other education agencies. Therefore within a system which overcomes the narrow dimensions of the “scholastic” to embrace the more general dimensions of “educational”, but which at the same time rejects the neo-liberalist theory of a mere extension of the places of education (within which everyone would, in positive or negative, reproduce their own disequilities) to manage the need for a rational and democratic integration of all the educational resources present (or to be developed) in the community.

Teaching professionalism acting solely within the school walls and aiming solely to develop subject-related competencies would betray the social mission of contemporary school and risk producing teachers who are unable to place the contribution of their own subject-related knowledge within a broader vision of the educational value of the school experience. In other words, the risk would be that of Teacher Agency imprisoned in the act of seeking to allow students to obtain specific subject knowledge without striving to generally enhance the students’ cultural and existential identity.

Note

¹ This contribution, fully shared by the two authors, was drawn up as follows: paragraph “A problematic pedagogical interpretation of the concept of Teacher Agency” and subparagraphs “Teacher Agency: a system of individual and institutional professional skills”, “Teacher Agency: the individual and collective dimension”, by Luca Ferrari; “Introduction”, paragraph “Teacher agency: teaching quality, teacher training and the school/community education system” and subparagraphs “Teacher Agency: between teacher and students”, “Teacher Agency: which teacher training”, “Agency between school and the community. The teaching profession, between the cultural role and social role of education”, by Arianna Taddei. In agreement with the author, the work returns to and further investigates considerations partly introduced in L. Guerra, For a problematic approach to the topic of “agency” in the development of teachers’ professional learning, in *Teacher Agency for Inclusive Education: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, Conference Documents, Salerno, July 2017, currently being published.

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