

2018

## What is Teacher Agency?

Alcione N. Ostorga

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*, [aostorga@gmail.com](mailto:aostorga@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/bls\\_fac](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/bls_fac)



Part of the [Education Commons](#), [Modern Languages Commons](#), and the [Other Languages, Societies, and Cultures Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ostorga, A. N. (2018). What is Teacher Agency? In *The Right to Teach: Creating Spaces for Teacher Agency*. Rowman & Littlefield. <https://www.universitypressofamerica.com/ISBN/9781475834482/The-Right-to-Teach-Creating-Spaces-for-Teacher-Agency>

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and P-16 Integration at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bilingual and Literacy Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

## Chapter 1

### What is Teacher Agency?

*“In our rush to reform education, we have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriations, restructuring schools, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called the teacher on whom much depends ...none will transform education if we fail to cherish and challenge the human heart that is the source of good teaching.” (Parker Palmer, 2007 p. 4)*

Although the interest in teacher agency is becoming more prevalent in the education literature, it is still an emerging concept. Some closely related terms sometimes encountered in the literature are teacher autonomy and teacher leadership. The three terms; teacher agency, teacher autonomy and teacher leadership are not synonymous. The inadequacy of the term teacher autonomy as an element of the profession has already been explained in the introduction. Essentially, autonomy implies a level of independence not present in educational structures.

Teacher leadership, on the other hand, is also not an exact synonym because it is recognized by a set of skills not present in all teachers and not an integral part of the teaching profession. The implication is that some teachers have the capacity to be leaders, while others do not. On the other hand, as teacher agency is defined, it is considered an integral part of the teaching identity and recognized as a key element of the profession, even though currently this is not fully recognized.

The current accountability environment of education in the US has focused on the discussions of improving the quality of educational outcomes based on a set of assumptions about teaching and what takes place within the classroom. In fact, much of the dialogue about the accountability and evils of education has focused on the excessive use of testing, the dumbing down of the curriculum (Ravitch, 2011) and the need for equitable funding and

resources to schools (Arce, Luna, Borjian, & Conrad, 2005). However, the teacher has been left out of the dialogue, as highlighted by Parker Palmer (2007,) in the quote above, first published in 1998. It is still true, even 16 years after the statement was originally made.

### Why Teacher Agency?

Some may argue that there is no value to this idea of teacher agency and that it is best to leave the school structure the way it is. For them, teacher agency may be ludicrous because teachers are not ready for decision-making. Perhaps this view is the result of fear of the possible negative consequences or what may result from teachers having the freedom to act with agency. Usually, it is school leaders who question the possibility of allowing teachers to decide the best course of action in their daily practices because it may hurt their own positions. “Why should we not allow teachers to function as technicians?” they may ask. Why not let teachers be the ones to carry out the job of teaching their students based on curricular decisions made by their supervisors, who often have more years of experience in the educational field?

Furthermore, educational administrators are seen as more aware of the organizational aspects of School systems and have more expert knowledge since they have an additional educational preparation. To become school leaders, they have undergone specialized certification processes that allow them to exercise their positions as curriculum developers, school principals, and superintendents.

The most reasonable argument for reconsidering the status quo and seeking to reframe the teaching profession is that the educational system as it is currently functioning is faulty. This is evident by the low performance of our students when compared to other nations. One well-respected source of evidence for this fact comes from the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA), developed by the Organization for Economical Co-operation and

Development (OECD). This triennial test is given to over half a million 15-year-olds representing 72 nations. The two-hour test evaluates different kinds of knowledge and skills, including mathematics, reading, and science (OECD, 2016). In the last test, administered in 2015, Singapore ranked number one, followed by Japan, and Estonia. Finland, a country that had ranked number one in the past, and recognized as a model to be emulated, was placed number 5 in the most recent report, which still places them among the top 10 countries in the world.

The US was ranked number 25 on the list. So obviously, there is no reason to maintain the educational structure, since it is obviously not helping us to succeed in our task of educating our nation's children, and preparing them to reach their potential and to contribute to our society as well-prepared citizens. Therefore, we must seek to transform our system to one that is more appropriate and beneficial.

Historically, policymakers have focused their attention on accountability measures to improve our educational system. While accountability and curriculum are important areas of concern, the discussion about them should include all professionals engaged in the education process. Yet the teachers' perspective has been absent from the dialogue, despite their knowledge and expertise because they are blamed for our failure to improve education outcomes.

We can interpret from educational policies that teachers are blamed for our students not being as academically ready as is in some other nations. For example, the NCLB policies pressured all schools to meet the goal of having all students reach, what is called the proficient level, as defined by each state. The effect of this policy has been well documented and we know that as a result of its implementation, the teacher autonomy decreased and the curriculum became prescriptive (Center for Education Policy, 2008). The allocation of time for instruction was

narrowed towards subjects that are tested (Dee & Jacob, 2011) and teachers' evaluations are in part, based on test results of their students, with the use of a value-added concept (Braun, 2005). Though NCLB has been supplanted by the, Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, it will take some time before the system is reformed, and we cannot yet envision a system that will include the teacher's perspectives in designing the solutions for an improved education for all students.

We can surmise from the policy and its implementation that the purpose of accountability is to make schools and teachers accountable for their professional actions. So the assumption is that punitive measures will lead to better quality of instruction. Another assumption detected in the educational debates related to policies is that the lack of positive results in learning is caused by a lack of appropriate preparation. To solve this problem monies are spent on new and improved professional development to improve the teachers' abilities to teach.

Although the quality of instruction, or the preparation of the teaching force, are logical explanations for the outcomes of standardized tests, why are teachers not included in the dialogues about solutions to our educational problems? After all, the role of teachers is a crucial element in the dialogue, for they are the professionals who are, in fact, in the best position to understand the learning process and they should be included as equal collaborators in the discussion who can bring insightful perspectives to promote better results.

In other words, the discussions about curriculum, methods, and ways to measure the results need to include the perspectives of those in the front line, and their voices should be valued for the professional perspectives they bring to the dialogue. After all, when traditionally certified, the teacher has gone through the appropriate training to become a professional and at least, has at the onset of their careers, some expertise about how to lead the classroom activities in ways that will not only promote learning but advance the overall development of their

students. With appropriate professional development, after a few years of experience, this expertise increases and the teacher can be quite effective, if given the space to make professional decisions in the classroom. Having daily face-to-face contact with their students, their perspectives on the ways to improve education should be of the utmost importance.

There may be some criticisms about the preparation of teachers, especially if they have undergone alternative means to become certified. Though many alternatively certified teachers eventually become excellent educators, unfortunately, they are not fully prepared when they first enter their teaching careers. They lack the pedagogical knowledge acquired through coursework and field-based experiences included in regular university-based certification programs. Nevertheless, if they are trusted with the education of our nation's children, once they have completed the certification process and acquired the pedagogical expertise through experience, they too, should be valued as professionals and their perspectives included in the educational dialogue.

Yet, though prepared for their careers, teachers are rarely given the chance to make the appropriate choices that are specific to the context of their classrooms and the specific needs of their students; and they are never given the opportunity to contribute to the national dialogue about educational reform. Indeed, today, most teachers have no agency in how they teach, especially in schools that serve populations of, so-called, "at risk" students. In these kinds of schools, teachers are generally treated as robots who must repeat the script provided in the curriculum manuals, given to them by their supervisors. In these schools, in particular, teachers are inundated with an overabundance of techniques, which, though appropriate in some instances, lose their effectiveness because they are used in incoherent ways. Teachers mindlessly apply the smorgasbord of techniques imposed on them by their supervisors, most

often, too afraid to diverge to other approaches they know may be more appropriate, for fear that they will get caught doing something different, and in consequence, receive a poor evaluation, or worse, lose their jobs. This is especially problematic in right-to-work states, where teachers do not belong to a union, and are more fearful of taking a stance for fear they will lose their jobs.

Obviously, what is proposed in this book is quite different from what is the current condition of the teaching profession, for it lacks teacher agency as an integral part. In order to fully understand this concept, it is important to define it within the context of professionalism.

### **Teaching as a Profession**

Some people question the idea that teaching is a profession, others argue that profession as a concept is an outdated idea. For example, according to Taylor & Runte (1995), the concept of a profession is founded on two outdated sociological theories, namely the *trait model* and *structural functionalism*. The trait model of professionalism is based on sets of traits, or specialized knowledge, that specific professionals have, which are questioned for their validity.

Another outdated sociological theory, according to Taylor and Runte (1995), applied in the promotion of teaching as a profession is called structural-functional theory, which seeks to connect theories to traits. Through the application of this sociological theory, professional organizations who oversee the standards for a profession develop competency-based assessments or processes to validate the profession and to attest that candidates who meet their standards have attained the necessary level of knowledge to consider themselves members of the profession. Examples of this approach are the American Medical Association (AMA) and the National Conference of Bar Examiners (NCBE).

Applying the principles of structural functionalism to teaching leads to an understanding that teaching is not a profession because, for teachers, the gatekeepers of the profession are special bodies inside each state government. These governmental institutions oversee the teacher certification process for each state in the United States and their members are not necessarily educators, which is a general prerequisite for the members of organizations that set professional standards, such as the AMA and NCBE. Nevertheless, sociologists have generally abandoned these theories because traits are, for the most part, arbitrary, undefined, and lacking clear standards. So trait models and structural functionalism are based on ideology.

We can attest to the presence of these identified weaknesses in applying these models to the teaching profession. For example, the standards set for becoming a teacher vary greatly from state to state and even from program to program. One can become a teacher through university-based programs or alternative certification paths. The variations in the preparation process are numerous not only between these two types of certifications but also within each type. The only standard in the certification process within each state is based on the set of certification exams that are used to assess the knowledge of specific traits agreed-upon, by the state's education policy-making body in the field, made up of people who do not possess a knowledge of pedagogy, curriculum, or human development.

If we examine the certification exams for each state, we see that there are some general similarities between the types of knowledge assessed in these exams, such as content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. However, when analyzing the details in the traits expected of a teacher, undoubtedly we see variations in the specific kinds of knowledge that are valued by each of the states' certification agencies. Likewise, there are enormous variances in the kinds of skills that must be demonstrated beyond the passing of



certification exams. For example, in addition to demonstrating their knowledge on a theoretical level, future teachers need to demonstrate how they apply their knowledge in real classrooms, so they are also evaluated through observations of their teaching in real classroom settings. These evaluations make use of observational protocols based on specific traits they must demonstrate and these evaluation tools also vary widely across states and certification programs.

After becoming certified and becoming employed in a school, teachers receive continuous evaluations based on varying types of assessment instruments, which often, have no real research to support their validity. There have been attempts to organize the standards into a national system such as the ones developed by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). However, this national standard is not obligatory, nor is it applicable at the initial stage of the teaching career, since teachers must have three years of experience before attempting this higher level of certification. Therefore, there are problems in applying the trait model to view teaching as a profession because educators have not yet been successful in reaching a consensus about the set of traits that are mandatory for all teachers to have. Nor have teacher educators been recognized as the appropriate people to create the standards for certification.

As stated by Taylor and Runte (1995), These kinds of processes are intended to promote specific codes of ethics and self-regulation through professional associations designed to restrain the professionals from engaging in practices that take unfair advantages of the specialized knowledge they possess. Upon close analysis, we can see that the development of procedures for professionalization is based on the assumption that structures for the profession are instituted to protect the public from a monopoly of knowledge.

Taylor and Runte (1995) give a clear explanation of issues surrounding the professionalization of teaching from a sociological perspective, arguing against its status as a profession. Yet, educators still recognize that society, at large, accepts some occupations as professions based on a consensus about their value and the required expert preparation (Musingafi, & Chiwanza, 2014). Therefore, educators regard teaching as a profession because it requires specialized knowledge and ethics; and because teachers as professionals, like lawyers and medical doctors, are held accountable for the work they perform.

As will be noted in this book, while the professionalization of teaching is advocated for, comparisons to the medical profession are frequently made. This is due to the many similarities between these two professions. Both the medical doctor and the teacher must have adequate preparation to exercise their practices appropriately, though this fact is not always recognized for the teaching profession, which must be remediated if we are to succeed in achieving optimal education for our citizens. Also, like medical doctors, teacher's work is complex and based on decisions that do not always lead to the same positive results. Similarly like doctors, teachers are in a profession that requires ethical values, for their decisions will undoubtedly have a significant impact on the lives of human beings who are in their care. Yet, though the status of the medical profession is somewhat diminished in the current environment of healthcare policies in the government, it is nevertheless, still regarded as more prestigious than teaching.

Even when teaching may be considered a profession by some, it is not valued or adequately supported by the public. As explained in the introduction, the frequent, bad publicity presented through the media leads to the current devaluing of the profession; which prevents teachers from exercising their right to apply their knowledge in the classroom in order to lead their students to achieve their potential. Therefore, it is imperative that educators at all levels

work to remedy these situations and transform the public views of teaching to one that sees it for what it is.

As we consider teaching a profession the decisions and policies about education must include the presence of educators at the forefront. This means that educators should be in charge of decision making at all levels, especially teachers. All policies about curriculum, preparation, certification, and evaluation should be created and overseen by educational professionals, especially those that work in the classroom, in order to create the structures necessary to make teacher agency possible.

### **Teaching as the act of building bridges**

Another dilemma in understanding the nature of teaching lies in conceptualizing it as an art or a science. Currently teaching as a science seems to be the most accepted view. It is evident in the United States Department of Education and its Institute of Educational Sciences. Through these agencies' patterns of funding for educational research, it is evident that ideologically they view teaching as a science. Funding of research is limited to studies that are quantitative and make use of experimental or quasi-experimental models. The impetus is on viewing education, or learning, as the result of cognition and the functions of the brain. While this approach is valuable, learning is too complex to be limited to these types of studies. Human development is made up of integrated and interrelated processes that include not only cognition but also physical and emotional processes of equal importance in the lives of humans from diverse racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups as they coexist in social spaces that are ever intermingling and expanding.

The limited lens used by positivistic, scientifically based, quantitative studies are limited in their capacity to elucidate the intricacies of human development within complex societies. Furthermore, the specific perspective used by scientists who view humans as purely biological beings is biased and simplified, leading to the reduction of teaching to a multitude of tidbits of unconnected knowledge and overlooking the ways and means of interconnecting the knowledge or connecting it to the learners, with their diverse identities. The scientific approach is also based on assumptions about the value of what is being measured. In other words, why are specific questions used in school assessments? Who decides what is important? Why is it important? Is the knowledge being assessed important to all? Why? What about assessing the ways that knowledge can be used? Or, how can we be open to the possibility that our means are incorrect? What happens when all learners are successful in acquiring the knowledge valued by those in power to make these decisions? Will there still be room for differences of opinion, diversity in values, culture, language or identities? How?

On the other hand, we can look at teaching as an art, or better yet, as architecture. Architecture is the design and planning of the construction of a physical structure. In the process, the architect applies scientific principles so that the product is sturdy, durable, and practical. But the architect also takes into consideration the contextual factors such as the type of terrain where the structure will be built and the proper materials for its strength and durability, as well as the social-cultural context of where it will be located. Who will use it? Why? Finally, the architect also considers the aesthetic value given to the structure by its users and from the perspective of its artist, the architect.

Applying the view of teaching in architectural terms, a proper metaphor is that of a bridge. The teacher is the architect who must connect the knowledge being imparted to the

learner. This is done through the act of teaching, Teaching must apply the cognitive sciences and human developmental principles and the current knowledge of how learning occurs, but it must also be an aesthetic act that considers the social and cultural aspects of the classroom where learning is occurring. It considers the identities of the teacher and the learners.

In this debate, the most crucial aspect to keep in mind is that teachers are charged with preparing our nation's children to become adept citizens and well-rounded individuals who can contribute to our society in a well-balanced way. It is too limiting to think of teachers solely responsible for the cognitive and academic development of students because well balanced human beings rely on a concerted functioning of the different aspects of their beings; namely, the physical, socio-emotional and cognitive aspects must work together. Thus, teaching is a highly complex endeavor requiring knowledge, expertise and a specific set of dispositions to be effective.

The multifaceted development of students cannot be expected to occur as the result of merely a technical approach. The teacher cannot blindly follow the demands of a supervisor who is not in direct contact with the students, as the supervisor' expertise often does not match the expertise of the teacher. This happens because principals and school administrators area of certification is often different from the one required of the teachers in the specific school setting. For example, the principal in an elementary school, may hold an initial certification in a content area for high school teaching and therefore has no knowledge of how to teach elementary children in the general classrooms, or the special and bilingual education classes.

Therefore, principals do not always have the adequate experience to understand the ramifications of specific approaches to instruction within the varied contexts of each classroom in their schools. In the school structure, their primary goal is the management of the school based

on governmental demands made at the local, state and federal levels. Since students are not mere robots who will function appropriately given the right programming, as humans are diverse and complex, then teaching should be in the hands of an adept, knowledgeable professional, the teacher. A crucial aspect of being a professional is the ability to make professional decisions, in other words, to exercise agency.

What is proposed here is not new but has been stated by other educators who have realized that for educational renewal to be effective it needs to value the role of the teacher as a central figure in the process (Cohn, 1992; Farris-Berg, Dirkswager, & Junge, 2012; Villegas-Reimers & Reimers, 1996; Shohamy, 2009). In particular, Villegas-Reimers & Reimers have voiced their concerns over the lack of teachers' voices in the process of selection, training or supervision of teachers on a global scale. Throughout the world, reform has excluded the teacher as an integral part of the process for school renewal. The exclusion takes many forms ranging from "*teacher-proof innovations, which can sustain the impetus for change in spite of the teachers.*" (Villegas-Reimers & Reimers, 1996, p. 469) to simply not including their perspectives in the discourse about reforms. The archetype of teaching as profession presented here is, therefore, innovative and requires a new vision for teacher preparation and educational policymaking. Central aspects of teacher preparation include the recruitment of highly capable individuals into the teaching profession and after professional preparation, giving teachers a central role in the dialogue about school reform and policies.

## References:

- Arce, J., Luna, D., Borjian, A., & Conrad, M. (2005). No child left behind: who wins? who loses?. *Social Justice*, 32(3 (101), 56-71.
- Braun, H. I. (2005). *Using Student Progress to Evaluate Teachers: A Primer on Value-Added Models. Policy Information Perspective*. Educational Testing Service. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED529977>
- Center for Education Policy, (2008). *Instructional Time in Elementary Schools: A Closer Look at Changes for Specific Subjects. A report in the series From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 5 of the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, DC.
- Cohn, M. M. (1992). *Teachers: The Missing Voice in Education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Dee, T. S., & Jacob, B. A. (2011). The Impact of No Child Left Behind on Students, Teachers, and Schools. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2010(2), 149–194.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/eca.2010.0014>
- Farris-Berg, K., Dirkswager, E. J., & Junge, A. (2012). *Trusting Teachers with School Success: What Happens When Teachers Call the Shots*. Lanham, Md: R&L Education.
- Musingafi, M. C. C. & Chiwanza, K. (2014). The Classroom Situation: Does Teaching Qualify To Be Called a Profession? *Journal of Education and Literature*, 1 (4) 2014, 128-132
- OECD (2016), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education*, OECD Publishing, Paris. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264266490-en>
- Palmer, P. J. (2017). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. John Wiley & Sons.

Ravitch, D. (2011). National standards in American education: A citizen's guide. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Shohamy, E. 2009. "Language Teachers as Partners in Crafting Educational Language Policies?" *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje Y Cultura*, 14 (22): 45–67.

Taylor, G. & Runté, R. (1995) Thinking about teaching: An introduction. Toronto: Harcourt Brace

Villegas-Reimers, E., & Reimers, F. M (1996). Where are 60 million teachers? The missing voice in educational reforms around the world. *Prospects*, 25(3), 469–492.