Cultivating teacher agency in professional learning and development: a case study of an individual from an enquiry-based learning programme

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Abstract
Teacher agency is increasingly recognised as essential for professional learning, school improvement, and sustainable educational change. However, neoliberal economic policies and heightened accountability measures may constrain opportunities for teachers to exercise agency, highlighting the need for further research. While teacher education has the capacity to enhance teacher agency, there is limited research examining how teacher agency is enacted within structured teacher education settings and which practices effectively support its development.

This paper addresses this gap by presenting a case study of an individual teacher drawn from an 18-month research project on teacher agency development involving nine Korean primary school teachers in Seoul, South Korea (Lee, 2024). It examines how an enquiry-based learning programme fostered the agency of one participant through their engagement in an action research project within their school. The findings raise questions about the need for a multidisciplinary approach to professional learning and development that promotes self-regulated learning, critical reflection, and collaboration. Additionally, the study advocates for expanding teacher agency beyond individual learning to encompass a broader societal role.

Keywords
Teacher agency, professional learning and development, enquiry-based learning, self-regulated learning, critical reflection, collaborative learning

Introduction

Teaching in the 21st century demands professionals who can innovate, adapt to diverse needs, and navigate complex policy environments (Bodman et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015). Student success depends on teachers functioning as high-level knowledge workers, responsible for developing students' complex thinking and communication skills (Scott, 2015), while making independent decisions and balancing personal preferences with collegial understandings (Eteläpelto et al., 2015).

These global expectations of teachers are evident in South Korea, where the challenges facing teachers today are shaped by the country's historical context. Following Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), the education system was designed to serve national development, preparing students to compete in a US-style capitalist economy (Kang, 2002; Namgung et al., 2020). This orientation intensified in the 1990s with the adoption of global neoliberal reforms, formalised through the 1995 Presidential Commission on Education Reform, which introduced market-driven mechanisms such as merit-based pay, school-based management, and high-stakes teacher evaluations (Sung, 2011; Lee, 2022). Although these reforms contributed to rapid economic growth and strong performances in international assessments, as documented in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) studies, they have been criticised for generating major educational challenges, including low student engagement and decreased levels of happiness (So and Kang, 2014; Ro, 2023). In response, curriculum- and student-focused reforms were introduced, such as the 2009 national curriculum revision granting greater school-level autonomy and the 'Happy Education for All' initiative (MEST,

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2015), which included the exam-free middle school semester system (Years 7-9) (So and Kang, 2014). Nevertheless, critics argue that the system remains tightly controlled, with teachers often positioned as targets of reform rather than active agents of change (Kim, 2022; Ro, 2023).

Teacher agency—the ability to make decisions and take deliberate actions for change—is increasingly recognised as essential for professional development, school improvement, and sustainable educational reform (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). However, global neoliberal policies and increased accountability pressures have limited teachers' opportunities to exercise agency, highlighting the need for further research (Cong-Lem, 2021; Cochran-Smith et al., 2022). While professional development has been shown to support teacher agency (Dillon et al., 2011; King and Nomikou, 2018), it is unclear how teacher agency is exercised within organised professional development and what practices best support its development (Kauppinen et al., 2020).

This paper reports on findings from a broader study examining the development of teacher agency among primary school teachers in Seoul (Lee, 2024). While participants demonstrated varied forms of short-term development in teacher agency and faced some challenges in sustaining these changes, this paper focuses on one participant who not only demonstrated many of the short-term changes observed across the wider study but also uniquely showed a significant and sustained long-term shift. Following a theoretical discussion of the concept, the paper presents a focused case study of this participant to explore the mechanisms that may underpin such development. It concludes by considering how teacher agency can be more effectively promoted.

Literature Review: Key Concepts

Professional learning and development and teacher agency

Teacher professional learning and development is a complex and much-debated topic (Opfer and Pedder, 2011; Bubb, 2012). Bubb (2012) notes that ‘professional development’ and ‘professional learning’ are often used interchangeably despite a lack of consensus on their definitions. Traditional ‘professional development’ can imply that teachers require external guidance, overlooking their capacity for self-directed learning (Timperley et al., 2008). This perspective portrays teachers as passive recipients and replicators of knowledge rather than professionals who actively interpret and apply knowledge within specific contexts (Timperley et al., 2008).

We adopt the term ‘professional learning and development’: ‘learning' emphasises teachers as active participants in their growth, while 'development' highlights the importance of acquiring knowledge from experts and peers. Conceptualised in this way, professional learning and development is a self-driven process that enhances teachers’ professional knowledge, skills, and beliefs to improve student outcomes. It is shaped by teachers’ beliefs, values, backgrounds, work contexts, and life circumstances (Opfer and Pedder, 2011), emphasising the subjective nature of learning and the central role of teacher agency in effective professional learning and development and sustainable educational change (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2019).

Agency and Teacher Agency

Rooted in the social sciences, agency is central to understanding human behaviour within structural constraints (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). While scholars debate the degree to which social and economic structures influence agency (Giddens, 1984; Archer, 2000), there is broad agreement that agency is both shaped and constrained by these frameworks (Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

This structural influence is reflected in the conceptualisation of teacher agency as an ecological phenomenon (Priestley et al., 2015). Here, agency is not an individual trait but an emergent outcome of interactions between individual efforts, available resources, and structural factors within unique

situations (ibid). While this perspective highlights agency's dynamic nature—influenced by past experiences, present conditions, and future goals—it pays less attention to the individual's intrapersonal processes enabling it (Cong-Lem, 2021). To address this gap in professional learning and development research (Evans, 2014), this paper also draws on the theories of Bandura (1986) and Mezirow (1991).

Bandura emphasises cognition, motivation, and affect as key intrapersonal regulators of behaviour, with cognition playing a central role. He characterises human agency through core features of self-regulated learning: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2001). Within this framework, self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to achieve desired outcomes—is positioned as the primary driver of motivation and action. While Mezirow (1991) also emphasises cognition, he focuses on critical reflection rather than metacognition and self-efficacy. Through such reflection, individuals experience cognitive growth that enables them to reason independently and act on personal beliefs and judgements rather than adopting those of others.

While Bandura's and Mezirow's theories illuminate the intrapersonal dimensions of agency, they do not sufficiently account for the environmental conditions within which teacher agency is exercised. Conversely, ecological conceptualisations highlight these contextual influences but under-theorise the intrapersonal processes that enable agentic action. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that teacher agency is best understood as emerging from the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments. Within this interplay, environmental influences at individual, school, and national levels shape available resources and affordances (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), while intrapersonal processes influence how teachers interpret and respond to these conditions (Mezirow, 1991; Bandura, 1997).

Ultimately, teacher agency is a multifaceted concept through which internal components translate into informed pedagogical choices that promote student learning and wellbeing (van der Heijden et al., 2015). Drawing on both ecological and intrapersonal perspectives, this study defines teacher agency for professional learning and development as follows:

> Teacher agency for professional learning and development is realised when teachers take intentional action as a result of the dynamic interplay between the intrapersonal components (cognition, motivation, and affect) and multiple environments connected across time, to enhance their learning and work practices, ultimately with the aim of improving student learning and wellbeing.

Maximising teacher agency through the learning environment

Through an analysis of international literature on continuing professional development models, Kennedy (2014) identifies collaborative professional enquiry as a transformative approach that supports teacher agency and transformative practice. Building on this work, which connects effective professional learning and development with teacher agency, this study examines how collaborative professional enquiry—hereafter enquiry-based learning—enhances teacher agency by fostering self-regulated learning, critical reflection, and collaboration.

Bandura (2001) proposes that human agency shares key features with self-regulated learning, a systematic process where learners set goals, select strategies, and adjust actions through reflection. In a rapidly evolving world, educators need to understand not only *what* they learn but *how* they learn (Scott, 2015). Self-regulated learning enhances metacognitive awareness and strengthens self-efficacy and motivation, empowering teachers to translate knowledge into contextualised action. This supports a shift from viewing teachers as knowledge consumers to knowledge producers who actively shape their professional learning (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999).

Mezirow (1991) also addresses cognition but focuses on critical reflection as the catalyst for transformative learning. He distinguishes premise reflection—which challenges underlying assumptions—from content and process reflection, which address immediate problems (Mezirow, 1998). This process targets narrative, systemic, organisational, and epistemic dimensions, moving beyond instrumental learning toward emancipatory learning. Ultimately, this drives 'perspective transformation', enabling educators to develop more inclusive, discerning, and integrative viewpoints that form the basis for informed action (Mezirow, 1991).

Collaboration further supports teacher agency by enhancing collegiality, self-efficacy, and reflective dialogue, all of which contribute to teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018). This is particularly relevant in Confucian heritage societies like South Korea, where non-critical cultures may prevail (Park and So, 2014). Effective collaboration requires mutual trust and openness to critique, allowing teachers to navigate power dynamics and move beyond traditional practices (Priestley et al., 2012).

Taken together, these perspectives indicate that a professional learning and development environment that promotes enquiry-based learning by integrating self-regulated learning, critical reflection, and collaboration provides strong affordances for teacher agency.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multidimensional framework that conceptualises teacher agency by synthesising Bandura's and Mezirow's theories with an ecological perspective (Priestley et al., 2015). Within this framework, teacher agency is understood as emerging when intrapersonal processes—specifically self-regulated learning and critical reflection—and environmental affordances interact to produce intentional action.

Enquiry-based learning is positioned as a key professional learning approach because it targets the intrapersonal processes identified by Bandura and Mezirow as essential for teacher agency. By fostering self-regulated learning and critical reflection in a collaborative environment, it is thought to create conditions that may support the development of teacher agency.

This theoretical positioning also supports the use of a single-participant case study. Focusing on 'Beth', the participant who demonstrated the most substantial development, enables a nuanced examination of intrapersonal processes and their interaction with environmental conditions, providing insights into mechanisms of agency development that may be overlooked in larger-scale studies.

Methodology

This paper reports an individual case study from a larger qualitative enquiry exploring how a professional learning and development programme using action research developed teacher agency (Lee, 2024).

Context

A five-month professional learning and development programme was designed specifically for the larger study. A key component of this programme was teacher involvement in school-based action research projects, centring on an enquiry-based learning approach. The programme was structured into two main phases.

In Phase 1, participants were introduced to action research processes, research methodologies, and data analysis techniques. This phase followed a structured cycle of learning model, which is based on the action research framework involving planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Ponte, 2010). This

systematic self-regulated learning approach enabled teachers to examine and address practical classroom issues.

In Phase 2, participants applied their knowledge through an eight-week research project conducted within their respective schools. Teachers were encouraged to engage in intentional action to tackle everyday challenges. To support this process, participants met fortnightly to engage in reflective dialogue on their research, fostering collaboration and critical thinking.

Unlike Korea's top-down professional learning initiatives, which assess teachers based on standardised criteria, the enquiry-based learning programme adopted a bottom-up approach. It prioritised the learning process and empowered teachers to explore areas of individual interest and need, allowing them to freely select their own research topics.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the larger 18-month study was collected through questionnaires, semi-structured individual and group interviews, programme observations, a researcher journal, and document analysis of materials generated during the enquiry-based learning programme. This paper focuses on interview data from one of nine teachers who, while demonstrating many short-term changes observed in the larger study, was the only participant to show a significant and sustained long-term shift in teacher agency. The analysis aims to provide in-depth insights into the mechanisms driving this change and to inform the design of effective professional learning and development. Interviews explored shifts in beliefs, thoughts, and actions before, immediately after, and one year following the enquiry-based learning programme, offering insights into both short- and long-term developments in teacher agency.

An exploratory qualitative approach was adopted to understand how this teacher interpreted her experiences and the meanings she attributed to them (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Situated within an interpretive paradigm that prioritises individual perspectives (Cohen et al., 2015) and views teacher agency as a subjective interpretation of one's environment (Mercer, 2011), the study employed a hybrid, theory- and data-driven analytical approach. Initial analysis examined perceptions of professional learning and development prior to the enquiry-based learning programme, identifying two key influences: formal government-provided professional learning and development and informal in-school learning. Subsequent interviews explored how the programme fostered self-regulated learning, critical reflection, and collaboration, producing changes in cognition, motivation, affect, and intentional action. Reflections on students, self, and teacher–student relationships emerged as key factors shaping these developments.

To ensure participant anonymity, a pseudonym was used. This study adheres to the BERA (2011) code of ethics, and ethical approval was obtained from the UCL IOE ethics committee before data collection commenced.

Findings

The findings examine both short-term and long-term changes in the teacher agency of Beth, a civil servant teacher in Korea with 21 years of teaching experience. In her late forties, she holds an undergraduate degree in Arts Education and a master's degree in English Education. As part of Korea's teacher rotation system, she changes schools every five years. Currently in her second year at a primary school in Seoul, she teaches 4th grade and values the school's supportive environment and engaged students.

Unlike her previous school, her current principal places less emphasis on student performances for parents, allowing Beth to focus more on teaching.

Before the professional learning and development programme

As a teacher in Seoul, Beth was required to complete 60 hours of professional development annually through government-approved institutions. However, she found these programmes overly focused on classroom performance, often conflicting with her teaching philosophy. Considering many professional development courses a 'waste of time', she participated only occasionally.

Beth was also sceptical about engaging in teacher research, perceiving it as a means to evaluate potential school leaders who advance government initiatives rather than genuinely support professional growth. She remarked, 'They [the government] are using research just for collecting some people who want to be principal. They just use it as a measuring tool'. Despite government efforts to expand professional development since the 1995 Education Reform Council—including national, regional, and school-based initiatives, international exchanges, and technology integration—Beth's experiences suggested that professional development remained largely top-down and transmissive, with little emphasis on self-regulated learning or critical reflection.

Beth believed education should foster creativity rather than simply deliver knowledge. She explained, 'We should focus on raising our students to become creative humans in the future rather than knowledge receivers, but the lecture-driven teaching method has limitations for this goal.' She also valued collaborative learning, often telling her students, 'When you are in school you can get some idea how to live with other people, how to share, how to argue, how to solve the problem together'.

Her belief in collaboration extended beyond the classroom to collegial relationships, but she found little value in mandated activities like open classes, where teachers, principals, and parents observed lessons. These, she felt, often became staged performances:

> When I did open class… my senior teachers recommended me to be like an actress… They said, 'You should show how to control your students. Everybody's looking at you during the class, it should be the perfect class'

These expectations, deeply ingrained among senior teachers, reflected broader trends in Korean and global education systems, reinforcing teacher performance over authentic professional learning. In contrast, Beth found genuine collaboration with teachers from other schools motivating and inspiring, explaining, 'Listening to something they [teachers] are doing in their school… I can get some idea … they motivate [me]'.

Beth's emphasis on creativity and collaboration led her to develop a research project aimed at helping students become 'creative and critical thinkers'. Acknowledging the limitations of lecture-driven classrooms, she aspired to create a democratic learning environment, explaining, 'I wanted to bring democracy into my classroom. My students could be equal to me because we are learners who can learn from one another'.

Short-term changes

Analysis of Beth's experiences from before to shortly after the enquiry-based learning programme revealed shifts in her reflections on teacher research, her students, her role as a teacher, and collaborative learning with colleagues. These shifts were accompanied by changes in her intentional actions.

Beth's classroom research, driven by daily teaching challenges, highlighted the contrast she perceived between 'traditional research' and teacher-led enquiry. Reflecting on her master's degree experience in comparison to the enquiry-based learning programme, she noted:

> My professors asked us to pick the 'right' topic… some topics have been researched already or some topics are old-fashioned, some topics are too hard to get good results… but with action research any topic is valuable

Her earlier research experience appeared to emphasise contributing to the broader knowledge base for teaching (Noffke and Somekh, 2009), with topic selection guided by academic relevance and existing research trends. In contrast, her participation in the enquiry-based learning programme, where she could 'pick the topic' I want to learn, it comes from my classroom, 'reflected a bottom-up approach'.

Beth also contrasted the rigidity of her master's research with the flexibility of the cycle of learning model's structure of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, which allowed her to adjust strategies as needed:

> Master's degree, I should have a plan from the beginning till the end but action research [cycle of learning model] shows me … I can modify during the research. That is the crucial part. So, I can just try it and then if it is not good, I can fix it later

Learning to modify and generate knowledge tailored to her individual context appeared to increase Beth's self-efficacy:

> [Before] I don't know how to connect my learning with my students' learning but action research [cycle of learning model] can give some way how I put my knowledge I am learning into my lesson, how I connect my learning with my students' learning. It doesn't show the way directly but … you should connect that knowledge to class always and if the knowledge is not suitable for your classroom you can modify it … it [cycle of learning model] tells me that teachers should learn always forever

Engaging in the self-regulated learning process through the cycle of learning model appeared to deepen her understanding of metacognitive learning. This, in turn, increased her self-efficacy, enabling her to adapt and refine strategies based on real-time observations while fostering a strong sense of ownership over her professional development.

Reflecting on student-generated data as part of the cycle of learning further shifted Beth's perceptions of her students and herself as a teacher. She acknowledged that before the programme she had 'just deliver[ed] knowledge 'without considering that' students could interact and learn from each other'. By involving students in decision-making, she observed improvements in communication and teacher-student relationships, noting:

> I didn't plan it from the start till the end... I just believe in my students… we can change things in our own way during the lesson and after the lesson I could see in their face they are proud of themselves, we could do it… even though there is a problem we can fix it together… [before] if there was a problem I usually try to fix the problem by myself but now for example they ask to change seating arrangements or I ask 'what would be a good seating arrangement? … do you think close friends in the same group is ok or not?' students can give opinions and we decide together

Previously, Beth had expressed low self-efficacy regarding her ability to effect change in students. After the programme, she reflected:

> Before joining this programme … in a year I thought I couldn't change my students much … but this is my previous thinking but [now] … I could do something for my students … also I can change myself… I can contribute for their development, for their improvement

Her reflections suggest a notable increase in self-efficacy, as she began to see herself as capable of making a meaningful impact on students' learning.

The programme also shifted Beth's views on collaboration with school colleagues. While her typical exchanges had involved storytelling and sharing materials, fortnightly enquiry-based learning discussions centred on participants' classroom research extended beyond these routine interactions. She explained:

> their [other participants'] school situations … their students' grade … their student's problems are not exactly the same but we have much in common … when we are talking together, I have experienced before … this talking process could give us many things

These reflective dialogues allowed participants to generate 'thick' descriptive data (Cohen et al., 2015), providing detailed accounts of their individual projects. While individual experiences cannot be generalised, engaging in collaborative reflective dialogue appeared to help Beth make informed judgments about adapting others' research findings to her own teaching.

Through collaborative learning in the enquiry-based learning programme, Beth began to re-evaluate her previously negative perceptions of working with her school colleagues:

> I didn't trust my colleagues… teachers are very passive, I used to think like this. Teachers learn when they have some reward from education ministry or when they want to get some promotion… but I could break this kind of thinking. There are so many teachers who want to teach their students better… [before] I thought it is hard to find some colleagues who can learn together… [now I think] even in my school there must be the teachers who must be eager to learn something

Although she became more open to collaboration, her school lacked a learning community that aligned with her interests, prompting her to consider starting one herself. She expressed uncertainty about this role, saying, 'I want to be a member of a learning group, but if I suggest something, I also have to take the lead, so I'm not confident'.

Long-term changes

To evaluate the sustainability of changes, data collected immediately after the enquiry-based learning programme were compared with data gathered one year later. Reflecting on this period, Beth considered whether the programme had led to lasting change. She recalled her experiences of pre-service and in-service teacher education—what she collectively terms 'teacher training'—and her previous tendency to accept expert knowledge uncritically:

> I thought memorising what experts said was important … before [the enquiry-based learning programme] I read more books, theory, government material… I thought that contained the right answers… education in Korea, teacher training programmes made me just follow the rules academics made.

The programme appeared to encourage her to question traditional educational roles, leading her to reframe her identity as both a learner and an educator. This shift aligned with Mezirow's (1998) concept of systemic critical self-reflection and strengthened her self-efficacy. She explained:

> Now I can be brave to try many things … when I find ideas, now I can say simply 'oh I can do it, I want to do it'.

She also felt more capable of adapting the syllabus to her students' needs:

> I think I have the ability to create my own programme… [before] I thought it was too difficult to adjust to my classroom. But now I can be brave to try many things that [other] teachers show me.

While these reflections suggest some sustained reflection and student-centred practices, her engagement in process reflection declined over time (Mezirow, 1991). During the enquiry-based learning programme, systematically planning and collecting data helped her recognise the limitations of relying solely on teacher observations. However, a year later, she reverted to this approach, explaining that she no longer gathered student feedback due to the stress of analysis and believed she could assess effectiveness through student reactions. Compared to her earlier reports, she now probed less into students' thoughts, reducing opportunities for open-ended, exploratory interactions. This shift risked limiting student participation in classroom decision-making, such as evaluating activities, offering suggestions, and shaping their learning.

Her most significant long-term change, however, occurred in collaborative practices with colleagues—a shift not observed among other participants in the wider study (Lee, 2024). After participating in the enquiry-based learning programme, Beth began to reorient her beliefs, recognising that some teachers in her school might also be 'eager to learn'. Shortly after completing the programme, she had expressed uncertainty about actively engaging with colleagues, but a year later she described this reluctance as 'me in the past', signalling a clear shift in mindset:

> [Now] I have a 'try' attitude… now without dread I can open my class and go to other classes, I can easily ask people to come to meetings … some people are interested, others not. In the past I was afraid if they were not interested in what I was saying, I was hurt. Thinking they wouldn't be interested I didn't try… now whether they are interested or not I can be open about what I'm interested in… I don't think I feel hurt that much. If they feel the same I'm really happy and say 'let's do it together'

Beth's resilience to differing opinions seemed to stem from viewing them as differences in perspective rather than personal rejection. She initiated a 'slow reading' programme with colleagues, and although the group disbanded due to staff reorganisation, she remained determined to connect with others, believing that 'people who are interested in the same topic can form a community'.

Previously, Beth felt constrained by the lack of a clear teaching model, stating, 'There was no good teaching model and I always wanted to do something new but didn't know how'. Now, she focused less on constraints and more on available affordances:

> Small ideas that colleagues next to me have, even though I wasn't directly taught by them they could be mentors but I didn't realise… sharing ideas from other teachers I can see a variety of ideas so I don't need to follow the same idea from the government curriculum … experiences and sharing, those things helped me to try new ideas… it gets easier to try, more courage, less stress. Just in my mind 'I can do it'. In the past I asked myself 'can I do it?' The question still comes to my mind at first but these days I think 'it looks fun, I want to do it'

Her strong belief in learning as a social process may have been a key factor in her increased self-efficacy in proactively engaging with school colleagues. Before the enquiry-based learning programme, she described teaching and learning as 'living together with students', highlighting the importance of interaction. For Beth, increased interactions with both students and colleagues during the programme appeared to play a central role in reshaping her perspectives.

Beth also acknowledged other influences on her transformation, including her age and working environment:

> Rather than just because of the [enquiry-based learning] programme … I don't know if it's the school I'm in or that it's the advantage of age. I haven't felt that I had the freedom to do what I wanted in the past. Before I worried whether teachers or parents would dislike it, I have to do what everyone else does, mustn't try something strange on my own, that kind of thing to suppress a lot of what I wanted to do. When I arrived at this school, I felt I could do what I wanted, not sure if it was the school letting me be free to teach or my age

Beth's transformative journey in collaborating with colleagues appears to have been influenced by multiple factors: insights from the enquiry-based learning programme, critical reflection on past experiences, age, working context, and belief in learning as a social process. Together, these contributed to a significant shift in her self-efficacy, empowering her to actively engage in collaborative learning with her colleagues to improve student learning.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper presents an individual case study drawn from a larger qualitative enquiry that examined how a professional learning and development programme supported the development of teacher agency (Lee, 2024). The findings illustrate how the programme fostered Beth's teacher agency, particularly through changes in her cognitive development and intentional actions.

Teacher agency shaped by cognitive development, collaborative learning, contextual factors

The self-regulated learning approach—encompassing goal setting, planning, implementation, and reflection on diverse data—equipped Beth with tools to develop metacognitive knowledge. Consequently, she appeared to become more proficient in interpreting and evaluating information and increasingly recognised the importance of continuous learning and adaptability. These findings align with Bandura's perspective (1991) that cognitive development extends beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge, emphasising agency as a process where learners systematically make decisions and engage in constructive actions. Similarly, Hadar and Benish-Weisman's (2019) large-scale quantitative study on teacher agency concluded that without specific knowledge and skills, teacher agency may remain underdeveloped or latent.

Beth engaged in both content and process reflection (Mezirow, 1991), prompting her to reorientate her beliefs about teacher research, student and teacher roles. This reflective shift appeared to influence her intentional actions, including adopting more student-centred approaches, engaging in problem-solving with students, and prioritising learning quality—characteristics that Hattie (2012) associates with teachers as change agents.

Increased collaboration with students and colleagues also influenced Beth's sense of teacher agency. Mezirow (1991) argues that a learner's commitment to reflective action depends on the extent to which they personalise and integrate new understandings of the epistemic and sociocultural forces shaping their perspectives. For Beth, internalising her learning from the enquiry-based learning programme appeared pivotal, as her active engagement in self-regulated learning and collaboration

within the programme enhanced her self-efficacy to work with school colleagues, despite some peers' limited interest in collaboration.

Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1991) highlights that individuals differ in their readiness for reflective change, a process likely shaped by the interplay of past experiences, current engagements, and future orientations (Priestley et al., 2015). For Beth, this interplay was evident in several ways. First, she engaged in self-regulated learning and critically examined how her prior educational experiences shaped her teaching beliefs. Second, she actively pursued opportunities for collaboration and professional learning within her school, and her interactions with students and colleagues reinforced her evolving view of learning as a social process. Third, these experiences not only shaped her present orientation but also appeared to inform her future approach to teaching and learning. These findings align with research suggesting that teacher agency results from a complex interplay of individual and contextual factors (Eteläpelto et al., 2015; van der Heijden et al., 2015; Kauppinen et al., 2020).

Although the programme supported the development of Beth's teacher agency in several ways, maintaining some of these changes over time proved challenging. For example, Beth's engagement in process reflection (Mezirow, 1991) declined; she stopped systematically gathering student feedback and reverted to relying primarily on teacher observations, which may have limited opportunities for open-ended interactions and student participation in classroom decision-making. Difficulties in sustaining change are likely influenced by a range of factors. Bendtsen et al. (2022) argue that learning outcomes are shaped not only by the goals and design of professional learning and development programmes but also by their interaction with contextual conditions. Research on sustained professional learning (Timperley et al., 2008; Bendtsen et al., 2022) emphasises the importance of collaboration and collegial relationships. In Beth's case, although her school provided some space for collaboration, there appeared to be a lack of leadership actively fostering enquiry-driven professional learning and teacher collaboration. Such support is likely essential for developing the emotional resilience and determination that Mezirow (1991) identifies as necessary for fully integrating new perspectives into everyday teaching practices.

Suggestions for ways forward for teacher agency for professional learning and development

In South Korea, policy-driven efforts to enhance teacher quality aim to improve student outcomes and strengthen national economic competitiveness. This has created a professional learning and development environment with diverse opportunities for teachers to acquire new knowledge and stay updated on pedagogical trends and technologies (Education Reform Council, 1995). However, as seen through one teacher's experience, the government's predominantly top-down and transmissive approach to provides limited space for self-regulated learning and critical reflection, thereby constraining the development of teacher agency. This raises an important question: how might professional learning and development be reimagined to better support teachers as active, reflective agents of their own development?

This paper does not seek to generalise from a single case. Nevertheless, it suggests that fostering teacher agency, which has a lasting impact on students' learning and well-being, requires a multidisciplinary approach—integrating teacher-led EBL, collaborative learning, and critical reflection across multiple levels of PLD. Research supports teacher-led enquiry-based learning (King and Nomikou, 2018; Wagner et al., 2019), highlighting its transformative effect on teachers' perceptions of their roles and practices. In evolving educational contexts, EBL can empower teachers by enhancing professional knowledge, learning strategies, and personal attributes such as reflexivity, emotional awareness, and confidence (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Being agentic involves embracing change to address complex educational challenges (Scott, 2015), positioning teachers as lifelong learners who

use enquiry-driven approaches to refine their practice at both classroom and school levels (van der Heijden et al., 2015).

The findings also raise questions about the role of collaborative learning with peers and students in promoting emancipatory learning and teacher agency. Collaboration emerged as central to more effective teaching, aligning with research emphasising the importance of collegial relationships in sustaining professional learning and development (Timperley et al., 2008; Bendtsen et al., 2022). Even highly motivated teachers encounter significant barriers in school environments that lack a collaborative culture (Priestley et al., 2015). This points to the need to consider how school structures and cultures—particularly those grounded in support, respect, and trust—can enable or constrain teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2012; Ning et al., 2015).

While this paper has focused on practical strategies to enhance teacher agency within a single school context, it also highlights broader questions about the role of teacher agency beyond the school. As Priestley et al. (2015) argue, without attention to wider cultural and structural conditions, positioning teachers as agents of change is unlikely to lead to meaningful transformation in educational practice or equip them to address pressing environmental and social challenges, including those related to sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). From the standpoint of the teacher in this study, this suggests the importance of critically reflecting on how agency enacted in classrooms and schools connects to broader societal outcomes. Such reflection does not imply political activism separate from teaching, but rather an awareness of the interconnectedness between pedagogical practice, school dynamics, and social change—opening possibilities for teacher agency to contribute to progress at both individual and societal levels.

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