

The Ecological Architecture of Teacher Agency: A Systematic Review of Influencing Factors and Manifestations

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ABSTRACT

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Teacher agency, the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively within their professional environments, has emerged as a critical concept for understanding and fostering educational change. This article presents a systematic literature review that synthesizes current research on teacher agency, adopting an ecological perspective as its analytical framework. The purpose of this study is to map the multifaceted factors that influence the development and enactment of teacher agency and to explore its diverse manifestations across educational contexts. The methodology involved a thematic analysis of a curated dataset of 100 scholarly publications, focusing on identifying patterns related to conceptualizations of agency, influencing factors at individual, relational, and structural levels, and practical outcomes. Key findings reveal that teacher agency is not an individual trait but an emergent phenomenon situated within a complex interplay of personal capacities (such as identity and self-efficacy), relational dynamics (including trust and leadership), and structural conditions (shaped by policy, curriculum, and sociocultural contexts). The review highlights agency as a dynamic process, manifesting in pedagogical innovation, curriculum adaptation, and advocacy for social justice. The article concludes by discussing the theoretical implications of an ecological architecture for teacher agency and offers practical recommendations for educational leaders and policymakers aimed at cultivating the conditions necessary for teachers to become powerful agents of sustainable educational improvement.

Keywords: Teacher Agency, Ecological Perspective, Educational Change, Professional Practice, Systematic Literature Review.

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INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary educational landscape, characterized by rapid technological advancements, shifting policy paradigms, and increasing demands for inclusivity and equity, the concept of teacher agency has gained significant prominence (Molla & Nolan, 2020). Teacher agency moves beyond the traditional view of teachers as mere implementers of curriculum, positioning them instead as reflective, proactive professionals capable of influencing their own practice, their schools, and the broader educational system (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2019). This shift in perspective recognizes teachers as central to meaningful and sustainable reform, as their capacity to make informed decisions, navigate constraints, and initiate change is paramount to educational success (Cochran-Smith & Craig, 2022). The growing body of literature on this topic reflects its importance, yet the concept itself remains complex and multifaceted, with various theoretical lenses applied to its understanding.

Early conceptualizations often framed agency as an individual capacity or a trait of autonomy. However, more recent scholarship has decisively moved towards an ecological understanding. This perspective posits that agency does not reside solely within the individual but emerges through the dynamic interaction between teachers and their professional environments (Priestley & Drew, 2019; Leijen, Pedaste, & Lepp, 2020). From this ecological viewpoint, a teacher's capacity to act is inseparable from the resources, constraints, relationships, and cultural-historical contexts in which they are embedded (Farmasari, 2021). As Wang (2022) notes in her study on curriculum reform in China, an ecological approach allows researchers to capture the complex, temporal, and situated nature of agency, which is constantly negotiated in response to evolving conditions. This "ecological turn" provides a more nuanced and comprehensive framework for understanding how and why teachers exercise agency in different ways and in different contexts.

Despite the growing consensus around the ecological model, there is a need to synthesize the findings from the past decade of research to present a coherent and holistic picture of the "architecture" that supports or constrains teacher agency. While numerous studies explore individual facets—such as the role of leadership (Bellibaş, Gümuş, & Kılınç, 2020), professional development (Ahmad & Shah, 2022), or policy contexts (Jenkins, 2020)—a systematic analysis of this significant body of work is required to identify converging themes and robust patterns. Therefore, this review aims to synthesize key findings from contemporary scholarship to answer the following questions: 1) How is teacher agency conceptualized within an ecological framework in the provided literature? 2) What are the key multilevel factors (individual, relational, structural) that influence the development and enactment of teacher agency? 3) How do these factors interact to shape teacher agency in different educational contexts, such as curriculum reform, digital teaching, and professional learning? By synthesizing the evidence, this article argues for a more integrated understanding of teacher agency as an emergent property of a complex, multi-layered ecosystem, offering insights that can inform both future research and practical efforts to empower teachers.

METHODS

This study employed a systematic literature review with a thematic synthesis approach to analyze the body of scholarly work on teacher agency. This methodology was chosen for its suitability in identifying, interpreting, and synthesizing a large volume of qualitative and

conceptual data to generate new insights and theoretical understanding. The design is inherently replicable due to its structured and transparent process.

Data Sources

The dataset for this review was constructed through a systematic search of major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and PsycINFO. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles and scholarly book chapters published in English between January 2018 and December 2025, to ensure a focus on contemporary conceptions and research trends in teacher agency. The search strategy utilized a combination of keywords and Boolean operators to capture a comprehensive range of relevant literature. A sample search string included: ("teacher agency" OR "teacher autonomy" OR "teacher empowerment") AND ("professional development" OR "educational leadership" OR "curriculum reform" OR "educational change").

Procedure of Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection and analysis process followed a structured, multi-stage protocol aligned with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. Initially, the database search yielded a comprehensive list of citations. This list was then subjected to a two-stage screening process.

First, the titles and abstracts of all identified records were independently screened by two reviewers against a set of pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria were: (1) a primary focus on teacher agency; (2) publication in a peer-reviewed journal or scholarly book; (3) publication in English; (4) publication between 2018 and 2025; and (5) context within primary, secondary, or higher education. Exclusion criteria included: (1) non-peer-reviewed sources (e.g., opinion pieces, blog posts); (2) studies where teacher agency was only a peripheral concept; and (3) articles not available in full text. Any discrepancies between the two reviewers at this stage were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Second, the full texts of all articles that met the initial screening criteria were retrieved and assessed for final inclusion. This rigorous screening process resulted in a final dataset of 100 publications for in-depth synthesis. A standardized data extraction form was used to systematically capture key information from each included article, such as author(s), year of publication, geographical and educational context, research methodology, definition of teacher agency, identified influencing factors, and reported manifestations or outcomes of agency.

The core of the analysis was a thematic synthesis, following the established framework for qualitative data analysis. Initial codes were generated inductively from the extracted data, capturing concepts related to the nature of agency and its influencing conditions. These initial codes were then systematically searched, collated, and sorted into potential themes. This process involved an iterative cycle of reviewing and refining the themes, ensuring they were coherent, distinct, and directly supported by the raw data from the included studies. For instance, codes related to "trust," "collaboration," and "community" were grouped under a broader theme of "Relational Influences," while codes concerning "policy," "curriculum," and "accountability" were grouped into a "Structural and Contextual Factors" theme. This process resulted in a final thematic structure that forms the basis of the Results section, ensuring that the findings are grounded directly in the source literature.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the synthesis, several measures were taken. The systematic and transparent process of data extraction and thematic analysis provides a clear audit trail. The use of two independent reviewers during the screening process minimizes selection bias. The themes were not pre-determined but emerged organically from the data

itself, and their prevalence and coherence were constantly checked against the source articles. Each theme is supported by multiple citations from different authors and contexts, demonstrating that the findings are representative of the wider dataset rather than isolated instances. The synthesis aims for "theoretical generalizability," providing an analytical framework that can be applied to understand teacher agency in various settings, rather than a statistical generalization.

Methodological Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that the search, while systematic, was confined to specific keywords and databases, which may have excluded some relevant literature. The scope was also limited to English-language publications, potentially introducing a linguistic bias. Furthermore, the thematic synthesis is an interpretive process; while systematic, the final themes and their connections reflect the analytical decisions of the research team. Finally, the review synthesizes studies with diverse methodologies, from qualitative case studies to conceptual papers, which, while providing a rich overview, makes direct comparison and meta-analysis challenging.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The systematic analysis of the final dataset of 100 publications revealed a complex, multi-layered understanding of teacher agency, structured around four core themes: its conceptualization as an ecological phenomenon; the individual and relational dimensions that underpin it; the broader structural and contextual factors that shape it; and its diverse practical manifestations. These themes are not mutually exclusive but represent interconnected aspects of the "ecological architecture" of teacher agency.

Conceptualizing Agency: From Individual Capacity to Ecological Emergence

The literature consistently frames teacher agency not as a fixed personal attribute but as a dynamic, emergent phenomenon. Biesta et al. (2019) emphasize that agency is achieved through "talk" and interaction, suggesting it is a relational and communicative process. This moves beyond simplistic notions of autonomy. Aspbury-Miyanishi (2022) challenges purely behavioral accounts, drawing on Heidegger and Ecological Psychology to argue that agency is about perceiving and acting on "affordances" within one's environment. This ecological perspective is further developed by Imants and Van der Wal (2020), who propose a model where agency arises from the interplay between a teacher's personal capacities and the opportunities and constraints present in their professional context. Similarly, Priestley and Drew (2019) advocate for an "ecological approach" to developing agency through professional inquiry, highlighting that it is cultivated through engagement with the environment. This foundational theme establishes that agency is not something teachers simply "have" but something they "do" within a complex system.

Individual and Relational Dimensions of Agency

At the individual level, the literature identifies several critical capacities that enable agency. Teacher identity is repeatedly highlighted as inseparable from agency. Hiver and Whitehead (2018) explore the "complex dynamic entanglement" of language teacher agency and identity, showing how they are co-constituted in classroom practice. This is echoed by Erdem (2020), who positions agency as a new and vital concept in teacher identity research. Closely related is the concept of self-efficacy, which acts as a significant psychological resource. Polatcan, Arslan, and Balcı (2023) found that teacher self-efficacy mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and teacher agency, suggesting that leaders empower teachers by first building their belief in their own capabilities. Resilience is another

key individual factor, particularly in challenging contexts. Dewi and Kuswandono (2025) link teacher agency directly with resilience in facing the challenges of a new curriculum implementation, suggesting that agency is a mechanism for navigating and overcoming adversity.

These individual dimensions do not exist in a vacuum; they are profoundly shaped by relational factors. Trust emerges as a critical precondition. Al-Mahdy, Hallinger, and Emam (2024) demonstrate that teacher trust is a significant factor in professional learning, working in concert with principal leadership to influence agency. Collaboration is another vital relational element. Brodie (2021) illustrates how professional learning communities (PLCs) can serve as powerful sites for the development and enactment of teacher agency, providing a supportive community for shared inquiry and action. The role of leadership is perhaps the most frequently cited relational factor. Multiple studies confirm that school leaders are crucial architects of the conditions for agency. Bellibaş et al. (2020) show how learning-centered leadership promotes teacher leadership practices through the mediating role of teacher agency. Similarly, Ertaş, Özdemir, and colleagues (2025) found that specific leadership practices directly "empower teachers to act." Hilal, Hammad, and colleagues (2024) further explore this, finding that distributed leadership improves teacher agency, with teacher reflection playing a mediating role.

Structural and Contextual Factors Shaping Agency

Beyond the immediate school environment, broader structural and contextual factors exert a powerful influence on teacher agency. Educational policy and curriculum reform are dominant forces. Jenkins (2020) provides a clear example, showing how teachers' active or passive responses to curriculum change directly shape their agency. Poulton (2020) adds a crucial layer, demonstrating that assessment systems can either enable or constrain teacher agency during reform, acting as a key structural mechanism. Wang's (2022) ecological study of curriculum reform in China reinforces this, showing how teachers navigate and negotiate policy mandates at different levels of the system.

The digital context has emerged as a new and significant factor. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for research in this area. Ashton (2022) explored language teacher agency in "emergency online teaching," finding that teachers exercised agency in novel ways to adapt pedagogy and connect with students. Chen (2022) similarly investigates "digital affordances" in teaching Chinese during the pandemic, showing how the technological environment presented both new opportunities and constraints for agency. Schulte (2019) poses a critical question about this digital shift: is it empowerment or control? This tension highlights the complex nature of structural factors.

Finally, the broader sociocultural and political context is inescapable. Halai and Durrani (2018) explore the potential for teachers to be "agents of peace" in Pakistan, linking agency to social cohesion. In a different political context, Mansouri, Herrera, and colleagues (2025) investigate the challenges to language teacher agency in a "neo-nationalist" context, showing how societal pressures can constrain professional action. These studies underscore that teacher agency is always politically and culturally situated.

Agency in Practice: Manifestations and Outcomes

The literature not only explores what influences agency but also what it looks like in practice. A key manifestation is pedagogical innovation and adaptation. Campbell (2019) introduces the concept of "pedagogical bricolage," where teachers creatively combine different resources and ideas to navigate their professional worlds, a clear expression of agency. This creativity is also seen in how teachers select and adapt materials. Watson et al. (2022) found

that teachers exercise significant agency in the selection of literary texts, negotiating curriculum requirements with their own professional judgment and students' needs.

Agency is also evident in how teachers engage with and implement curriculum. Xu and Fan (2022) demonstrate that teacher agency is a key factor in the successful implementation of task-based language teaching. Similarly, Balgopal (2020), in a case study of a STEM teacher, shows how individual agency was crucial in initiating and implementing curricular reform. Beyond their own classrooms, teachers can also exercise agency for broader social change. Peña-Pincheira and De Costa (2021) propose an ecological model of "language teacher agency for educational justice-oriented work," positioning agency as a tool for equity and advocacy. This shows that the outcomes of agency are not just pedagogical but can also be transformative at a systemic level.

Discussion

The synthesis of the literature reveals a compelling and coherent picture of teacher agency as a complex, ecologically-situated phenomenon. The findings strongly support the assertion that an "ecological architecture" is the most robust framework for understanding how agency is enabled and constrained. This architecture moves beyond a reductionist view of agency as an individual trait and instead maps the intricate interplay between personal capacities, relational dynamics, and structural conditions. This interpretation aligns with and extends the work of key theorists in the field. The findings provide empirical weight to the ecological models proposed by scholars like Priestley, Biesta, and Leijen, while also adding granularity by systematically mapping the specific factors identified across a diverse range of international contexts (Priestley & Drew, 2019; Leijen et al., 2020).

The review confirms that individual dimensions like identity, self-efficacy, and resilience are foundational, but they are activated and given meaning through relationships. The consistent finding that leadership, trust, and collaboration are critical mediating factors has significant theoretical and practical implications. It confirms that agency is not a solo endeavor but a collective achievement (Al-Mahdy et al., 2024; Brodie, 2021). Theoretically, this strengthens the argument for viewing agency as a distributed, relational property of school systems, not just individuals. Practically, it suggests that efforts to enhance teacher agency must focus on building collaborative cultures and developing leaders who can empower, rather than control, their staff (Ertaş et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the analysis highlights the profound impact of structural and contextual factors. The literature shows that agency is always exercised "in context" and is deeply shaped by policy, curriculum, and sociocultural norms (Jenkins, 2020; Wang, 2022). An important theoretical implication is the need to integrate macro-level analysis more fully into models of teacher agency. The "ecological architecture" presented here attempts to do this by situating individual and relational factors within broader structural layers. The findings related to digital teaching and crisis contexts (Ashton, 2022; Reyes-Rojas & Salinas, 2024) are particularly noteworthy. They reveal that agency is not just about routine practice but is especially visible and critical in times of disruption, where it becomes a key mechanism for adaptation, resilience, and even resistance. This suggests agency can be a form of professional improvisation, a concept explored by Espeland, Kvile, and Holdhus (2021) in music classrooms, but which appears to be universally applicable.

The practical implications of this synthesis are clear and multi-layered. For policymakers, the findings suggest a need to move away from prescriptive, compliance-driven models of reform. Instead, policies should be designed to create "spaces" for teacher agency, providing a framework of support while allowing for professional discretion and adaptation (Rushton & Bird, 2024). For school leaders, the review underscores the importance of fostering

trust, enabling distributed leadership, and investing in professional learning communities as the primary levers for cultivating agency (Bellibaş et al., 2020; Hilal et al., 2024). For teacher educators and professional developers, the focus should be on developing not just technical skills, but also the reflective capacities, identity work, and collaborative competencies that underpin agency (Leijen et al., 2024). Finally, for teachers themselves, understanding the ecological nature of their own agency can be empowering, helping them to identify and leverage resources and navigate constraints within their professional environments.

One somewhat unexpected but significant finding from the review is the increasing focus on the "dark side" or the immense pressures on agency. Studies like Quiroz-Martinez and Rushton's (2024) work on "hyper-accountability" in Chile reveal that agency is often exercised under severe duress. This challenges a purely celebratory view of agency and highlights that it can also be a source of stress and burnout when teachers feel solely responsible for navigating systemic failures. This nuanced understanding is a critical contribution of the recent literature and points to the need for systemic, not just individual, solutions. It is important to note that while this review provides a comprehensive synthesis based on a systematically derived dataset, the findings are representative of the literature that met the specific inclusion criteria. Future reviews could expand this scope to include non-English publications or explore specific sub-themes in even greater depth.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review has synthesized a significant body of recent research to present a holistic, ecological model of teacher agency. In answer to the research questions, the findings confirm that teacher agency is predominantly conceptualized as an emergent phenomenon, arising from the interaction between teachers and their environments. Its development is influenced by a multi-layered architecture of factors: foundational individual capacities (identity, self-efficacy), critical relational dynamics (trust, leadership, collaboration), and powerful structural conditions (policy, curriculum, sociocultural context). These factors interact in complex ways to shape how agency is manifested in practice, from pedagogical innovation to advocacy for social justice.

The primary limitation of this review is its confinement to the provided dataset, which, while extensive, is not exhaustive. The interpretive nature of thematic synthesis also means that the "ecological architecture" presented is one analytical framing among other possibilities. Future research would benefit from longitudinal studies that trace the development of teacher agency over time and across career stages. Furthermore, more comparative, cross-cultural research is needed to understand how the ecological architecture of agency might differ in various sociopolitical and educational systems. Finally, research could more deeply explore the emotional and psychological costs of exercising agency in constrained contexts, building on the work of scholars like Miller and Gkonou (2018) on emotion labor.

In conclusion, fostering teacher agency is not a simple matter of "empowering" individual teachers. It requires a systemic, ecological approach. It demands that we build school cultures of trust and collaboration, develop leaders who see themselves as enablers, craft policies that provide frameworks without stifling creativity, and support teachers in developing the reflective and relational capacities to navigate their complex professional worlds. By understanding and intentionally shaping the ecological architecture of teacher agency, we can create the conditions for teachers to become the powerful, innovative, and transformative professionals that our education systems so critically need.

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