

## ABSTRACT

### Dissertation Title

The Paradox Of Professional Teacher Agency And Accountability In Public Education: Using Autoethnography To Promote Reflexivity In Teachers And Raise Consciousness Of Agentic Beliefs And Values

### Topic of the Dissertation

“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.”

—Alice Walker

One of the greatest factors of both failure and success is what one *believes* about oneself (Bandura, 1982). This concept is studied across a wide range of disciplines under numerous titles and an amalgamation of related terms. Each iteration adds to the constellation of ideas that form our understanding of an individual’s capability to author their own identity.

In philosophy, for example, one can reference the theories of *existentialism* developed by Martin Heidegger (1927) and his contemporaries to understand individuals as *free and responsible agents* who develop their existence through willful acts. In psychology, one can reference the work of Albert Bandura (1982) on *self-efficacy* as one’s belief in their ability to achieve goals. In sociology, one can reference the seminal work of Margaret Archer (2003) on both *structure* and *agency* in the debate of one’s capability to act within a given environment. These three examples alone employ a wealth of jargon that expand the notion of self-constitution even further.

The reference above to structure and one’s ability to act within delineated socio-cultural environments may very well invoke the concept of *autonomy*. Autonomy has evolved extensively from the constitutional work of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes and their

conceptualizations of *liberalism* and *individualism*. Individualism, through the work of Albert Bandura and other social psychologists, may be viewed as the tenet to theories of *Self-Determination* and *Social Cognitivism*. From an even broader perspective, understanding oneself through one's beliefs generates fundamental philosophical conversations on the construction of reality/*ontology*, knowledge/*epistemology*, and value/*axiology*.

What is pivotal in this progenation of theories and concepts is that each perspective utilizes, directly and/or indirectly, a concept of human agency. Agency, in and of itself, yields a rich canon of work across a number of disciplines and multiple fields of study (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Its significance, specifically in research on the constitution of self, however, is its ability to negotiate multiple phenomenological conceptualizations of action and identity across numerous fields *without* losing concernment.

For example, agency has played a provocative role in education, particularly as it pertains to educational reform and the significance of students and teachers as agents of change (Biesta et al. 2014, 2015; Hadar and Benish-Weisman, 2019). The importance of agentic research has just recently been promoted as a formidable topic in educational research. Priestley et al. (2015a) utilize an *ecological approach* to study the concept of teacher agency through qualitative inquiry in their work on curricular school reform in Scotland. The ecological approach posits a temporal construct of agency, first formulated by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), which expresses interdependence between one's iterational (past), practical-evaluative (present), and projective (future) experiences to form agentic understanding and beliefs. This temporal conception of agency is strongly supported by philosophical tenets within the theoretical framework of social realist theory related to Margaret Archer's (1995) work on *morphogenesis*. As argued by Priestley et al. (2015a) in exploring opportunities and strategies for school improvement, we

must begin to appreciate the imperative significance of teachers and their agential beliefs in bringing educational reform to fruition. By probing the role of teacher agency within structures of education, we can discover and codify its requisite components and generative mechanisms. Then, such information can be used to develop methods of identifying variables in professional contexts that support teacher's agential growth and development (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, and Paloniemi, 2013; Hadar and Benish-Weisman, 2019; Lipponen and Kumpulainen, 2011). The present study is located at this crucial juncture in the scholarship of teacher agency.

Through critical reflection of my own professional experiences as a performing arts teacher in Central Texas, which are presented in the study through autoethnographic inquiry, I have discovered the significance and necessity of intrapersonal investigation in authoring one's sense of agency and ultimately affecting one's actions and the environment one acts within. I believe this discovery is not limited to my personal exploration and interpretation of past experiences, but rather, represents a valuable opportunity to shift school reform dialog and focus professional development on the topic of teacher agency with the expressed desire of supporting teachers as agents of change within their unique professional contexts. By promoting teacher agency through agentic dialog and reflexivity, our collective consciousness of agency and its generative mechanism will be raised. Subsequently, our actions will reflect a heightened sense of self in correlation to others, and the concept of reform will be both positioned and realized by teachers and students awakened to their own possibilities and power.

In promoting the significance of teacher agency within the context of educational reform, I would like to briefly investigate some of the philosophical tenets of agency, in order to fully appreciate its plentitude of ontic and epistemic values which frame agentic conversations and research.

## Contextualization of the Research Question within the Literature of the Field

For centuries philosophers have engaged in dialogue regarding the ontological implications of human identity and the internal conversation which constitutes our *sense of agency*. To understand what we believe of ourselves, however, we must begin simply with what we know, or rather, what we believe to be true. From this epistemological perspective, we are challenged by polarized systems that fuel epistemic debate.

Our understanding of the world has long since been divided into opposing poles. In this instance, the polarity lies between *positivistic* and *interpretivistic* perspectives of the world. Applying parallel terms, germane to scientific inquiry, we can refer to these extremes as being understood *objectively* and *subjectively*. Marking out this philosophical territory is not necessarily problematic. But for those who believe reality and knowledge must exist solely in one camp or the other, a great deal of value and meaning is lost from the resultant dialectic of the opposing poles (Scott, 2013). Philosophers have shown us that the neatness of a polarized perception of the world is far too simple to fully appreciate the growing complexities of our existence. What is significant, is the *dialogue* that comes from the polarization of ontic and epistemic theories. Through the maieutic method, humanistic and existential thoughts have emerged. Challenging the Cartesian models of the age of enlightenment within the eighteenth century. Heideggerian continental philosophies have subsequently promoted a *new* sense of agency among nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers.

From an agential perspective, the dichotomy of that which is understood as *objective* and *subjective* fuels debate across several disciplines. Archer (2003) suggests, in a very basic sense, that this debate is fundamental in supporting objective perceptions of structure and the subjective nature of agency. A dialogue between the objective and subjective, or structure and agency,

begins with the inception of action. Actions are inherently rooted in structural contexts that directly influence the agent who is acting. Conversely, the agent's actions affect and ultimately mold the structural landscape within which the agent acts. In other words, an agent cannot act without experiencing effects from the structure they act in, yet the structure is affected by the actions taken by the actor. Archer's work (1982) suggests a new approach which conceptualizes structures and agents as ontologically inseparable because each enters into the other's constitution. This is discussed in greater detail in chapter two through the work of Emirbayer and Mische on the temporality of agency and Archer's theory of morphogenesis. What is established here is the significance of philosophy to carve out territory in which a conversation of agency can mature. A conversation on agency is vital to constructing an understanding of our actions and of ourselves within professional cultural contexts.

Entrenched in a rich internal philosophical dialogue, I have been challenged both personally and professionally to evaluate my own sense of agency as a public school teacher. In my studies of pedagogical theories and educational professionalism, I have become an extremely conscientious educator. I rely heavily on the practice of critical self-reflection to maximize my effectiveness and ultimately author my identity as a successful teacher. I was vexed, however, by the perceived variables of my profession and position (as a public-school performing arts teacher in central Texas) that were out of my sphere of influence and control, which dramatically affected my capabilities to take action in professional contexts. Furthermore, my experiences altered my perceptions, and affected my sense of agency, regardless of established structural elements that promoted autonomy and self-efficacy within my *job* as a teacher (Campbell, 2009; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, and Paloniemi, 2013).

It has been suggested that “teacher agency ... has the capacity to make the operation of the educational system, both at the systemic level and at the individual and collective level of teacher practice, more intelligent and, therefore, more able to engage with the complexities and the uniqueness of the here and now in meaningful and purposeful ways” (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 149). As articulated above, in exploring the topic of teacher agency, several important questions are posed: Where are the philosophical and pragmatic boundaries of teacher agency as we continue to examine the implications of agency on teachers’ professional identities? How does one “awaken” a teacher to the concept and constructs of agency in order to exercise their perceived agency in professional contexts? Which educational philosophies and practices generate a structure that promotes the importance of agency as an emergent and dialectical phenomenon? And how can accountability be understood and subsequently resolved as a structure of education which paradoxically affects teacher agency?

The current atmosphere of education perpetuates a tumultuous climate in which educators must construct their identity amidst competing philosophies of education, pedagogy, and schooling. Furthermore, their professional actions are seldom appreciated in context of teachers’ ability to act as agents of change undermining their significance and the importance of their beliefs and sense of agency (Priestley, et al. 2015). An emergent theory of agency is suggested within a temporal construct that appreciates the phenomenological aspects of critical reflexivity. This construct invites qualitative inquiry into the subjective well-being associated with related concepts of self-constitution.

This study identifies requisite agentic variables and helps to reconceptualize teacher agency within multiple fields and disciplines in order to establish an emergent phenomenological concept of agency generated by intrapersonal beliefs that can be used within the context of

authoring authentic selves as teachers in professional contexts (chapter 2). The study will serve as an example of an agentic conversation, practiced through reflexivity, and realized autoethnographically, between myself as both student and teacher within educational structures of accountability (chapters 4-6). Ultimately, I promote other educators to practice similar reflexive/autoethnographic conversations between themselves and their unique professional and educational contexts. The process of “awakening” educators to their agentic realities through autoethnographic reflexivity holds perceivably limitless potential for teacher education, professional and personal development, and the broader concepts of school reform (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, and Paloniemi, 2013; Hadar and Benish-Weisman, 2019; Lipponen and Kumpulainen, 201; Priestley, Biesta, Robinson, 2015a).

### **Methodology**

With so much work promoting the significance of reflexivity in agentic research (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015; Archer 2003, 2007, 2010, 2012; Bochner & Ellis, 2016, Roberts & Sanders, 2005, Spry, 2001) selecting autoethnography as a methodology for the study seemed more like a necessity than a choice. Adams, Jones, and Ellis (2015) define autoethnography as a qualitative method that “offers nuances, complex, and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships rather than general information about large groups of people” (p. 21). As I learned more about human agency and one’s disposition to express and understand it, I quickly conceded that a quantitative, exclusively objective and empirical analysis was not only impossible (Cauce and Gordon, 2018) but irresponsible and disingenuous to the reality of social science research and the extremely subjective nature of agentic beliefs (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). I found solace in Arthur Bochner’s narrative (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) which describes his journey from the social sciences, through a quantitative (primarily statistical) lens, to mainly

autoethnographic research methods. In explicating his research career and agenda he references the philosophical turn of the late twentieth century in social science, where a growing number of “critiques showed how empiricism’s value neutrality mask[ed] domination, conserve[d] the interest of the status quo, and reinforce[d] oppressive social practices” (p.49). Although he recognizes that the work he was publishing was statistically significant, he found himself wondering if it was “humanly significant” (2016, p.33).

As I progressed through the doctoral program at Texas State University, and subsequently matured through the academic research process, I found myself asking similar questions. I wanted to address the concept of teacher professional agency in a deeper, more nuanced way that simply could not be addressed in black and white terms. Just as my own research on human agency wrestles with seemingly endless debates of polarized theories e.g., structure and agency, subjectivity and objectivity, qualitative and quantitative methods, et cetera; I began to appreciate the importance of what was *in-between* perceived poles. Bochner (2016) explains,

autoethnography inhabits a space between science and art; between epistemology and ontology; between facts and meanings; between experience and language; between the highly stylized conventions of fact based reporting and the unfixed alternatives of literary, poetic, and dramatic exposition; between a cold and rational objectivity and a hot and visceral emotionality; between a commitment to document the reality of what actually happened and a desire to make readers feel the truth coursing through their blood and guts (p.66).

This is a space I sought to occupy in my own research, as an educator trying desperately to understand my own sense of agency as a fine arts teacher in central Texas. The more I studied and engaged with others on the topics of accountability and agency, the more I came to appreciate the importance of my experiences, and the significance of reflexivity in my research.



## **Findings and Their Impact in the Field**

The work presented in this study represents a radical personal and professional transformation which spans the past seven years of my life. From my first assignments in the doctoral program at Texas State exploring the work of Patti Lather, to the pinnacle of my career as a public school performing arts teacher, the birth of both of my children, my resignation from San Marcos High School, and my transition to higher education as the director of music education and orchestral activities at Seattle Pacific University. Through everything that I have experienced and learned, I am grateful that I have been able to share it in the dissertation, with the ambitious goal of inspiring others to think reflexively about their own sense of agency in the world.

I have discovered and developed my own philosophy of teaching and learning, which I detail in chapters one and five, and which I practiced as a middle school and high school music teacher and continue to explore as a college professor. In all of it, I humbly recognize the significance of agency in how I think, act, and respond to the world. In chapter two, I present a review of literature that illustrates my unique understanding of agency as an emergent phenomenological set of beliefs. I celebrate the momentous task of trying to incapsulate such an interdisciplinary topic, and gracefully accept the challenge of seeking new and evolving perspectives of agency across multiple fields.

In chapter three I outline my methodological design to realize agency through autoethnography within a critical realist framework, both challenging and pacifying intense ontological and epistemological debates. My research design includes an excavation of personal and professional artifacts and experiences, many of which I am sharing for the first time. I organize my autoethnography into three chapters that reveal my research and conceptualization

of accountability as an agentic structure (chapter four), the development and establishment of my philosophical understanding of teaching, learning, and myself (chapter five), and a deeply personal foray into the last two years of my career as a public school teacher, in which, I address my personal challenges with systems of accountability and their effect on my sense of agency (chapter six).

Authoring the autoethnography allowed me to practice reflexivity and develop a complex and sagacious understanding of who I was, who I am, and who I aspire to be as an educator. In the final chapter, I answer the research questions and provide an analysis of the autoethnography. The analysis identifies seven themes that I believe encapsulate the benefits of critical reflexivity in the pursuit of supporting agentic beliefs. I invite others to think with me, in the implications for future research and practice, and humbly submit to the difficulty of an agential education through the words of Maxine Greene.

Of course, it is difficult to affirm the value of plurality and difference while working to build a community of persons who have a feeling of agency, who are ready to speak for themselves. Yet, once the distinctiveness of the many voices in a classroom is attended to, the importance of identifying shared beliefs will be heightened. Again, these beliefs can only emerge out of dialogue and regard for others in their freedom, in their possibilities (Greene, 1995, p.42).