Teacher Agency for Social Justice – Implications for Teacher Education

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Abstract

Calls for teachers to act as ‘agents of change’ have become common in policies worldwide, often linked to social justice agendas. This paper explores the meaning of teacher agency for social justice by applying social theories of human agency to the work of teachers. It then maps out the territory for development of teacher education as agents of change arguing that such education requires: 1) a cultivation of moral purpose and commitment to social justice; 2) developing competences for enactment of the principles of social justice in teaching practice 3) an awareness of the limitations and opportunities afforded by teachers’ individual and collective autonomy in contemporary contexts of education; and 4) a systematic professional reflection on their practices and environments. The paper discusses the implication of each of these aspects of teacher agency for teacher education.

Key words

Teacher agency, educational change, social justice, teacher education

Introduction

Calls upon Teacher Education (TE) designers and educators to prepare teachers as ‘agents of change’ have become common in policies and literature worldwide, often linked to the agendas of social justice and concerns for raising educational outcomes for all children, e.g. as in Australia, US and many European countries (Ballard, 2012; Florian, 2012; Fullan, 1993, Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Zeichner, 2009). Teachers’ transformative power has long been acknowledged in teachers who understand education as a political and cultural practice that can be focused on work towards more just societies (Freire, 1970; 1998). The task has become ever more complex in contexts of socially and culturally diverse school populations (Florian, 2012). The response of TE has often been to add a new course or additional content to an existing course, e.g. focusing on special educational needs or diversity, rather than reconsidering and restructuring how all teachers are prepared to work in today’s schools. Because they are presented as distinct content, issues of social justice have become marginalized within TE programmes (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012),
while studies suggest that TE reform for inclusive education requires a paradigmatic change in order to develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that support the teaching and learning of all students rather than providing additional ‘specialised’ knowledge for some teachers (Florian, 2009; 2012; Pantić et al., 2011). This paper maps the territory for the development of teacher education that has the potential to develop all future teachers as agents of change for social justice. It looks into the theoretical propositions about the meaning and essential aspects of human agency applied to the work of teachers before discussing the implications of these aspects of agency for teacher education.

**What is agency?**

Theories of professional agency (Edwards, 2007; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2013) are guided by social theories of human agency, such as Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration and Margaret Archer’s critical realist theory of agency (Archer, 2000). Giddens (1984) defines agency as an ability to ‘intervene in the world’, to ‘act otherwise’, to ‘make a difference’, to exercise ‘some sort of power’ (p. 14). According to these authors, essential aspects of human agency are purpose, competence, autonomy and reflexivity. Agents engage purposefully in acts which they know, or believe, will have a particular quality or outcome. A sense of *purpose* guides agents’ intentions and motivation which determine levels of effort people put in an endeavour, and of perseverance in face of obstacles (Bandura, 2001). Next, agents use the knowledge of the act (*competence*) to achieve this quality or outcome (Giddens, 1984). Agency is also determined by levels of *autonomy* and power within structures and cultures, which can either foster or suspend agency (Archer, 2000). In a socio-cultural perspective agents are seen as embedded in their professional contexts, yet capable of transforming these contexts (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä & Paloniemi, 2013). For Archer (2000) agency is always collective, while actors are individuals who shape the structures and cultures, not in a way any particular actor wants but as a result of interactions. Their efficacy is entirely dependent of what sense agents make of their contexts. This is another essential aspect of agency - a distinctively human capacity for *reflection* on both own practices and social contexts, creatively envisaging alternatives and collaborating with others to bring about their transformation (Archer, 2000; Bandura, 2001; Giddens, 1984). Thus, collective agency can contribute to the transformation of structures and cultures over time as groups and individuals interact exercising their particular abilities, skills, personalities, seeking to advance their purposes and perceived interests. Agency can also be used to reproduce the existing structures and cultures, e.g. if an individual or group action fails to bring about desired changes, or seeks to maintain the status quo (Archer, 2000).

In this context, there is an important distinction to be made between ‘agency’ and ‘agency for change’. The later requires a clear articulation of the nature of change which could help teacher education designers specify appropriate purposes and relevant preparation. This paper considers what such teacher preparation might involve in relation to the calls for teachers to act as agents of change for social justice. For example, Edwards (2007) discusses teachers’ relational agency with reference to the agenda of disrupting trajectories of exclusion and
under-achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The related aspects of agency might be: 1) a sense of (moral) purpose (e.g. commitment to social justice), 2) competence - understanding the implications for teaching practice (e.g. for establishing appropriate interpersonal relationships with students), 3) autonomy - decision making power and positioning in relation to other relevant actors (e.g. understanding how actors can collectively transform situations of exclusion or under-achievement of some learners), and 4) reflexivity - a capacity to systematically evaluate own practices and institutional setting (e.g. analysing the impact of individual and collective practices on socially just educational outcomes). Below we discuss what kind of teacher education might prepare teachers to think of themselves and act as agents of change for social justice considering each of these four aspects of agency.

**Cultivating moral commitment to social justice**

Given the enormous public significance of schooling as a formative influence on the social, economic, and human capacities of citizens, it is increasingly recognised that the teaching profession cannot turn only on technical knowledge divorced from other kind of expertise or wisdom needed for teaching as a moral practice (Hansen, 2001; Pring, 2001). Commitment to social justice might require teachers who first of all think of themselves as transformative intellectuals and link their agency to a moral vision (Fullan, 1993; Giroux, 1988).

In the context of social justice agendas, teaching has a distinctively moral turn. Of course, it might be one thing to agree about social justice as a desirable aim of education, and quite another to agree what justice actually means or what it means for different students in different circumstances (Campbell, 2004). For example, a distinction can be made between distributional justice which refers to the principles by which goods are distributed in society (Rawls, 1972) and the relational dimension of justice referring to the nature of the relationships which structure society, including issues of power and how we treat each other, both on macro level of social and economic relations which are mediated by institutions, and in micro interpersonal interactions (Gewirtz, 1998). Teachers who are agents of social justice will need an in-depth understanding of the implications for practice of these different, often competing conceptualizations of justice, for their practices. For example, a relational conceptualization of justice as recognition might have different implications for educational practice depending on how recognition is approached (Fraser, 2000). Fraser argues that the politics of recognition which displaces redistribution, e.g. by prioritizing gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity over class, may actually promote economic inequality insofar as it reifies group identities at a risk of reinforcing the very inequalities it purports to mitigate (Fraser, 2000). It is beyond the remit of this paper to consider the educational value of these varying understandings of social justice. The significance for teacher education development is that student teachers will need to be able to engage with the conceptual and practical complexity of issues around social justice if they are to engender them in their practices.

So, how might TE support the aims of developing teachers thinking of themselves as agents of change and understanding the varying implications of social justice principles for context-
embedded practices? Following Archer’s (2000) suggestion that agents need to find the reasons embedded in a role – in our case commitment to social justice - sufficiently good to make them their own, we would need to think of the ways to help student teachers internalise a vision of a socially just, equitable education as part of their moral purpose. Campbell (2004) argued that if teachers are to model certain attitudes and behaviour in classrooms they need to live by the same principles that they want pupils to embrace. However, teachers are rarely systematically prepared for making their moral values explicit (Chang, 1994; Pantić, & Wubbels, 2012; Penn, 1990; Sanger, 2008; Willemse, Lununberg, & Korthagen, 2005).

A disposition to justice requires attention to the needs and interests of others that is no less affective than cognitive. Virtue ethics position is that moral agency also requires being a certain kind of person and developing sensitivity to the particularities of a situation, not just moral reasoning skills or application of general rules (Carr, 2007). Thus, preparing teachers to follow the so-called codes of professional ethics is unlikely to be sufficient for the task. If we accept the argument that moral agency requires a more holistic personal and professional development, the aims and practices of education for such agency cannot be confined to a section of the curriculum (Pring, 2001). Prospective teachers might need opportunities to exercise the making of decisions which call for highly contextualized judgment and interpersonal sensitivity that defies reduction to mechanistic rule following. One of the challenges for TE programmes is reexamining the ‘traditional approaches’ that view practice as applied theories derived from disciplines such as psychology and sociology, and considering new insights into the nature of knowledge as situated and interwoven with experience and emotion (Korthagen et al, 2006). In Aristotelian terms, effective moral agency is a matter of cultivating practical wisdom attuned to cognitive-affective responses to the complexities of human association. The essence of the complexity of professions such as teaching is that there is little general agreement about what counts as the right thing to do in this or that circumstance. Drawing on Aristotle’s distinction between practical wisdom and technical rationality, it has been argued that teachers require a preparation for phronesis – a context specific practical reasoning, in contrast to techne – a technisist view of teaching (Carr, 2007). Phronesis has also been described as the knowledge of how to act in particular situations which involves an understanding of relational aspects of a situation, in contrast to episteme – generalized knowledge about many situations (Korthagen et al, 2006). Such knowledge cannot be ‘transferred’ but only co-created with student teachers resulting from their own reflections on particular situations of much greater emotional significance for them (Ibid, p. 1027). As an example, the view of behavior management as a development of technical skills or strategies can be contrasted to a phronetic of view behavior management as a capacity to create positive classroom climate that depends upon more fundamental teachers’ capacities for personal and interpersonal interaction and communication in which they appreciate and respect other viewpoints (Carr, 2007). Relevant teacher preparation might involve a cultivation of virtues that are conducive to positive and productive relations with pupils (Carr, 2007) as will be discussed below.

In summary, the reviewers and developers of TE programmes might start by asking:
- Where in the programme do our students have opportunities to explore their vision and mission as teachers and its underlying moral values?

- Where in the programme do our students have a chance to explore varying conceptualizations of justice and their implications for context embedded practices?

- Where in the programme do our students have opportunities to exercise educated decision-making in real educational contexts?

**Building teachers’ competence as agents of change**

Competent agents understand how their moral purposes can be engendered in their actions. In their observations of teachers’ moral practices Jackson et al. (1993) showed that teachers are more influential in moral terms than they typically understand themselves to be. For example, their moral influence might manifest in the rules and regulations they set in the classroom, with those who follow them becoming known as good students, and those who transgress them as troublemakers (Jackson et al., 1993). Although the debates about the structure, location and content knowledge of TE for social justice are on-going, there is some agreement in the literature about the kind of knowing, doing and believing that teachers need to be effective with diverse groups of students. In addition to being able to create a classroom environment and develop a pedagogy that is inclusive of all students accounting for difference as essential aspect of learning, and believing in their capacity to teach all children, inclusive teaching practices often require responses beyond classroom and developing ways of working with others (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Florian & Spratt, 2013). Agents of change create spaces for inclusion wherever possible working creatively with their colleagues and other professionals to actively challenge the status quo and push the social justice agenda forward. To be able to do so prospective teachers might need to develop a sophisticated understanding of how broader social forces influence exclusion and disadvantage, and how their professional ‘acting’ can affect the conditions for learning and schooling (Liston & Zeichner, 1990; Slee, 2010; Zeichner, 2009).

So, how might such a competence be developed in teacher education? Giddens (1984) described agents’ competence as ‘knowledgeability’ of rules and tactics of practical conduct in the milieu in which agents move, which may or may not include knowledge about those which apply in contexts remote from their own experiences (pp. 90-92). For example, agents from different cultures or social groups might not know the rules of others in less privileged sectors of life, and vice versa. Teachers who are able to act as agents of social justice might need to experience a variety of cultures and social milieus in order to understand how broader social and economic forces influence educational outcomes and recognise the importance of home environment working with diverse families (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). A relational pedagogy is one way to invite student teachers to personal and professional transformation through interpersonal relationships for knowing and apprehending the reality of their students and imaging their perspective (Lysaker & Furuness, 2011; Noddings 2005).
Sadly, teachers do not seem to be adequately prepared to for understanding either the macro level social and economic relations mediated by the educational systems and institutions (Pantić, Wubbels & Mainhard, 2011), or for noticing how their interpersonal interactions might affect the conditions for learning of all students (Pantić, 2014). A study of teachers’ perceptions of their moral roles and their interpersonal relationships with students found that the more teachers tended to agree with the liberal views of their moral roles, the less students perceived teachers as helpful, friendly and considerate (Pantić & Wubbels, 2012). The views of liberalism as tendencies to value neutral teacher-student relationships, have been criticised for imposing an inappropriate pattern of professional-client association on teacher-student relationships (Carr, 2003). It seems to be commonly supposed that impartiality entails impersonality understood as avoiding any or all personal association. However, good practitioners are precisely those capable of entering into professionally appropriate personal relations with clients, patients or pupils in order to respond adequately to their diverse needs or interests. The importance of warmth and knowing the students is particularly stressed for teaching students of diverse backgrounds (den Brok, et al., 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Building caring relationships has been defended as integral part of teachers’ moral roles as it is instrumental to students’ learning and moral development (Kohlberg, 1984; Noddings, 1984). However, despite taking the moral stance of care in ethical dilemmas, teachers have been found to struggle to accomplish the responsible professional action (Tirri & Husu, 2002). Lysaker & Furuness (2011) point out that we cannot simply expect that student teachers will apply the insights they gain in teacher education for achieving a particular kind of praxis aimed at the creation of socially just educational climates for all students. If we know that what kind of relationships are beneficial for improved learning outcomes (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005) there is no reason why student teachers should not be explicitly and systematically prepared to build appropriate relationships.

In summary, the reviewers and developers of TE programmes might consider:

- Where in the programme do our students have an opportunity to consider educational implications of the broader social, economic and political contexts?
- Where in the programme do our students have an opportunity to interact with families coming from a variety of cultures and social milieus?
- Where in the programme do our students have an opportunity to examine their capacity for building appropriate relationships with their pupils?

**Helping teachers understand the scope of their individual and collective autonomy for acting as agents of change for social justice**

Moral commitment to social justice and understanding what can be done and how is unlikely to be sufficient for the actual exercise of teacher agency in given contexts. It is not uncommon that even the most committed and highly competent teachers experience a burn out in the face of structural and cultural features of the environments in which they work that they perceive as barriers to the achievement of their moral purposes. One of the biggest
challenges for preparation of teachers as agents of change is to help teachers understand the opportunities as well as constraints in the given policy and school contexts and work collectively to change those that might obstruct the implementation of their purposes (Fullan, 1993; Liston & Zeichner 1990). Some of the most important influences perceived by teachers as an opportunity and/or constraint for exercising their agency are within school relationships (Priestley et al., 2012). For example, reciprocity is perceived as a positive dimension that operates in horizontal collaborative relationships in which agents share tasks within the same hierarchical levels which may cross departmental boundaries (Priestley et al., 2012). At the same time relationships are maintained through collective agency. The idea of teacher’ learning as an individual cognition has been challenged by social practice learning theories (Wenger, 1998). Socially just education requires collective action for collective wellbeing, and the knowledge that can help challenge the status quo is created through social encounters (Mc Arthur, 2012). One of the core aspects of the structural environments but also teachers’ competence as agents of change is their ability to build collaborative relationships through which they can develop shared purposes, negotiate meanings and align their individual and collective practices. Collaborative school environments have powerful effects on teachers’ taking responsibility for improved learning of the under-achieving students from migrant and low socioeconomic status families (Louis et al., 1996). At the same time relationships are part of the structures and cultures that can be significant resources for building future patterns of interactions and relationships supportive of school improvement and organisational change (Daly et al., 2010). Robinson (2012) illustrated how strong collegial relationships enabled teachers to adapt policy requirements to fit some practices and reshape others.

Accordingly, in teacher education, teachers could be helped to notice how their interactions and relationships with colleagues can contribute to transforming their work contexts. Since relationships are dynamic and can be transformed over time teachers could be given tools and conceptual frameworks for analysing their interactions and relationships as integral part of their professional activity, as well as part of structures and cultures that might obstruct or support their purposes (Fullan, 1993; Liston & Zeichner 1990). Such teacher education might require opportunities for teachers to work closely with their peers as part of getting used to learning in collegial relationships, which might substantially challenge the existing structures and cultures of the schools and universities (Korthagen et al, 2006).

In summary, the reviewers and developers of TE programmes might consider:

- Where in the programme do our students have an opportunity to explicitly focus on collaborative relationship as part of school structures and cultures?
- Where in the programme do our students have an opportunity to interact and build relationships with their peers?
- How do the teaching and learning, and assessment practices on our program encourage development of collaborative practices?

Building teachers’ capacity for professional reflection
Agents’ powers of reflexive monitoring of both their own actions and social contexts enable them to make commitments and re-commitments (Archer, 2000). A view of teachers as agents of change is not dissimilar to the descriptions of ‘extended professionals’ who are directly involved in the wider development of professional values, aims and objectives, way beyond the call of strict requirement of duty, in contrast with the 9 to 5 routines of taking only minimum jobs-worth responsibility by restricted professionals (Carr, 2003). Pro-active agents take time to engage in discussion, enquiry and research, attend professional conferences and seminars, assist with the education and training of junior colleagues, take individual responsibility and initiative, and so on.

The importance of thinking about teaching as a reflective, rather than routine, practice has been extensively discussed in literature (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983, 1987; Zeichner, 2006) on the grounds that reflective practice involves linking education with its wider purposes in contexts, rather than a straightforward application of theories to defined problems. Systematic reflection is seen as the essential tool for linking practice and theory (Korthagen, 2001; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005).

Student teacher engagement in systematic practitioner inquiry has become a well-established part of teacher education (Korthagen et al., 2006; Liston & Zeichner, 1990) and is widely believed to have a powerful influence on how teachers position themselves as agents of change (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993, 1999). Educating teachers as collaborative agents of change for social justice might require pushing the reflective practice approaches to building the knowledge base for teaching beyond the individual teachers (Korthagen et al., 2006).

The reviewers and developers of TE programmes might consider:

- Where in the programme do our students have an opportunity to discuss and systematically reflect on their own and their peers’ practice?
- Where in the programme do our students have an opportunity to systematically explore the interdependence of their individual and collective practices with given school structures and cultures?
- In what ways do our programmes build students’ capacity to pro-actively engage in their own and each other’s professional development, e.g. through participation in research projects, seminars and conferences?

**Implications for Teacher Education design**

In summary, preparation of teachers as agents of change for social justice might involve 1) cultivation of moral purpose and commitment to the cause of social justice; 2) building competence for the practices that can help fight exclusion and improve the learning of all students; 3) helping teachers understand the full transformative potential of their collective and individual actions within the scope of their autonomy; 4) promoting systematic and critical reflection on their own practices and educational contexts.
Cultivation of moral purpose might involve explicit focus on the moral dimension of the practice of teaching and education which has become detached form a moral perspective in the current context of concern for increased performance (Fitzmaurice, 2008). This might involve helping students make moral judgments in relation to particular situations, but also modelling through teacher educators’ practice of making their reasoning explicit. For example, Villegas and Lucas (2002, p. 54) propose the following actions of teacher educators to prepare teachers to be agents of change for social justice:

- Emphasise the moral dimension of teaching (e.g. to make the moral purpose central and highlight the place of social justice in that purpose)
- Guide prospective teachers to develop their own vision of education and teaching (e.g. making decisions about acting or not takes an ethical commitment that goes beyond intellectual understanding of issues)
- Promote the development of empathy for students of diverse backgrounds (e.g. students need to get to know their students and their families)
- Nurture passion and idealism as well as a realistic understanding of obstacles to change (understand the structural impediments to the accomplishment of their educational vision)
- Provide evidence that schools can become more equitable (through examples of successful change in schools)
- Teach about the change process explicitly (e.g. engagement with policies)
- Promote activism outside as well as inside the classroom (e.g. involvement in communities of practice and professional networks)
- Emphasize the importance of and develop skills for collective action and collaboration (engage student teachers in collaborative projects)

Building teachers’ competence for the practices that can help all students learn might depend on student teachers’ experience of diversity, as much as on their knowing about the reasons for inequalities. A systematic teacher preparation for transformative practice might include opportunities for building caring relationships with students and their families. Helping teachers understand the full transformative potential of their collective actions might require equally systematic preparation for building collaborative relationships with their peers and with other education professionals. Promoting systematic and critical reflection might involve collaborative enquiry and research into the impact of their own practices and environments.

Finally, teacher education cannot fully prepare teachers for their entire careers, so it needs to focus on how to learn from experience and how to build the professional knowledge (Korthagen et al, 2006). Perhaps, the most we can hope for from the initial teacher education is to encourage teachers to see themselves as active agents of change within the constraints of school structures (Lysaker & Furuness, 2011), e.g. by adopting a view of teaching is inherently political, ethical, morally sensitive activity, and of schools as sites for social
transformation. Building formative links between teaching practice and teacher education will require university-schools partnerships for building teachers’ individual and collective sense of efficacy as agents of change for social justice throughout their careers.

References


