

Teacher agency in enacting physical education in a period of curriculum change and reform in Ireland

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Drawing on the concept of agency and teacher agency and engaging with figurational sociology, this paper explores the extent to which teacher agency plays a role in one teacher's enactment of a new school subject (Leaving Certificate Physical Education (LCPE), an examinable subject assessed in a high-stakes environment) in a period of curriculum change and reform in Irish post-primary schools. Through a case study design, one teacher was interviewed regularly (19 times) during their 1st year of teaching LCPE. The findings are presented in three teaching episodes. In analysing the three teaching episodes, the process (and fluctuation) of achieving agency is evident. The achievement of agency should not be conceptualised as a product (achieved) but rather, it should be viewed as something that is processual (achieving). We offer a figurational viewpoint of teacher agency through a constructed Figure in the paper. We argue that it is impossible to link the achievement of agency with one element (including the teacher). It is the combination of interdependent relationships (past and present, recognised and unrecognised) in a teacher's figuration, the overarching social processes, and the contextual and structural factors surrounding and within a figuration. The paper provides considerations in how best to support teachers in their process of achieving agency.

Keywords: teacher agency; figurational sociology; leaving certificate physical education; curriculum

Introduction

The inclusion of learning outcomes as a central element of curriculum policy internationally continues to maintain momentum (CEDEFOP, 2016). Although critical of this shift in curriculum policy, Biesta (2009) has conceptualised this move as part of the 'learnification' of education, 'a transformation of an educational vocabulary into a language of learning' (p. 36). Alongside this shift, there has been a curriculum policy focus on the teacher as school-based curriculum developer (Priestley *et al.*, 2016) and facilitator for student learning (Biesta *et al.*, 2015). These moves have led to a prominent discourse constructing teachers as 'curriculum makers' and 'agents of change' (Priestley *et al.*, 2012) in curriculum policy and curriculum texts. Central to these conceptualisations is teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2016).

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In line with these international trends, in Ireland, there has been significant curriculum reform and change at post-primary school level in the last number of years (MacPhail *et al.*, 2018). Reflecting the ‘learnification’ of education (Biesta, 2009), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) have advocated for foregrounding the language of ‘learning’ (NCCA, 2009) and have engaged with a discourse of teachers as ‘key agents of change’ (NCCA, 2009). With specific reference to this study, Senior Cycle (the final 2 years of post-primary school, aged 16–18 years old) reform began in 2016 and is currently occurring with a particular focus on reviewing the Leaving Certificate examinations (an exit award after the 2-year cycle). While a number of established subjects (e.g. Mathematics, Gaeilge [Irish language], Biology) are under review, ‘new’ subjects (e.g. Politics and Society, Leaving Certificate Computer Science) have been added to the Senior Cycle curriculum. Central to all Leaving Certificate subjects’ syllabi (through Senior Cycle reform) are learning outcomes which ‘ensure that the objectives of the relevant curriculum component, the learning and teaching strategies adopted, and the assessment approaches employed are consistent with each other’ (NCCA, 2009, p. 24). The Leaving Certificate is a terminal, high-stakes examination system and most subjects have one formal, summative assessment point, that is, 100% written examination. For more practical subjects (e.g. home economics, art, music and languages), there are two or three assessment points which are also of formal, summative nature, that is, a practical project, an oral examination and/ or a written report or essay. All assessment components assess ‘all dimensions of the learning outcomes in the syllabus’ (NCCA, 2009, p. 28) and assessment components are externally assessed by the States Examination Commission.

One addition to the Leaving Certificate subject range is Leaving Certificate Physical Education (LCPE; introduced in September 2018); an examinable physical education certificate subject assessed in a high-stakes environment. LCPE is made up of 128 learning outcomes which teachers are expected to teach over the 2-year course. This is the first-time physical education has been formally examinable in Ireland which brings about many opportunities and challenges for the teachers responsible for teaching the subject.

Drawing on the concept of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and engaging with figurational sociology (Elias, 1978), this paper explores the extent to which teacher agency plays a role in one teacher’s enactment of LCPE in a period of curriculum change and reform in Irish post-primary schools. This research also aims to understand the influence of the teacher’s network of relationships in his pursuit for the achievement (or not) of agency. When viewed from a figurational sociology perspective, agency is not seen as an independent variable and separate to social action but rather, agency is viewed in an interdependent relationship with social action through the people who act such actions. Through this lens, we explore the ways in which teachers navigate moments when they perceive they can be agentic (or not) and the associated implications of these actions. This paper begins by briefly outlining the learning outcomes-based LCPE specification before moving on to the potential evolving role of teachers as ‘policy actors’.

LCPE specification

The LCPE elements (and the content) are presented in Figure 1. The 10 topics listed below consist of 128 learning outcomes; although different topics have different number of learning outcomes, for example, while topic three has 29 learning outcomes, topic eight has seven learning outcomes. While the elements below are presented as separate entities, an integrative relationship exists between the elements (highlighted by the arrows). The assessment components assess the learning outcomes (Physical Activity Project and written examination) and practical performance (performance assessment). All assessment components are externally assessed.

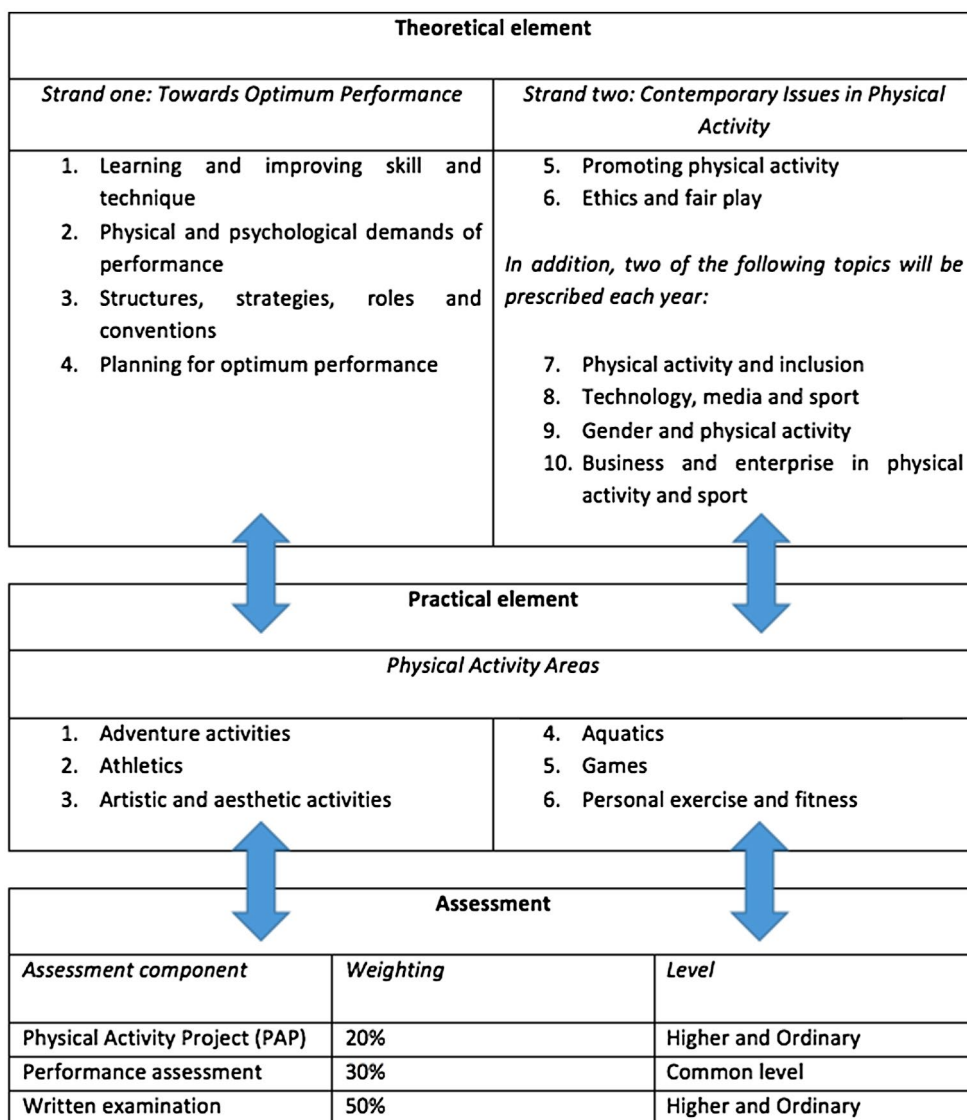


Figure 1. LCPE outline (adapted from the specification [NCCA, 2017]) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Teachers as ‘policy actors’

LCPE, a learning outcomes-based curriculum, can be considered somewhat prescriptive (given the 128 learning outcomes) while also potentially providing the teacher with a level of freedom in how these learning outcomes can be enacted. The LCPE specification allows this freedom as it lists learning outcomes with minimal direction in how they should be taught, allowing the teacher to design their own learning experiences for the learning outcomes. Simmons and MacLean (2018) suggest there are added challenges for flexible curricula which are designed to give teachers more freedom. Recently, Herold (2020, p. 2) argued that in order to reap the benefits of such flexible curricula, there is a reliance on ‘proactive teachers, whose agency is essential if the intended outcomes are to be met successfully’. This raises questions regarding the concept of agency and who, what and how teachers engage with this concept. Herold’s (2020) study, which explored teachers’ enactment of the new National Curriculum for Physical Education in England, found that while the curriculum provided teachers with curriculum freedom, the minimalist outline and brevity of the document (and the lack of specific detail on pedagogy and assessment) inhibited their pedagogical possibilities and opportunities for enactment. As this process can be conceptualised as ‘policy slippage’ (Penney & Evans, 2005), it is important to acknowledge the policy enactment context (Ball *et al.*, 2011) as others have previously explored (Wilkinson *et al.*, 2020; Wilkinson & Penney 2020). Braun and colleagues (2011, p. 585) conceptualise this context and outline four interrelated dimensions (acknowledging context is not limited to these four dimensions): ‘*situated* contexts (such as locale, school histories, intakes and settings); *professional* contexts (such as values, teacher commitments and experiences and “policy management” in schools); *material* contexts (e.g. staffing, budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure); [and] *external* contexts (e.g. degree and quality of local authority support, pressures and expectations from broader policy context)’. Wilkinson and colleagues’ (2020) research highlight the influence of this conceptualisation on policy enactment and emphasise the complex inter-relationships which shape setting policy in school subjects. Teachers are located in this multilayered policy enactment context.

In this context, we can theoretically view teachers as ‘policy actors’ (Ball *et al.*, 2011) who operate ‘alongside and in relationships with others ... to variously influence the policy and pedagogical directions that are pursued, and can be pursued, in any given context’ (Brown & Penney, 2018, p. 10). By conceptualising the teachers as policy actors (Ball *et al.*, 2011) and locating them in an interdependent web of relationships with others, we can gain a deeper exploration of their pedagogical actions in their respective individual school contexts (Brown & Penney, 2018). Teachers as policy actors have the responsibility to decipher and convert these learning outcomes (and the curriculum) into teachable learning experiences for their students (Wallace & Priestley, 2017). Within this translating process (from learning outcomes to learning experiences), the teachers ‘have quite a degree of autonomy in how they choose to enact curricular policies’ (O’Sullivan *et al.*, 2020, p. 207). With the policy enactment context (Braun *et al.*, 2011) and conceptualising teachers as policy actors (Ball *et al.*, 2011) in mind and to explore the translating process further, we move onto discuss the concept of agency.

Agency

While the concept of agency can be considered as ‘an inexact and poorly conceptualised construct in much of the literature’ (Priestley *et al.*, 2016, p. 136), we draw on Biesta and Tedder’s (2007, p. 137) conceptualisation of agency, which interestingly has similarities (and differences) with Braun and colleagues’ (2011) conceptualisation of the policy enactment context:

[T]his concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment [so that] the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations.

Priestley *et al.* (2016) commented how their perspective on agency differs from the sociological concept of agency. The authors believe agency to be something people achieve, rather than an independent variable in social action. While we agree with Biesta and Tedder’s (2007) conception that achievement of agency is a result of the combination and interaction of the teacher’s actions, resources, and contextual and structural factors, we argue that the sociological concept of agency has a part to play in this complex interplay when viewed from a figurational sociology lens. This is with particular reference to the notion of ‘habits’ (Camic, 1986) in the enactment of ‘individual efforts’ and how habits, alongside other factors, can assist (or not) in achieving agency. This aligns with Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) conceptualisation and theorisation of agency.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) discussed their theory of agency in three entities and highlight that the complex interdependent relationships between these entities ‘varies within different structural contexts of action’ (p. 963). The three entities are the iterational, the projective and the practical-evaluative dimensions. Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 971) commented how the iterational dimension of agency is ‘the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions and institutions over time’. This conception highlights how agency is a product of construction of past experiences, arguably underpinned by the actor’s biography and habits (Camic, 1986). The projective dimension of agency expresses ‘the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears and desires for the future’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971). This highlights how there is a level of motivation driving agency to engender change for the future (Priestley *et al.*, 2016). While agency is underpinned with the past and concerned with the future, agency is achieved and enacted in the present (Priestley *et al.*, 2016), in the practical-evaluative dimension which expresses ‘the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas and ambiguities of presently evolving situations’ (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971).

While all three entities and the operating interplay between each, play a role in actions, one entity may have a larger contributing influence dependent on the context

of action and the factors within such context. As such, the achievement of agency should be viewed as a ‘configuration of influences of the past [the iterational], orientations towards the future [the projective] and engagement with the present [the practical-evaluative]’ (Priestley *et al.*, 2016, p. 137).

Teacher agency

Priestley and colleagues (2013) identified a number of aspects of teacher agency to Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) theory of agency (Figure 2). Under the iterational dimension, the authors have listed life histories and professional histories which highlights teacher education and teacher experiences. For the projective dimension, the authors allude to the aspirations of the teacher’s work, both short- and long-term. For example, the development of students, responsibility for the student learning process or subject identity and status. These aspirations are largely connected to past experiences. For the practical-evaluative dimension, the authors listed three aspects: cultural aspects (relating to ideas, values, beliefs, discourses and languages); structural aspects (relating to relationships, roles, power and trust); and material aspects (relating to resources and the physical environment in which teachers teach).

Figurational sociology

While working with Priestley and colleague’s (2013) model of teacher agency, figurational sociology offers another way of viewing the achievement of agency. Returning to Priestley and colleague’s (2016) perspective on the ‘structure-agency’ debate (i.e. agency being something people achieve rather than an independent variable or factor in social action), we challenge this suggestion with reference to figurational sociology. Figurational sociology derives from the work of sociologist Norbert Elias who viewed the structure-agency debate as a false dichotomy and sought to go beyond this dichotomy (van Krieken, 1998). Elias argues that these should not be seen as

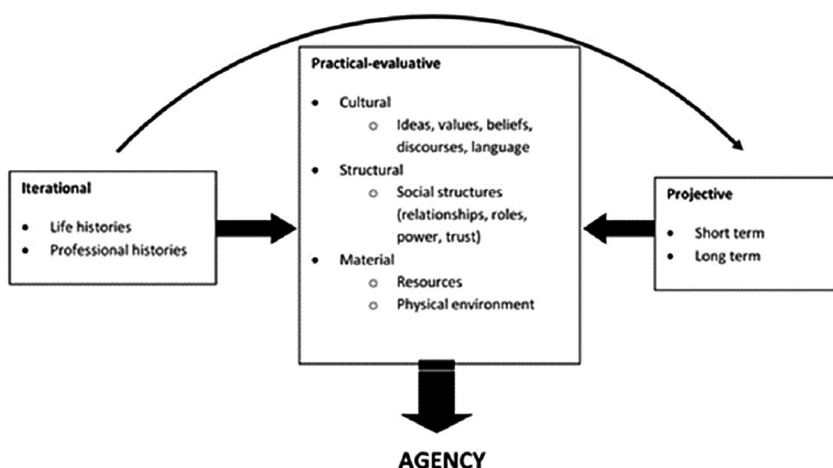


Figure 2. Understanding teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2013; adapted from Emirbayer & Mische, 1998)

separate entities but rather in an interdependent relationship. With reference to the concept of ‘action’, Elias comments ‘Why put “actions” in the centre of a theory of society ... and not the people who act? If anything, societies are networks of human beings in the round, not a medley of disembodied actions’ (van Krieken, 1998, p. 45). This, therefore, contests the notion of agency being an ‘independent’ variable in social action. In an attempt to overcome this dichotomy, Elias (1978, p. 72) argued that:

the figurations of interdependent human beings cannot be explained if one studies human beings singly. In many cases the opposite procedure is advisable—one can understand many aspects of the behaviour or actions of individual people only if one sets out from the study of the pattern of their interdependence, the structure of their societies, in short from the figurations they form with each other.

Figuration is a concept central to figurational sociology which refers to a web or network of interdependent people (Elias, 1978). Elias (1978, p. 271) argued that human knowledge develops over time within their figuration and people should only be understood within their figuration as ‘people are more-or-less dependent on each other first by nature and then through social learning, through education, socialization and socially generated reciprocal needs, they exist, one might say, only in pluralities, only in figurations’. It is important to note a figuration consists of interdependent relationships and social processes, past and present, recognised and unrecognised (Green, 2002). Thus, for the purpose of this research, we located the teacher in his figuration to understand how the interweaving social actions which operate in a figuration through the ties of interdependent relationships influence his achievement (or not) of agency. Through these figurations, people construct and develop personality structure or what Elias terms ‘habitus’ (Elias, 1978). Habitus captures aspects of one’s personality that are so deeply ‘habituated’ that it operates as second nature which, therefore, influences the human action (Mennell & Goudsblom, 1998). As such, this (alongside other elements) sheds light on how people act in certain ways within a figuration (Law & Bloyce, 2019). While Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) theory of agency acknowledges how agency is informed by the past (iterational dimension), habitus may better explain to what extent agency is being informed and in what manner.

We now move onto aligning these figurational concepts with the three elements from Priestley and colleague’s (2013) teacher agency model to offer another way of viewing the achievement of agency. The iterational element can be further conceptualised as habitus which encapsulates life histories and professional histories and also the development of internalised constraints relating to behaviour (Law & Bloyce, 2019). For the projective dimension, a figurational sociology lens highlights how a person’s actions (past, present and planned) are inevitably connected with the past and are an outcome of interdependent relationships and interrelated social processes engrossed in that person’s figuration which is in a constant state of flux (Elias, 1994). With regards to the practical evaluative dimension, a figurational sociology lens takes a more processual outlook on this dimension. While Priestley *et al.* (2013) have identified three aspects to this dimension (cultural, structural and material), it can be argued that this is all encompassed in the

relational complexity of a teacher's figuration. Rather than viewing a figuration as a (social) structure (one of Priestley and colleague's (2013) aspects), a teacher's figuration encapsulates a network of interdependent relationships between mutually orientated people (e.g. other teachers, students, parents, professional development providers, Department of Education and Skills, NCCA) and social processes, both past and present (e.g. educational and political), which have formed and influenced Priestley and colleague's (2013) cultural aspect. Power, identified in Priestley and colleague's (2013) model of teacher agency, is a core component of a figuration. In other words, power can be conceptualised as 'a structural characteristic ... of all human relationships' (Elias, 1978, p. 74). As power-ratios in a figuration are seen as unbalanced (Maher, 2010), relationships within the teacher's figuration can be enabling or constraining (Keay, 2009) in terms of achieving agency depending on the location of power.

To revisit the research aim, this paper explores the extent to which teacher agency plays a role in one teacher's enactment of LCPE in a period of curriculum change and reform in Irish post-primary schools. By doing so, we aim to understand the teacher's figuration which influences his ability to achieve agency in an encouraging and discouraging manner, with a particular focus on the role of relationships within that achievement (or not) of agency.

Methods

Participant and data gathering

A case study design (Bryman, 2012) was adopted to allow for deeper exploration into the concept and enactment of teacher agency. One teacher (Brendan was a pseudonym given) was purposively sampled (Bryman, 2012) due to his inclusion in a professional development cluster which the Professional Development Service for Teachers organised that was geographically convenient to the researcher team. Brendan studied a physical education (alongside a second subject) as his undergraduate degree. While a detailed biographical positioning of Brendan would add to an understanding of his decision-making process (and therein, his process of achieving agency), given the small number of schools enacting LCPE (64) and that sensitive data may be traceable, limited information is given on Brendan to protect his identity. This teacher was interviewed regularly during his 1st year of teaching LCPE. The teacher was either interviewed face-to-face (at the teacher's school or at the authors' university) or by phone weekly (when possible) for the post-primary schooling weeks. This resulted in 19 semi-structured interviews that encouraged reflection on the week's teaching of LCPE and explored how the curriculum was taught (pedagogy), how it was assessed (formal/informal) and the extent to which student learning was achieved. For the purposes of this study, we focus on the pedagogical and assessment aspects. While it is usual for case studies to employ multiple methods, semi-structured interviews were the only source of data collection for this study and as such, this can be considered a limitation of the study.

Data analysis

All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis was conducted in a combined inductive and deductive manner (Charmaz, 2014). That is, the concept of teacher agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley *et al.*, 2016) and concepts of figurational sociology (Elias, 1978) were used as a sensitising concept (deductive) but was not drawn on until the latter end of the coding process (inductive) (Charmaz, 2014). The coding process consists of three phase—initial, focused and theoretical coding. While presented as three phases, these are not separate entities and are revisited throughout the coding process. The first phase—initial coding—involves coding the data line-by-line and incident-by-incident in a descriptive manner using the participant's words to minimise author interpretation (Charmaz, 2014; Mordal-Moen & Green, 2014). Given the processual nature of figurational sociology and in achieving agency, data analysis is very much focused on seeking processes and relationships in the data. As such, while we used a traditional coding process, we also labelled data which represented processes. The fear was that by labelling data with single word codes, we were reducing the data to words and not processes. The second phase of coding (focused coding) involved selecting the most worthwhile and meaningful initial codes and constructing categories (and sub-categories) through a constant comparison approach (Weed, 2009). Under each constructed category and sub-category, teaching episodes from the data were aligned and listed. Teaching episodes represented teaching moments, teaching decisions and/or teaching experiences which the teacher described. Due to the nature of the interview schedule (and the reflective nature of the interviews), Brendan described numerous weekly teaching moments. The three reported teaching episodes represent a range of teaching episodes; a teaching decision over 1 year, a teaching episode in a theoretical setting and a teaching episode in a practical setting. In the final phase of coding, the sensitising concept was drawn on to make connections between the categories and teacher agency. Other theoretical and conceptual concepts were also drawn on to further understand some categories and sub-categories. In this case, figurational sociology and in particular, the concept of a figuration, was used to make sense of the context (and the relationships and social processes within that context) in which the teacher resided and how his figuration influenced his achievement of teacher agency.

Findings and discussion

This paper set out to explore the extent to which teacher agency plays a role in one teacher's enactment of LCPE in a period of curriculum change and reform in Irish post-primary schools. In this section, we aim to understand how Brendan acts in a certain way within his role or, in other words, how he acts in certain ways within his figuration. In Brendan's figuration, there are numerous interdependent relationships (both face-to-face and non-face-to-face) which influence his teaching including students, their parents, other teachers in the school, other teachers enacting LCPE, professional development providers, university teacher education researchers, the NCCA and so on. We provide three examples of Brendan's teaching and talk through these with regards to the influence of these diverse and complex network of

relationships in the process of achieving agency. These episodes include examining specific teaching decisions over a year, Brendan's teaching in a classroom and on a sports pitch.

Episode 1: The consequences of making a decision intended to improve student engagement and teacher confidence

After the first term (September–December), based on student reaction and feedback and given two students had dropped LCPE as a subject at this point, Brendan decided to change his plans from teaching Strand 1 (focus on four topics (Topics 1–4) related to biophysical knowledge) to Strand 2 (focus on four topics (Topics 5–8) related to socio-cultural knowledge):

I felt the last term was very, very, heavy, the topics we had done were very heavy; they were very slow, the kids [students] were finding it really difficult, I felt we would start with a fresh, positive start just to make things a bit easier for them and things that were a bit easier [to understand]. So, we started with [Strand 2], Topic 5...

Another reason why I changed my plan [was that] I said, 'God, I don't want them to all think this is impossible' and have more of a drop-off [from the subject]. (Interview four)

Brendan became more comfortable teaching Topic 5 (Promoting physical activity) as he was more familiar with the content knowledge. Reflecting on teaching topics from Strand 1, Brendan comments:

[The topics from Strand 1 are] probably the harder things in the course and the ones I was most nervous about; I was never 100% comfortable. I'd be, the night before, looking through it and making myself familiar, because ... [it's been] 16 years since I was in college ... I was 100% familiar and confident [in Topic 5] so I suppose I felt more confident in myself in the class. (Interview four)

Brendan emphasised the benefits his decision of teaching Topic 5 (Promoting physical activity) had on the atmosphere of the class, his use of different pedagogical approaches, student engagement and student learning by 'giving them a bit more autonomy in the learning, just giving them more responsibility'. Despite these benefits, Brendan regretted his decision as the year progressed due to the ongoing pressure to ensure all the content from Strand 1 had been covered:

If I were teaching this again next year, I wouldn't touch Strand 2 [until 6th year because] ... there is an awful lot of content in Strand 1 and you need all that for the PAP [Physical Activity Project; which is to be completed and submitted at the start of the 2nd year of undertaking LCPE]. (Interview 17)

This example of such a teaching decision highlights the (unintended) consequences of the decision over a year long period and the fluctuating process of achieving agency. Based on students' somewhat negative reaction to the difficulty of grasping and understanding of Strand 1 content and the drop-out of two students from LCPE (students being 'strong' interdependent relationship within his figuration), Brendan made an agentic decision in the present (the practical-evaluative element) to move from teaching Strand 1 to Strand 2. His hope was that students would be more immediately comfortable with the content, that is, a short-term goal with the students

in mind (the projective dimension). This decision was also based from Brendan's teaching biography (the iterational dimension) and his level of familiarity with the content knowledge. We can see how this agentic decision was constructed by an interplay of all three dimensions of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley *et al.*, 2016). Months after this decision, Brendan commented on numerous occasions on the benefits of his decision. However, as the year progressed and formal assessment deadlines approached, Brendan regretted his decision as the professional development providers (another interdependent relationship) informed all the LCPE teachers that the collective content of Strand 1 was required to be completed before the submission of the first formal assessment, the PAP. In this case and similar to what Simmons and MacLean (2018) suggest, what had appeared to Brendan to be a flexible curriculum constrained his agency.

From a figurational lens, we can see the interdependent relationships in this teaching episode which influenced Brendan's agentic decision. While the students in this example are a strong relationship in his figuration, Brendan's own teaching biography (or an aspect of his habitus), which is constructed through his figuration (van Krieken, 1998), also played a role in this decision given his familiarity with the content knowledge from Strand 2 in comparison to Strand 1. Another group of people who had an influence in his decision to revert back to teaching Strand 1 were the professional development providers (PDST) who informed teachers of what content was required to be covered for specific deadlines (PAP). Therefore, this decision was not solely Brendan's but a combination of influences through interdependent ties within his figuration (Green, 2002). This decision was further complicated by the fact that the PDST did not know the deadline for the PAP as it was not released by the NCCA until after the teaching of the LCPE curriculum began. Therefore, for Brendan, there was at some point a legitimate notion of flexibility in what he could teach. This highlights the role of non-face-to-face relationships in Brendan's figuration.

While the relationships mentioned to this point were all face-to-face relationships, an influential non-face-to-face relationship which directed this teaching situation was the NCCA. Scanlon *et al.*'s (2019) study highlights how, due to social and political processes, the LCPE specification and assessment guidelines were not published by the NCCA at the same time. As a result, the unintended consequences (Scanlon *et al.*, 2019) of this process influenced the enactment of the subject and led to further unintended consequences. The unintended consequence in Brendan's case and this teaching episode, is that he was left under pressure to cover the remainder of Strand 1 for the PAP after making an agentic decision (informed by interdependent relationships) to primarily benefit his students and increase his own confidence in the delivery of content. Although at the time of that decision it seemed that Brendan had the autonomy to make such a decision, the face-to-face and non-face-to-face (past and present) interdependent relationships in Brendan's figuration influenced and constrained his desired teaching practice and his achievement of agency.

Episode 2: Enacting pedagogical decisions to accommodate students' interest

The second episode occurred in a classroom when Brendan was teaching a specific learning outcome from Topic Five (Promoting physical activity) (Strand 2):

I put them in pairs (...) I just felt they had lost a bit of motivation. They weren't as [engaged] (...) probably because the instructional model was the same as what I had done Tuesday and last week (...) they were kind of going, 'This again?' So, I ended up intervening and giving them information, because I felt (...) they were getting a bit tired. Lazy. And some of them weren't really pulling their weight when they had to put together [the information]. So, what I was going to do was fix the approach, so they'd come up with information and then, they'd go to different tables and share it. But (...) some of the (...) lads were talking about a match that was on (...) they kind of lost engagement. That's the first time I felt that (...) [So] we started doing the jigsaw puzzle [student-centred pedagogy where students work in groups and share their work with their peers, building in their knowledge]. But I just felt they were totally off task (...) I tried to get them on task (...) then we ended up having a group discussion and debate. And then, they were really engaged in that, so I kind of changed my plan, really ... [but then] it ended up that it was me talking to them most of the time, to get information out of them and trying to engage them and get them to brainstorm in their copies [their work books]. (Interview five)

In this episode, Brendan acted reflexively to the students' reaction to his pedagogical approach and task. Brendan attempted to teach through student centred approaches which his students did not actively engage in and, as such, he had to adapt his approach three times in the space of one class to engage students. His reactions and further pedagogical actions are informed by past teaching experiences (iterational dimension) to 'get them on task' and to enhance student learning (projective dimension). While informed by both dimensions, Brendan's process of achieving agency is located in the present, the practical-evaluative dimension (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Brendan had the ability to make pedagogical decisions on the spot, expressing the process of achieving teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2013). Although, this was not how he would have ideally taught the class. By viewing this episode through a figurational lens, we can gain an alternative understanding of this process.

We can only understand Brendan's actions once viewed in relation to his location in his figuration (van Krieken, 1998; Green, 2002). In the above episode, a strong relationship (among numerous interlinked relationships) existed between Brendan and his students in that he had direct interaction with them in the classroom. By conceptualising power as a 'structural characteristic' (Elias, 1978) of relationships which is constantly in flux (Maher, 2010), we can understand how the location of power in the above teaching episode enabled or constrained (Keay, 2009) the achievement of agency. Given Brendan's role as a teacher, it may be assumed that he possessed all the power in the classroom but the power-ratios in the classroom allows people or groups of people, to occupy powerful positions. This is evident given that once Brendan exercised his position of power by telling the students what to do, the location of power moved to the students as they did not want to engage in his instructions. This unbalanced and constantly moving power-ratio was repeated throughout the teaching episode and constrained Brendan's process of achieving agency. The power-struggles evident here resulted in Brendan reverting from a student-centred approach to a more traditional, teacher-led approach, a teaching approach he did not plan for (and a possible reflection of his habitus). By viewing this situation through a figurational lens, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of achieving agency and the manner in which it constantly fluctuates (in a similar manner to power) throughout the process of teaching. While we focus on one relationship here, this is not to say that other relationships and other figurations, did not influence this

situation. For example, each student is part of their own figuration in which they have relationships with other teachers of other subjects at Leaving Certificate level. These students, who are more familiar with teacher-led pedagogies, rote learning and the use of a textbook in Leaving Certificate examinations, reacted somewhat suspicious to Brendan's student centred teaching approaches which were informed by his relationships with other LCPE teachers and the PDST. This provides us with some evidence of the complexity of a figuration and, therefore, the complex process of achieving agency. This episode could also be viewed from the student perspective and how Brendan's actions can potentially constrain or enable students' achievement of agency (Manyukhina & Wyse, 2019).

Episode 3: The reality of dealing with context and resources for effective teaching and learning

The third teaching episode is where Brendan is teaching content from Strand 1, Topic Three (structures, strategies, roles and conventions) on a sports pitch:

Now that we are on a pitch [to teach the Gaelic football skills], it is a bit of a challenge (...) I knew that they [students] would have no Wi-Fi so it involved forward planning. I had emailed them the night before because I wanted them to watch a link from a GAA match of how someone would fail at side-steps (...) they were all in twos looking at their phones looking at the video so we had to improvise because with the ipads, there's no internet outside (...) I had pages put on google classroom with the teaching points (...) in their groups of four, one person was a coach and I gave them teaching points of the side-step and the solo, and they rotated roles and explained the teaching points, then they would set a drill, a basic drill and a more advanced drill, and they would give feedback to their players (...) what I found useful was I used the people with the most prior knowledge as coaches (...) [their tasks] are kind of like a mini PAPs [Physical Activity Project], they are demonstrating their skills in school on the video, then they are improving at the weekend [at home for their homework and re- recording themselves], and they are saying 'How am I improving?' so it is reflective practice as well. (Interview 13)

In this episode, we can see how the achievement of agency depends on contextual factors and resources available, *and* the ability or capacity of the teacher to 'critically shape their responses to problematic situations' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11). This aligns with Biesta and Tedder's (2007, p. 137) conception of the achievement of agency being an 'interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors'. It is within these transactions where the process of achieving agency occurs; an ecological approach to teacher agency (Priestley *et al.*, 2016). In Brendan's teaching episode, he was teaching on a sports pitch outside with no internet connection and as such had to 'forward plan'. Brendan operated his agentic decisions in transaction with the context in which he resided (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In doing so, Brendan drew on aspects of a flipped classroom approach and the use of digital technologies.

Examining this teaching episode through a figurational lens, we can identify a number of influencing interdependent (past and present, face-to-face and non-face-to-face) relationships in Brendan's figuration. While the students in this teaching episode are a strong relationship, a deeper analysis can identify two sets of interdependent relationships which influenced Brendan's teaching and, therefore, in the

process of achieving agency. Brendan's past and present relationships in his figuration influenced the enactment of his pedagogies in the above episode. One past interdependent relationship is with teacher educators during his physical education teacher education (PETE) programme. Brendan draws on aspects of Sport Education in the above teaching episode, a curriculum and instructional model (Lund & Tannehill, 2015) which marries theoretical and practical components together. He uses aspects of this model with specific reference to the use of roles and peer teaching (Wallhead & O'Sullivan, 2007). This is a curriculum and instructional model which is advocated within PETE (Kinchin *et al.*, 2005; Deenihan & MacPhail, 2017). Another influential present relationship in Brendan's enactment of the above pedagogies is with the PDST. The PDST also use aspects of curriculum and instructional models in their teaching during professional development for LCPE. The use of digital technology for teaching and learning was also an important element of professional development for LCPE and throughout the LCPE specification (NCCA, 2017). These are examples of how Brendan's past and present relationships with teacher educators have influenced his teaching biography/ habitus. We also acknowledge that subject historical subject practices influence, enable and constrain the process of achieving agency but with reference to LCPE, this is the first time physical education has been examinable in Ireland and these are the first cohort of teachers enacting this curriculum and, therefore, historical practices, at this moment, have little affect their process of achieving agency.

A figurational viewpoint of teacher agency

In working through these teaching episodes, we have suggested viewing teacher agency through a figurational sociology lens. We now offer a figurational viewpoint of teacher agency through the constructed Figure 3. We have mapped the concepts of figurational sociology onto Priestley and colleague's (2016) model of teacher agency to view their model through a different lens to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity in how a teacher achieves agency and what (and who) influences this process. As seen in Figure 3, habitus (iterational dimension) is located on the left and the curly bracket emphasises how people construct and develop habitus through their figuration. (Un)planned actions (projective dimension) is located on the right and the curly bracket represents how these are an outcome of person's figuration. The practical evaluative dimension is all captured in a figuration. Figure 3 represents a web of interconnected relationships, that is, each hexagon represents a group of interdependent people (which could be further broken down into further hexagons). The teacher has an interdependent relationship with all these groups but some relationships are stronger than others (represented by the shade of the multidirectional arrows); some are face-to-face (beside the teacher, e.g. students) and non-face-to-face (further away from the teacher, e.g. NCCA). As you can see from Figure 3, there are no boundaries to the figuration and it is in a constant state of flux shaping the teacher's ideas, values, beliefs and discourses.

In analysing the three teaching episodes, we have seen the process (and fluctuation) of achieving agency. The achievement of agency should not be conceptualised as a product (achieved) but rather, it should be viewed as something that is processual.

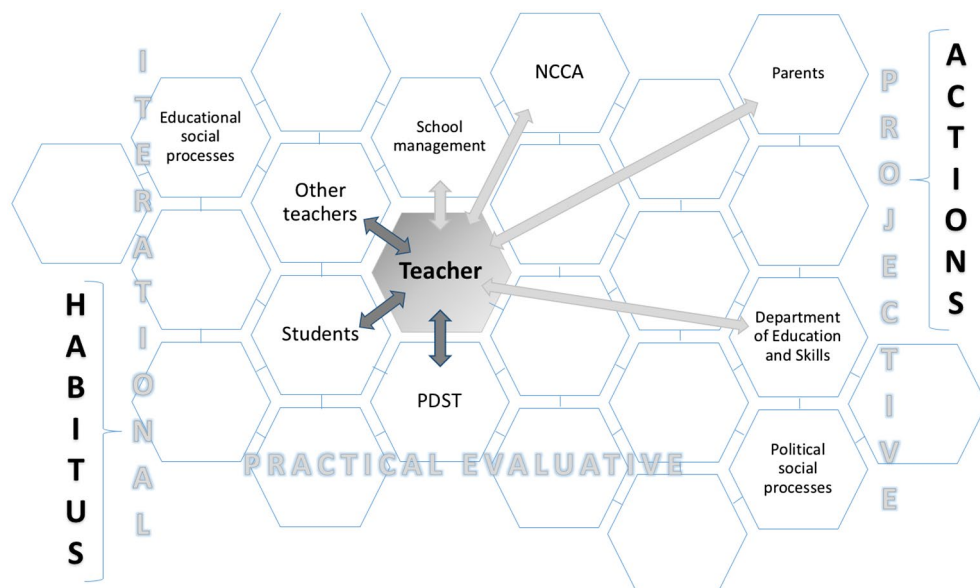


Figure 3. A figurational viewpoint of teacher agency [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

For example, in teaching episode 1, Brendan's decision to teach different content in the curriculum could be viewed by some as an achievement of agency given the benefits this decision had on Brendan's confidence and student learning. Although, as the content became more challenging, assessment deadlines approached and the reality of the number of learning outcomes that needed to be covered dawned, Brendan reverted to a more teacher-led, traditional style of teaching and not how he would have ideally wanted to teach the curriculum. Therefore, constraining his achievement of agency. This leads us to question the extent to which achievement of agency is nominal in an examination subject context. Brendan always had a specific outcome to teach to (i.e. the LCPE formal assessments) which dictated what he had to teach, when he had to teach and, to some extent, how he had to teach. The accountability of the Leaving Certificate and the pressure that puts on the teacher in terms of completing the course, shapes and constrains the achievement of agency, as Datnow (2012) points out. In Brendan's case, the process of achieving agency resides in his everyday practices, in his classes on a day-to-day basis. This continues to question what the achievement of agency looks like?

In the episodes outlined, Brendan attempted to achieve agency and the interdependent (past and present, face-to-face and non-face-to-face) relationships enabled, constrained or changed this process. While it is difficult to pinpoint if Brendan achieved agency, we can see where and how he operated within the 'achieving' of agency. Informed by other's (Quennerstedt, 2019) work on verbing nouns, we suggest a focus needs to be redirected from the 'achievement' of agency to the 'achieving' of agency. Once we focus on the achieving (the process) of agency, we then can gain a deeper understanding of the extent to which the teacher (as one person) has on

this process. The teacher is only one element in a very complex teaching situation and, as equally complex, figuration (please see Figure 3). In saying this, this does not imply that there is a desirable standard of 'teacher agency' that can be achieved but rather, that a teacher operates within the process of (and the fluctuation of) achieving agency. There is no product of 'achievement' but a process of 'achieving' agency.

Conclusion and considerations in how best to support teachers in their process of achieving agency

We agree with Priestley and colleagues' (2016) plea to take the importance of context into account when considering policy enactment (Braun *et al.*, 2011), agency and agentic capacity and the importance of highlighting the quality of relationships (Priestley *et al.*, 2013) in this process. We argue that it is impossible to link the achievement of agency with one element (including the teacher). It is the combination of interdependent relationships (past and present, recognised and unrecognised) in a teacher's figuration, the overarching social processes and the contextual and structural factors surrounding and within a figuration. It is in this interaction that teachers construct agentic decisions and these decisions represent 'something of a compromise' (Green, 2002) or a negotiation between relationships and elements. As Elias (1978, p. 131) comments, 'there is no one who is not and has never been interwoven into a network of people'. We subsequently propose that a teacher's process of achieving agency is informed, enabled and constrained by their contextual and structural factors and, as we explicitly argue, their network of interdependent relationships or their figuration. We raise a number of considerations (and possibilities) below which can potentially enable practices and conversations in how best to support teachers in their process of achieving agency.

First, we encourage the use of communities of learners as a form of (informal and formal) professional development. Through this research we have acknowledged a number of strong interdependent relationships in a teacher's figuration; one being other teachers teaching the same subject. We, as a physical education community, need to capitalise on these influential relationships. These interdependent, influential relationships have the potential to work towards a collaborative partnership between teachers with a common goal. Teachers working together in communities of learners (Patton *et al.*, 2015) can allow this collaborative discourse to engage in shared ideas on how to work towards achieving agency and support one another in the process. As power is prominent feature of all relationships and, therefore, figurations (as seen in teaching episode 2), collaborative partnerships in these communities can work towards and support in, addressing issues related to power. We are also suggesting that these communities of learners should not only be exclusively for teachers but for multiple stakeholders (MacPhail, 2020). Expanding these communities of learners to bring together teacher educators (which encompasses all individuals who educate teachers) and teachers to work on shared goals and drawing on the principle of complementary expertise (Locke, 2017) would be a welcomed addition to capitalising on these influential relationships.

Second, we have questioned if teacher agency is nominal in the context of an examination subject, whereby the teacher has to work towards a structured, accountable

end goal. While we argue this to be true, teachers can continue to make agentic decisions regarding their everyday pedagogical practice informed and influenced by multiple interdependent relationships within their figuration. With specific reference to examination physical education, dominant discourses (e.g. theoretical over practical knowledge and biophysical over socio-cultural knowledge) and pre-determined ways of knowing (e.g. dualistic thinking of the knowledge bases of theory and practice), alongside the accountability context, has made alternative curriculum, pedagogical and assessment approaches 'hard to imagine' (Brown & Penney, 2018). Brown and Penney (2018) provided numerous examples of how to move beyond this. As an example, the authors suggest we need to accept different ways of knowing beyond dichotomous thinking and including (alongside biophysical and socio-cultural dimensions) a phenomenologically grounded dimension drawing on embodied learning (Tinning, 2010). In their book, Brown and Penney (2018) list practical examples which push the boundaries of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the examination physical education context by focusing on the 'possibilities agenda' and, therefore, enable teachers to have more control over how they would like to operate in an accountable context. That is, engaging in the process of achieving agency.

Third, we suggest the need to move away from discourse that positions a huge amount of belief on the agency of a teacher. We have conveyed throughout this paper the minimal role a teacher appears to have in the process of achieving agency. We also strongly advocate for the physical education community (teachers, students, teacher educators, PDST and policy makers) to work together to enable collaborative thinking, discussion and action. As MacPhail (2020, p. 16) states in considering how best to redesign physical education provision, 'we need to stop working in isolation and work with, and learn from, each other'. MacPhail and Lawson (2020) advocated for and supported, such a collaborative approach by inviting different stakeholders in the physical education community to co-author chapters on topics that effected numerous physical education stakeholders. Another example would be Alfrey and O'Connor's (2020, p. 290, emphasis added) recent study which highlighted how '[the authors and four teachers] agreed to work *together* to rethink the provision of H/PE in their school'. Such collaborative approaches could potentially enable teachers to engage in and construct, shared ideas on (i) how to most effectively work towards achieving agency, (ii) educate policy-makers on the realities (not ideals) of the role teachers have in achieving agency and the importance of the context in which they reside, (iii) inform teacher education on how best to prepare pre-service teachers for this role and (iv) direct PDST on how best to meet the learning needs of teachers.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest with this paper.

Ethical approval

Ethics were approved from the authors' institute (ethics approval number: 2018_02_28EHSREC). Participants signed consent forms in line with ethical procedures.

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