Teacher empowerment, teacher agency

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Modern curricula, such as Curriculum for Excellence, requires teachers to be active curriculum makers. Recent discussions about empowering schools and teachers in Scotland has reinforced these expectations on teachers, and empowerment as a concept is often linked with teacher agency. Nevertheless, the empowerment agenda has been critiqued as a handing over of responsibility to schools in a way that does not necessarily enhance the professional agency of practitioners. Teacher agency is often poorly understood and weakly conceptualised. Its use begs various questions, not least ‘What is teacher agency?’ and ‘How can it be achieved?’.

In this presentation, I explore these issues. I start with an overview of an ecological understanding of teacher agency as something that is achieved, rather than something innate to individuals. I then explore how teacher agency (in relation to curriculum making) can be achieved, focusing on three dimensions: 1] individual, including conceptual development about the curriculum; 2] cultural, for example, collective beliefs about the role of schools; and structural, for instance relational resources afforded by networks in schools.

Mark Priestley is Professor of Education at the University of Stirling, and the director of the Stirling Network for Curriculum Studies. His research interests lie in the school curriculum – theory, policy and practice. He is a Lead Editor of the Curriculum Journal and Co-Convener of the EERA network 3, Curriculum. His current research includes the Nuffield-funded Choice, attainment and positive destinations: exploring the impact of curriculum policy change on young people (with Marina Shapira). His publications include Teacher Agency: An Ecological Approach (with Gert Biesta and Sarah Robinson).