

Understanding Professional Agency for Hong Kong Kindergarten Teachers: A Mixed Methods Study

Developing kindergarten teachers' capacity to exercise agency in professional practices is pivotal in offering quality education and care in early childhood. Current scholarship has focused on a concept of professional agency that is closely linked to an individual's knowledge, identity, and belief about self-efficacy. A socio-cultural perspective has extended the theory by taking contextual influences into account. Contextual factors, such as perceived external demands for accountability, principal leadership, and collaboration among teachers, play significantly influence teachers' agency for professional practice. Existing conceptual studies have outlined the relative contributions made by those contextual factors to teachers' professional agency. However, the literature lacks a clear analysis of the effects of these factors and how they interact with each other. Moreover, few studies have investigated how kindergarten teachers perceive those influencing factors, whether as enablers or barriers in the development of their agentic professional practice. As such, it is important to engage in investigations that will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of kindergarten teachers' professional agency. The proposed study will address this gap through a mixed methods approach, striving to develop an analytical framework for exploring and explaining the underlying mechanisms that shape kindergarten teachers' professional agency. Data will be collected from teachers at Hong Kong kindergartens (which vary in size and mode of operation) based on the grade level taught by the teachers, their years of teaching experience, and the level of their educational qualification. The proposed study will use a sequential design consisting of a quantitative study that will gather data using questionnaires, followed by a qualitative study that will collect data using interviews and on-site observations. The integrated data will be further synthesised in a convergent study that will provide a fuller picture of kindergarten teachers' agency for professional practices in different kindergarten settings. The research design will be novel in its use of multiple data sources to investigate a key issue related to the work of kindergarten teachers. Theoretically, the findings of the proposed study will yield well-conceptualised and contextualised accounts of the driving forces of kindergarten teachers' professional agency, which will enhance scholarly discussion on the topic. The proposed study will have practical implications for the development of frontline kindergarten teachers' capacity for agentic professional practice in their work with young children. Furthermore, it will offer school leaders, teacher educators, and policymakers research and policy recommendations to strengthen capacity-building in teacher education and professional development training.