

A POSTHUMANIST RE-READING OF TEACHER AGENCY IN TIMES OF CURRICULUM REFORM

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ABSTRACT

Teacher agency in times of curriculum reform has often been researched and studied from a humanist perspective that focuses on human experiences and narratives. While this way of conducting research has contributed to a better understanding of curriculum design and implementation, it is nevertheless important to move away from a human-centred approach and to consider intra-actions between teachers and their material conditions as they inhabit multiple macro-policy and micro-institutional spaces across temporal dimensions. In this article, emphasis is laid on teacher agency as a hybrid collective between teachers and others (policy documents, formal and informal infrastructures, technology, textbooks). Teacher agency is consequently rethought as a fluid process of entangled and diffracted possibilities that is not predetermined, but as a result of intra-actions, it is one that is always in “becoming”.

Keywords: teacher agency, diffraction, entanglement, curriculum reform, intra-actions

INTRODUCTION

Descartes’s famous “cogito ergo sum” (Watson 2007), to some translated as “I think, therefore I am”, to others, “I believe, therefore I am”, captures the essence of humanism which has been celebrating the centralisation of human individuals as the centre of research and understanding of experiences. However, as part of evolving social, cultural and political landscapes, following poststructuralist critiques such as Foucault and Derrida who have been attempting to understand the deconstruction of this logocentric understanding, posthumanism is born as a new way of looking at our ecology. Barad (2007) conceptualises this complex ecology as one in which humans and their material conditions intra-act, and “intra-action” is a relationship that neither prioritises the human nor the non-human, but instead focuses on meaning-making process, a progressive becoming process that is entangled and always being reconfigured as a response to sociocultural changes. The de-centering of humans from research narratives that have been focusing on human experiences and representations is not one that can be easily achieved. The notion of preconceived identity, roles and agency of the individual is challenged as posthumanism prioritises intra-action over humanistic inter-action.

Some researchers who have been focusing on the experiences of teachers within a macro-

policy or micro-institutional landscape during curriculum implementation could question, why there is a need to renounce traditional ways of education research. Education research on teachers and curriculum studies, have been theorised from a humanistic lens such as, Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) representation of teacher experiences through narrative inquiry or Priestley, Biesta and Robinson's (2015) ecological model of teacher agency to understand teachers' experiences. Both of these research methodologies acknowledge the influence of ecology on the teacher and the need to position the teacher within a broader three-dimensional space that captures temporal and spatial forces at work. However, the teacher/human is always centralised to understand a particular phenomenon. How can we dissociate teachers from their material conditions, the spaces they negotiate, and their entangled positioning within temporal dimensions (of past, present and future)? Why do we marginalise objects or the non-humans, rather than foregrounding the possible influence of material conditions on teachers during a reform or curriculum implementation? I am not suggesting that the individual should now be marginalised and non-humans be foregrounded, because then the perspective will still be a binary one (of human vs. non-human). The purpose of adopting a posthumanist lens to re-read teacher agency in times of curriculum reform is not to renounce previous humanist approaches or studies that have contributed to curriculum making and implementation. Why should we aim for research purity when we are aiming for diffraction and entanglement, which is messy and causes disruption?

Humanism focuses on human agency, and it is believed that an individual who is exercising agency is "a voluntary actor making choices that are willed rather than determined." (Mazzei 2013, 733). But this "free will" or "free choice" can be challenged as actions and reactions cannot be dissociated from the material conditions or the socio-material world (Barad 2007). This posthumanist reading of teacher agency in times of curriculum reform forces me to question to what extent is teacher agency a manifestation of negotiations with human and non-human entities. Adopting a posthumanist lens does not translate into "killing the human", similar to when Barthes (1977) discussed the need to depart from an over-celebration of the author in order to come up with multiple interpretations when reading a text. Bennett (2016) opened his discussion on posthumanism with this question, "can we actually engage any more "deeply" with non-sentient objects, and in a way that detaches our investigations from human concerns and positionality?" (Bennett 2016, 58) Both humans and non-humans are equally important in reading curriculum reform through a posthumanist lens. The attempt here is not to create binaries of object versus subject or human versus matter (matter comprising human and non-human), but it is to transcend such binary conceptions by presenting a world in which

human and non-human fuse; one which departs from a human-centric analysis. The conceptualisation of teacher agency in times of curriculum reform should take into account the “intra-actions” and “cuts” (Barad 2007) that lead to the entanglement of teachers with their ecology. Besides the curriculum landscape is one which is constantly changing and adapting to sociocultural demands, and in the process, teachers intra-act with their changing surroundings rather than merely “interact” with colleagues and stakeholders.

When I conducted a study on teacher agency in times of curriculum reform in Mauritius (Appadoo-Ramsamy 2022), I wanted to represent the voices and experiences of teachers as they express and negotiate their agency in such a macro-policy tumultuous reform moment. But can we represent such entanglement and complexity of teachers demonstrating diffracted possibilities of agency, and their intra-action as a hybrid collective between humans and non-humans (students, colleagues, stakeholders, objects, and paraphernalia that will be henceforth termed as “others”) through specific modes of representation? Or is research on teacher agency in times of curriculum reform one that involves experimentation and should capture the process of becoming? To address these pertinent issues, in the first section of this article, I discuss the movement of humanism to posthumanism which is at the core of the need to revisit teacher agency as a hybrid enactment rather than an individual one. The influence of context is equally important to understand the material conditions that influence the hybrid agentic possibilities, and here I discuss the context of a small island developing state, Mauritius, as a site that comprises entangled temporal and spatial dimensions. Next, I discuss teacher agency, not as a phenomenon that is being studied, but one that is being re-read from a posthumanist lens; which leads the discussion to the hybrid collective agency of teachers and “others” in times of curriculum reform.

FROM HUMANISM TO POSTHUMANISM: A COMPLEX RESEARCH LANDSCAPE

The implementation of a new curriculum, or any moment of change such as the changes brought about in the educational sector by the COVID-19 pandemic, is rich with research possibilities in relation to teachers’ changing roles, perceptions of identity, job satisfaction, professionalisation and deprofessionalisation, standardisation procedures or even accountability concerns. In this atmosphere of change, a study on teacher agency was conducted in Mauritius, a small island developing state which has experienced multiple reforms since its independence in 1968. The reforms have often been associated with the promotion of economic growth and the provision of education to all with the aim of achieving global competitiveness (Crossley 2016; Jules and Ressler 2016; Mariaye 2016). Mauritius also suffers from what has

been termed “managed intimacy” where for fear of being judged and known in a small island, inhabitants “become experts at muting hostility deferring their own views and containing disagreement and avoid disputes in the interest of stability and compromise” (Lowenthal 1987) cited in Bray 1991, 21). Conducting research in such a space becomes not only problematic with regard to confidentiality and anonymity, but also forces me to question whether the focus should be on human narratives only. Can human/participants’ narratives be trusted in such an atmosphere of “managed intimacy” or should a posthumanist lens be adopted to have a broader picture of intra-actions and entanglements?

At first glance, the study has a humanist approach, adopting a narrative inquiry methodology with an interpretivist paradigm in order to make sense of teachers’ experiences as they negotiate their roles and agency in a changing macro-policy landscape. But that study disrupted my humanist perspective as I could not make sense of teachers’ agentic choices without an understanding of the “intra-action” between the teachers and their material environment. While I initially devised semi-structured interviews to conduct the research, I soon realise that those interviews were not enough to capture the intricacies emanating from that tumultuous space marked by the implementation of a new curriculum. To understand the intra-action, I came up with artefact activities such as the use of policy extracts and poems from the syllabus; I also conducted classroom observations with emphasis on the intra-action between the teachers and their classrooms (students, resources, teaching aids); I walked with them and engaged in informal conversations as they intra-act with different spaces such as the staffroom, the library, the playground, and the parking. The entangled spaces, and human and non-human intra-actions allowed me to read agency as one that is diffracted into multiple possibilities, instead of as one that is predetermined or fixed. However, instead of aiming for research purity, this article is showing how what initially started as a humanist qualitative methodology, finally gave shape to a posthumanist reading of agency as a product of messy intra-actions between teachers and their material conditions during the implementation of a new curriculum.

A POSTHUMANIST READING OF TEACHER AGENCY: DE-CENTRING CHARACTERS AND FOREGROUNDING MATERIALITIES

The past decade has seen rising interest in teacher agency as a phenomenon impacted by various forces (Priestley et al. 2015; Singh-Pillay and Samuel 2017; Tran 2018), with policy implementation as one of the major forces. Priestley et al.’s (2015) ecological model of teacher agency emphasises the role played by teachers’ experiences (past), their material conditions

(present) and their aspirations (future). This model thus highlights the influence of spatial and temporal dimensions on teacher agency, deconstructing previous beliefs that agency is a manifestation of one's inner capacity (Bandura 2006). However, most of these studies on teacher agency are human-centred with a focus on the role of teacher beliefs (focusing on the individual and the collective group of individuals) and teacher accountability or agency as active and passive (Bergh and Wahlström 2018; Fu and Clark 2017; Imants and Van der Wal 2020; Ryder et al. 2018; Tao and Gao 2017). Some studies have highlighted how infrastructure or context (such as geographical contexts) impacts agency (Erss 2018; Nguyen and Bui 2016; Oolbekkink-Marchand et al. 2017; Tran 2018), but these were still human-centric and posthumanism calls for acknowledgement of the influence of the “non-human” on human actions, reactions, beliefs, behaviour and even agentic possibilities.

According to Bonnett (2003, 707), humanism is “that broad perspective that assigns to human beings a special place in the greater scheme of things, setting their nature and interests at the centre of study and policy.” This humanist epistemological understanding echoes my initial focus which was on human experiences and to capture this humanist concern, I represented my data through an ethnodrama, but in this article, I am departing from a human-centric representation to give way to a posthumanist reading of teacher agency in an evolving curriculum landscape. Some of the questions that led me to this shifting paradigm are: Would the teachers have behaved differently if the classroom setting was different? Would teacher agency be different as an outcome of their material interactions? Does, for instance, a classroom with proper infrastructure or teaching resources lead to curriculum making? Does embracing technology impact the conscious and unconscious choice of agency? Hence, instead of presenting teachers as agentic individuals who are curriculum makers with the agenda to fill up empty-vessel students with knowledge, teachers are presented as individuals who are intra-acting with their constantly changing environment. Instead of being glorified as superior humans in a classroom, they are presented as disrupted individuals whose roles and agency are always fluctuating as they negotiate the messiness of intra-acting with their material conditions and relations. These teachers are in the process of becoming and, not in a fixed moment of curriculum reform. It is important to understand agency as one that can be changed depending on intra-actions. It would be wrong to say that a teacher who enacted agency as a curriculum maker during a particular reform will enact the same type of agency in another reform. Or, it would be against posthumanist conception to present agency as constant and as an inner capacity, because the individual is part of an ecology that is always in “becoming”.

In theorising “how matter comes to matter”, Barad (2003) highlighted the importance of

a research focus on materiality and its significance. A three-dimensional space (Clandinin 2007) was selected to express how the significance of materiality as teachers implement a new curriculum would eventually influence their agency. Located within the multiple spaces inhabited by teachers such as the classroom, the private tuition classroom, workshops, the Rector's office, and so on, the study revealed intra-actions between teachers and their material conditions. Since matter is considered "an active participant in the world's becoming" (Barad 2003, 803), it should be included in the entangled landscape to re-read the teacher's becoming in an evolving space impacted by curriculum and policy changes. "Objects" such as policy documents, textbooks, a laptop, or a mobile phone are not separate from power dynamics. The new textbook accompanying the policy reform was, for instance, perceived by some participants during the study as a way to impose standardisation, while for some it was empowering. Similarly, the ban on teachers using mobile phones in class was regarded as a way of imposing strict regulations on teachers, thus acting as a control mechanism. This intra-action influenced the ways in which teachers would exercise agency.

Below are extracts from the ethnodrama which was used as a way to express the experiences of teachers during the introduction of the new reform. Instead of narratives and biographies that would have centralised the voices and actions of teachers, the ethnodrama captured complex space and time dimensions. It may be argued that the ethnodrama is still a way of representation and posthumanism transcends modes of representation; however, the ethnodramatic two extracts chosen are not capturing a certain finality but a process. The aim is to reflect realistic intra-actions of teachers in different spaces that they inhabit, with the influence exerted by different material conditions. The focus is on curriculum-as-lived (Du Preez, Simmonds, and Grange, 2022) whereby teachers are part of an assemblage (Braidotti 2019) as they work with "others" in the process of becoming. For instance, previous studies on teacher agency in times of curriculum reform would term teachers as passive agents that are engaged in deliverology (Kelly 2008), or those performing strategic mimicry (Mattson and Harley 2003), or also, those actively involved as curriculum makers (Lambert and Morgan 2010). These categorisations are not predetermined, as the teachers intra-act with "others" and agency cannot be perceived as fixed, but instead agency is always in the making and evolving as a response to forces emanated by the "others". For instance, claiming that teachers are always passively delivering the curriculum is suggesting a predetermined trait that would paint a caricatured picture of teachers who are unchanged by their intra-actions within evolving material conditions.

The focus on the non-human prompts the question of why the influence exerted by

textbooks, policy documents, lessons, or even a potted plant on a teacher's desk is not considered. How can teacher agency be researched in isolation and divorced from the material conditions that shape (Ulmer 2017) teachers' agentic possibilities? As Barad (2007) pointed out, when we focus on matter, we focus on the intra-action between humans and their material conditions. Thus, in this article teacher agency is not being theorised as agency or agencies exerted by individuals, but instead, as intra-actions that lead to a hybrid collective (humans and others) and entangled agentic possibilities which are discussed below by exploring (some of the) different spatialities inhabited by teachers and "others".

Extract 1: "Others" within a macro-policy landscape

"This Act takes place in a classroom in the MIE [Mauritius Institute of Education] building. Teachers are attending a workshop on English Language Teaching in the context of the NYCBE [Nine Year Continuous Basic Education] reform. Three teachers are seated (on the right side of the stage) around a table working on some activities.

The set comprises the teachers' table, chairs, some worksheets, a collage with quotes from policy documents, additional extracts from the policy documents, and some sheets of poems, the standardised MIE textbooks and a scheme of work belonging to one of the teachers. On the left side of the stage, there is a big rectangular table with chairs around it."

(Appadoo-Ramsamy 2022, 117)

The paraphernalia in this extract is typically associated with a macro-policy context and in this case located within a dominant and power-infused continuous professional development (CPD) setting. Do these documents exert a particular agency on the teachers during this reform process? When discussing shifting relations of matter along different spatialities, Law (2004) criticises the permanence of facts/objects as universal and claims that facts attain value and agency when treated in a particular context. In line with this argument, the question that may be asked here is, what collective agency is enacted by the human and "others" in this dynamic reform space? During the research, one participant confused the textbook with the policy document, and to her, the policy document was meaningless and what mattered was the textbook and footnote instructions for teachers offered at the bottom of pages in the book. While the textbook would be empowering, or deprofessionalising, or presented as clutches that limit the agency of the teacher, the policy document which is the core of the policy reform disappears from practice and implementation. Some others would associate the policy with a guiding metanarrative that calls for compliance with a reform process. Similarly, the textbook, which is an important "object" that was introduced as a compulsory resource to the reform process can be read as one whose agency is fluid and not constant. At the beginning of the reform, the textbook is perceived as a powerful tool that calls for compliance – it was compulsory and not

a choice, a description that is associated with macro-policy regulation, standardisation and accountability. However, during the course of the reform, this tool can be deprofessionalising, empowering, or can take various other agentic forms that will consequently influence teachers' agency.

Meanwhile, these documents/objects/"others" do not exist on their own as the table (in the extract) comprises policy extracts, textbook, scheme of work, along with teachers from different schools in the same CPD classroom. These teachers are intra-acting with the "others" in an agentic relationality, and their agentic possibilities cannot be dissociated from the choices that they would be making during the implementation of the reform. But are these intra-actions fixed, or are they transformed along different spatialities? Below is an extract that moves to a different relationality space (Law 2004; Latour 1993) that these teachers inhabit in a moment of change, in an attempt to respond to these questions.

Extract 2: Material conditions in the classroom and the private teaching space

Maya [*moves to the middle of the stage and addresses the audience*]: "No respect, no greetings. Is this called teaching? Teaching is not my dream job ... I'm not passionate about teaching [*pause and feeling dejected*] ... With pressure from school, time constraints due to the timetable, with a difficult home environment, with changing curriculum and examination pressure ..." [*Breathing heavily, suffocating, closes eyes*]. "My personal problems pressurise me further, I'm unhappy at home, unhappy at work ..." [*failing voice*]. "I am verbally abused at home and in turn I verbally abuse my students ... what am I doing? Why? I'm tired." [*Points at the plant on her table*] "I'm like this plant. The plant needs sunshine and water, otherwise it will wither. That's exactly what is happening to me! I'm withering in this school and I must admit, my chaotic personal life is also contributing to my state! How I wish I could work as I do during tuitions¹ at home!" [*heavy sigh*] "I'm so free and comfortable at home."

[*Maya exits stage. Six new students, dressed in different school uniforms, enter the classroom. There is a shift from Maya's classroom at school to her private tuition classroom at home. The Grade 9 students take their seats and start working in groups. After some minutes Maya enters the stage, casually dressed, carrying her laptop and some books. Her phone is still on her table; she puts her books on the scheme of work so that it is no longer visible to the audience. She has a broad smile and seems very happy.*]

(Appadoo-Ramsamy 2022, 133)

¹Offering private tuition after school hours is a common practice in the Mauritian context.

The competitive examination-oriented culture in Mauritius and high levels of competitiveness lead to the practice of what Bray (2016; 2020) termed "shadow schooling". Private tuition or shadow schooling, are provided by teachers who inhabit the micro-institutional space of the school during school hours, but depart from being a technician (Pinar 2013) and adopt a leadership position to teach within a flexible personal structure after hours. But what agency does this space exert on the teacher's agentic choices? Does the tuition space offer a discontinuity to structured and regulated teaching and curriculum implementation? Does it provide continuity to curriculum-making processes? This extract captures shifting spaces as

teachers move from their “suffocating” school classrooms to their personal private tuition spaces with the emphasis on their laptops and phones – “objects” that are banned in their traditional classrooms. A change in infrastructure and “others” within the hybrid collective may lead to a diffracted form of agency and these two spaces could be read as merely two spaces on a broader spatial spectrum. Within that unregulated space, the laptop or phone may signal the transformative capacity of adaptation as the teacher embraces new strategies in implementing the reform. The absence of these “objects” in their standardised micro-institutional space and network alters their material conditions. When this study was conducted, as reflected in the extract, many teachers’ uses of technology were monitored and functioning within that controlling mechanism, those teachers would feign compliance or would comply with micro-institutional structures. But during the pandemic, with lockdown and online teaching, the same “objects” were attributed a different value and agency. Adapting to the fluidity of the curriculum implementation and global dynamic space, these “objects” shifted their agency. Meanwhile, the spaces and boundaries between these spaces such as the regulated school classroom and the private tuition classroom became blurry. The agency of the hybrid collective is, therefore, always in the process and forces me to question the ways of researching or attempting to understand agency as a phenomenon or as one which is being controlled by human actors (teachers, stakeholders, policymakers).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

“In contrast to the usual interaction, which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognises that distinct agencies do not precede but rather emerge through their intra-action” (Barad 2007, 348).

It is significant to begin this last section with the above quote with an emphasis on continuity and intra-action. Consequently, I hesitated to term this section as “concluding thoughts” as this posthumanist reading is signalling continuity and process rather than a conclusion. When this study of teacher agency in times of curriculum reform was conducted, the aim was definitely a humanist understanding of interactions and agency that emanate as part of interactions of teachers with different stakeholders, including the collective group of other teachers. But this posthumanist reading has broken the humanist barriers that limited my analysis and interpretations of teacher agency to a diffraction that was influenced by the ways in which teachers would be negotiating with Rectors, colleagues, parents, students, and other “human actors” within the network. I am not renouncing the benefit of that research as it opened doors to multiple diffracted teacher agencies that would materialise as an outcome of entangled

spaces (Appadoo-Ramsamy 2022) inhabited by the teachers. However, in this article, agency is not limited to one that is a result of interactions, but one which is complexly born through intra-actions and which is termed as a hybrid collective agency between human subjects and the “others”. How would this new way of reading agency contribute to curriculum inquiry, implementation, and help in continuous professional development? Curriculum planning, designing and implementation cannot be separated from material conditions, and when introducing a new curriculum, the agency exerted by the “others” should be taken into consideration. For instance, what are the different forms of agency that materialise as an outcome of intra-action with this hybrid collective? Meanwhile, in this article emphasis has been laid on spatialities that comprise different “others” such as in the case of the differing spaces of the regulated classroom and the private tuition space. These spaces are entangled and as highlighted, always in the process of change such as the overlapping of spaces that occurred during online teaching. In a post-COVID-19 education and curriculum space, teacher agency cannot be limited to an understanding of interactions but should embrace a diffracted reading of intra-active fluidity that is hybrid and always in the “becoming”.

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