

## **Main Content**

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## **Contribution**

In response to the demands of the global knowledge economy, current international school-based reforms draw on a range of top-down and bottom-up approaches to change. Devolving decision-making to the level of local schools may be one way to give teachers the opportunity to exercise professional agency. International literature exploring teachers' professional agency largely centres on top-down approaches to reform based on national initiatives or frameworks and in reference to secondary school settings. However, there is little understanding of how primary teachers in Australia experience professional agency to make decisions and choices in relation to their work in top-down, bottom-up curriculum reform contexts. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how primary teachers experienced professional agency in a school-based curriculum reform context and to consider what teachers reported as the enablers and constraints on professional agency in such a unique context. The ecological conceptualisation of professional agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Biesta & Tedder, 2007) formed the basis of the theoretical framework for this study, enabling an exploration of how teachers' professional agency could be experienced in relation to individual capacity, available resourcing and structural and contextual factors.

## **Method**

The study was designed as a single, embedded case study of a large metropolitan primary school in Queensland, Australia. The school-based reform of the school was influenced by top-down national and state initiatives like the National School Improvement Tool (ACER, 2012) and Education Queensland's School Improvement Hierarchy (DET, 2016). The researcher positioned themselves as a teacher-as-researcher, researching within their own school context. Data collected included teacher interviews and teaching and planning materials. A hybrid thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to examine teachers' professional agency as they planned and enacted an English unit developed through school-based curriculum development.

## **Expected Outcomes**

This study uncovered several enablers and constraints as having a significant impact on teachers' experiences of professional agency in a reform context. These include factors associated with assessment, the use of time and opportunities for professional collaboration. It was found that building teachers' assessment literacy and creating timely opportunities for collegiality, informal collaboration and reflection, through relationships built on trust, accountability and honesty, enabled teachers' professional agency. Strengthening teachers' assessment literacies emerged as a significant enabler to agency in school reforms.

Constraints to professional agency included narrow timeframes for planning, reporting and assessment deadlines, the use of assessments from top-down system developed resources and relationships with an absence of trust. The findings of this study contribute an Australian perspective to the growing international literature surrounding professional agency. The study contributes to conceptual understandings of teachers' professional agency in contexts of school-based curriculum reform and highlights conditions that enable teachers' professional agency in future school reform contexts. The findings have significant implications for school authorities, school leaders and teachers.

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