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Abstract

In order to increase student performance, governments stress the importance of standardization for teaching which is seen as a threat to teachers' professionalism. In this small-scale study we investigated the way teachers use their professional space in these changing circumstances. We studied eighteen cases of secondary education teachers in-depth, using observations, interviews, and storylines. Our analyses revealed two types of trajectories which can be characterized by bounded and contested agency. In both trajectories the importance of personal factors and environmental factors were acknowledged. Insights into the relation between perceived space and agency can promote our understanding of teacher professionalism.

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To the Editor of Teaching and Teacher Education,

We would hereby like to submit a research report to your journal. Our manuscript entitled "*Teachers' perceived professional Space and their Agency*". We hope you will consider our manuscript for publication in your journal,

On behalf of all the authors,
Dr. Helma Oolbekkink

1. Introduction

To increase student performance, educational leaders increasingly stress the importance of standardization, which mainly includes a focus on student testing and transparency of school results to the public (e.g. Buchanan, 2015). This tendency is seen as a threat to teachers' professionalism, reducing teachers' professional autonomy. Wills and Haymore Sandholtz (2009) describe this as *constrained professionalism* which denotes that the autonomy of teachers as professionals is constrained by contextual factors such as the standardization of the curriculum. In this study, we take another perspective. We are interested in teachers that make active use of their professional space, in spite of the growing emphasis on standardization. Teachers that perceive, decode and make sense of or "read" the semiotic configurations of their work place (Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007) and are able to navigate and rely on their expertise and judgment and thus hold continued authority (Wills & Sandholtz, 2009) over their practice. We therefore choose to take the bottom-up perspective that puts teachers at the centre of the educational process, in spite of the most common prescriptive, top-down approach for teacher practice (Priestley, Biesta, Philippou, & Robinson, 2015).

By taking this perspective we acknowledge the importance of teachers' intentional use of their professional space. This intentional exploitation of professional space forms a significant aspect of teacher leadership. It is built on teachers' "capacity to initiate purposeful action that implies will, autonomy, freedom and choice" (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011, p. 812). This form of leadership manifests teacher agency (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015) which encompasses teachers' active involvement in directing and designing their practice (Van der Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard, & Popeijus, 2015). In this paper, we document the relations between teachers' interpretation of their professional space and their agentic behaviour, in other words, how s/he makes active use of this space. Attending to our goal, we take a multi-cultural perspective and explore these relations in the

Netherlands, Norway and Israel. Our attempt to understand the relations between professional space and agentic behaviour provide a new frame of reference to acknowledging teacher professionalism.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Teachers' professional space

The notion of professional space is related to the “amount of say” teachers have in their own teaching practice (Dutch Educational Council, 2013; Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007). This definition relates to factual or objective professional space such as school internal and societal boundaries in which teachers work. That is, teachers have to conform to a set of objective rules in their practice, for example found in policy documents and school rules. One aspect of studies on teachers' professional practice in schools is that the context in which they act is treated as “objective” - as a characteristic of the context in which teachers work (policy rules and regulation). These conditions are assumed to play a role in teachers' autonomy and their practice (Imants, Wubbels and Vermunt, 2013).

However, the *perceptions* of space can be more influential on teacher actions than the objective factors themselves (e.g. Imants, Wubbels & Vermunt, 2013; Anderson 1982; Owens 1995; Hoekstra, Korthagen, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Imants, 2009). These perceptions mediate the effects of the factual contextual space. In this study we refer to these perceptions as perceived professional space. As pointed out by Ellström et al. (2007), ‘Whether or not a certain situation should be considered as enabling or constraining is assumed to depend, not only or primarily on its objective characteristics, but rather on how these characteristics are subjectively evaluated and dealt with by the learning subject’ (idem, p. 86). Teachers can therefore be seen as active interpreters of the school context and the space they have, to act on their own personal goals. These goals can be different from those of the institution in which they work (Imants, Wubbels and Vermunt, 2013).

In our attempt to understand teacher leadership we examine how teachers actively evaluate their space and we consider their perceptions of professional space in relation to the enactment of their personal teaching goals (agency).

2.2 Teacher agency

In recent literature, much attention has been paid to teacher agency (e.g. Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015; Buchanan, 2015). More specifically researchers have indicated that teacher agency is a key capability of teachers for advancing student learning, and for their continuous professional development and school development (Toom, Pyhältö & O'Connell Rust, 2015). Although the importance of the concept of agency is acknowledged, we lack empirical studies about (the development of) professional agency. Only quite recently have empirical studies focused on teacher agency and the journal *Teachers and Teaching* had a special issue on agency in 2015. (e.g. Toom, Pyhältö, O'Connell Rust, 2015; Van der Heijden, Geldens & Beijaard, 2015).

The basic concept of agency in general, or of teacher agency in particular, is based on an understanding that people do not merely react to and repeat given practices. Rather, people exhibit capacity for autonomous action, a process through which they intentionally transform and refine their worlds and thereby take control of their lives. Thus, agency can be defined as the capacity to initiate purposeful action that implies will, autonomy, freedom and, choice (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Priestley et al., 2015; Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Engeström, 2005; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). When applied to teachers' professional practice, agency denotes the ability of teachers to step out of the contextual rules and regulations, and to act upon their own goals. Employing agency is a dynamic process that is personally constructed through many forms of interactions with the constraints of a given context (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). We claim that one major

contextual characteristic through which agency is negotiated, is a teacher's perception of his/her professional space.

Biesta, Priestley and colleagues introduced an ecological view on agency and thereby expanded the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998). In their view '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' (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137). This interplay between personal and contextual factors is an essential feature of the ecological model on (teacher) agency in which both the importance of 'agentic capacity' and 'agentic spaces' are stressed, and agency is viewed as a temporal process (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015).

The ecological model of agency consists of three dimensions, taking into account both the past or iterative dimensions, the present or practical evaluative dimension and the future or projective dimension (see Figure 1).

insert figure 1 about here

The *iterational dimension* shows that past achievements, understandings and actions are important and are selectively reactivated. Iterational aspects that contribute to teacher agency are personal values, personal capacity and beliefs rooted in past experiences but also in the day to day interactions with colleagues in schools. The *projective dimension* points at teachers' intentions to bring about a future that is different from the past and the present. The *practical-evaluative dimension* is concerned with the present where agency can be acted out, influenced by both past and future. Both structural, cultural and material conditions play a role in '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). Teachers, in other words, evaluate their agentic space and decide how to act within that space. In this study, we refer to the evaluation of space as teachers' perceived space and to teachers' achievement of agency as the exploitation of space. In this sense, we use the model posited by Priestley et al. (2015) to develop an understanding of the experienced and exploited space of independent teachers in secondary education in three different countries: Israel; Norway; and, the Netherlands. We aim to gain more insight in teachers' agentic behaviour and its relation with professional space over time by studying teachers' practice in-depth.

3. Method

In our attempt to understand teachers' agency, in this paper we explore the interaction between teachers' perceived space and exploited space in three different professional contexts.

3.1 Methodological approach

The notion of professional space and its relation to teachers' agency was explored within its real-life context. According to Lefebvre (1974), understanding social practices and relations entails attending to the construction of space, which can be revealed through deciphering connections between the ways individuals represent, perceive and use spaces.

In order to interpret those relations we employed a multiple case study approach. This methodology uses in-depth examination of multiple cases, providing a systematic way of approaching the problem, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting results (Merriam, 1998). Moreover, case study analytic techniques enable identification of patterns and explanation building (Yin, 2013).

3.2 Participants

Eighteen secondary school teachers, six from Israel, six from Norway and six from the Netherlands served as cases in this study. These teachers were selected because of exemplary initiatives related to exploitation of professional space in their practice. We asked principals to suggest independent teachers in their school. The researchers approached these teachers, and they all agreed to participate in the study.

insert table 1 about here

3.3 Data collection and analysis

We used multiple sources of evidence which allowed for triangulation of data, thus strengthening findings and conclusions (Merriam, 1998). For each case, three complementary data collection methods were applied:

1. Open classrooms observations – At least three lessons of each teacher were observed during one school day. Field notes were taken throughout the day, including the teachers' activities during breaks.
2. Semi-structured interviews – The teachers were interviewed about their professional practice, their professional history, their motivation to teach, and their decision making processes as teachers. Finally, we asked teachers to relate to the observed school day and to analyze it from the perspective of their decision making processes they previously had described (See Appendix 1 for interview guide).
3. Storyline method – At the end of the interview, teachers were asked to draw two storylines on one chart reflecting both their evaluation of their professional space and their exploitation of this space. The vertical axis reflects a 1-10 scale of evaluation, while the horizontal axis reflects teachers' professional timeline.

Teachers were asked to label low and high points and describe inclines and declines, explaining how and why these changes occurred. The storyline method was inspired by the work of Beijaard, Van Driel and Verloop (1999) that suggests that storyline can shed light on the evaluation process in which teachers engage.

3.4 Data analysis methods

As case study methodology for the study of more than one case implies, data were analyzed within each case (vertical), and then across the cases (horizontal) for comparison purposes.

3.4.1. Within case analysis:

Five researchers were involved in the data collection and analysis (3 in Norway, one in each of the two other countries). Each researcher analysed her data before all researchers re-analysed all data. First the data were studied per cases in chronological order: Interview and observation data were transcribed and coded using both a deductive and an inductive (grounded) content analysis procedure. We applied the ecological agency model of Priestley et al. (2015) and we used these dimensions and the underlying aspects as described by Priestley et al. (2015) as sensitizing concepts in our analysis and refined them based on the data.

Storylines were unpacked by relating to graphic representations, written clarifications, and verbal explanations. Moreover, we identified characteristics of inclines and declines on the storylines. This analysis identified themes of each teacher's trajectory and factors which influenced changes of professional space and the exploitation of that space. Based on the storyline and interview data, individual teacher portraits were drafted. Each story contained insights into the teachers' past experiences, personal characteristics, and current situation including a characterization of the school day, the lessons and future perspectives. The portraits were sent to the teachers for member checking (Maxwell, 2004). All teachers

indicated their agreement with the portrait; some made minor adjustments mainly related to details such as the formulation of a specific sentence in the portrait.

3.4.2 Cross-subject analysis

At this stage individual teacher's data were compared across all data sets as follows:

1. Each researcher read the categories that stemmed from the individual interviews, all the portraits obtained in the three countries, and the storylines. We compared the individual cases by identifying common categories. This comparison revealed nuanced differences between subjects and led to a fine grained definition of each category. At this stage categories that represent all cases were generated in an interpretive procedure (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The following categories referring to personal characteristics were found: 'commitment'; 'resilience'; 'responsibility'; and, 'motivation'. Contextual categories involved 'support principal', 'positioning towards colleagues' and 'space between boundaries'.
2. Based on the individual data matrix, a meta-matrix was constructed in order to compare the cases. Particularly the achievement of agency or exploitation of space in each case, and its relation to the teacher's perception of professional space. We compared these themes and influences between participants, including pattern matching and explanation building (Yin, 2011). In addition to the individual case comparison, we compared the teachers from the three different countries.

To reduce subjectivity and increase trustworthiness the categories were abstracted separately by each researcher, then all researchers cross examined within each country, and finally the researchers compared between the countries through an on-line (Skype) moderation process. At this stage of analysis the teachers' trajectories were revised, and likewise the categories that describe each trajectory in order to reach agreement across countries. Once agreement

was achieved, we were able to describe both space and agency and shed light on the connection between these two constructs.

4. Results

In analyzing teachers' development of agency, vis a vis their perceptions of space, we found in general no differences in the trajectories of early and middle career teachers, neither did we find subject-matter related differences between these teachers. They taught different subjects and this did not seem to influence their achievement of agency. Overall, we identified two typical trajectories. Both trajectories relate to how teachers use their space in relation to the way in which they perceive the amount of space they have. We elaborate on those two trajectories and describe what factors specifically seemed to contribute to the achievement of teacher agency.

4.1 Gradual growth of Agency over time

One type of trajectory, exemplified by nine cases, showed a steady increase of agentic over time. For both early and middle career teachers, it seems that agentic behaviour increases over time. Within this trajectory, in the Israeli and Dutch cases, the perceived agentic space was more than the exploited space, in the Norwegian cases the perceived space was less than the exploited space. In analysing this trajectory the categories which describe this steady increase in exploited space include: experience as a classroom teacher; experience with school culture and conditions; relationship with the school management; and, personal pedagogical values and beliefs. Below are typical examples of this trajectory from the three different contexts.

An example is Daniel, from the Netherlands, who relates the growth of his agentic space to him getting to know the school better, growing into the organization and knowing where the limits are (see figure 2). *“As I got more experience in the school I gradually discovered how much space I actually had.”*

insert figure 2 about here

Similar to Daniel, Ava, an Israeli teacher relates the growth of agency to her understanding of the limits: *“When I started my practice, I really tried to understand the red lines in this school; those that I cannot cross. I tried to understand what is my leeway in this place, and at the same time I realized where are my limits.”* Similar to Daniel, Ava’s exploited space storyline starts at a lower point than her experienced space storyline, while the lines get closer with experience (see figure 3).

insert figure 3 about here

The trajectory of the Norwegian teachers shows that they all exploited gradually more space than they perceived they had. The cases of Per, Knut and Bitte show gradual growth in both the perceived and the exploited space. The case of Tom shows that exploited space gradually grows, but the perceived space stays at the same level throughout the trajectory.

Especially in the case of Per gradual growth in agency is related to his personal beliefs about teaching and him prioritizing his students over external pressure. In addition, he feels trusted by his principal and does not experience interference with his work as a teacher. As such, he had always exploited his professional space beyond what he perceived the space was. Per describes this in the following manner *“I know there is a school schedule as regards breaks, but I do not follow this. To me it is more important to respond to the students and their needs. So when they need a break, we have a break, and if they are in the flow, the bell does not intervene with the ‘flow’ of their work.”*

Even when new regulations were implemented and he experienced limitations to his professional space, he did not fully act on it, and carried on with that in which he believed.

Per's agentic behaviour represents resilience: "*There were new regulations about teachers' presence at school, and I did not like them. I continued as before, knowing that the work I did at home counted for longer hours than what was required.*" Commitment: "*My commitment is to the students and not to the government or the principals.*"; and, persistence: "*as long as I see my students succeed in the final exam in electronics, I keep on doing what I think is best for them.*" His agentic behaviour exceeds the perceived space (see figure 4).

insert figure 4 about here

As seen in the cases above, in this type of trajectory teachers from all countries report a gradual increase in agentic behaviour over time. In most cases, the perceived professional space also grew. Only Per's case shows one temporal decrease in perceived space, which was attributed to new official regulations. In both the Dutch and the Israeli cases teachers' agentic behaviour is mainly contextual in nature. The context in which they work defines the amount of space they exploit in their practice. Their used space never exceeds the limits. Thus their agentic behaviour is bound to the contextual conditions. Their trajectory can thus be termed as '*bounded agency*'. Teachers who follow this trajectory are active interpreters of the school context and the space they have, and act on their goals according to its boundaries.

In the Norwegian cases teachers' agentic behaviour is also influenced by contextual aspects, but it seems that much of their agentic behaviour is attributed to their values and beliefs. As such, teachers in this context attribute their exploited space to their professionalism. Although they are aware of the limits of their professional space they stress that the context in which they work does not limit them they all exploit more space than they perceive. In order to act on values and beliefs their behaviour can be characterized by resilience and persistence. While exploiting more than the granted space, Norwegian teachers

(like the other teachers) are still active interpreters of the school context and feel supported by the principals.

4.2 Bumpy moments in achievement of agency over time

The second type of trajectory involves variations in perception of professional space and/or exploited space over time. Typical in this trajectory is teachers' experience of several drawbacks in perceptions and exploitations of space. Thus we termed this path the bumpy trajectory. We found nine teachers that exemplify this trajectory in the three national contexts.

When analysing this trajectory we identified typifying categories describing these bumps. These were both personal as well as contextual. The downs in the storylines were caused by increased control from principals, parents or other stakeholders, inflexible school organization, increased responsibilities in the school, not being recognized by school management, and conflicts with colleagues. Personal aspects for the lows in the trajectory included increased responsibilities outside school. The highs in the teachers' storylines were typified by recognition and support by the school management, cooperation with colleagues and the principal, and time to exercise agency. Below are examples of typical cases in this trajectory.

Maria's bumpy trajectory starts early in her teaching career in the Netherlands. At this point Maria experienced a great deal of professional space since she was granted the opportunity to develop the history curriculum in the upper levels of the school. As such, both her experienced and her exploited space start high in the Storyline chart (above 8). Two years later, Maria felt that her work too often goes unrecognized. *"I found then that I experienced less space and also less appreciation for the initiatives we undertook here."* Moreover, at this point in time the school management initiated new regulations. Therefore, Maria experienced a decrease in her professional space which consequently caused her to take on a part-time job with a textbook publishing house where she works on what she finds important, namely

developing material for differentiated instruction in history. When her new-position with the publishing house became known, the school management encouraged her to apply for promotion within the school. She indicates, *“You really get excited when you get more positive feedback and more space.”* Since then she has become, *“more political, in the sense that I involve them more in what I am doing.”* This enabled her to employ her agentic behaviour back in the school context, thus, her exploited space storyline in her trajectory increases (see figure 5). Interestingly, although Maria felt a decrease in her professional space her agentic behaviour finds an alternative space to prosper. This increase does not show in the storyline which addresses the school context. Nevertheless, as her interview reveals, in spite of the constraining circumstances she continues to do what she finds important in her teaching. Maria’s agentic behaviour is characterized by resilience and persistence in following her agenda.

insert figure 5 about here

Anna, a teacher in the Israeli context provides another example of a bumpy trajectory (figure 6). When Anna started her teaching career in a big urban high school she taught five different classes every day in the subject in which she specialized. Anna did not agree with the situation: *“I had 180 students. How can one reach 180 students? I felt that I can do much better, that I can take them much further, only if I will have a chance, they will have a chance ... I did not make any difference ...”* At this point Anna experienced little professional space. Anna could not agree with the situation, thus she approached the principal: *“I came to him with an idea. I made it a condition for my future work in the school. I told him that I want to teach all subject in one class. I explained what I planned to do and he went along.”* Now Anna felt a drastic increase in her professional space, and thus her agentic behaviour. This increase is characterised by support from the principal. Nevertheless, it had not been an easy

journey: *“This is not how it is done in high school. Each teacher has his own specialty and s/he teaches one subject. My request also harmed other teachers’ professionalism. If I can teach literature (and I am not trained in this subject matter), so what does it say about other teachers’ professionalism?”* The conflicts Anna had with her colleagues caused her to doubt her agentic behaviour, moreover it made her work harder, thus she felt a slight decrease in her agentic behaviour. In spite of the stressful contextual conditions, Anna followed her values and beliefs. Anna’s exploitation of professional space is characterized by a strong sense of commitment: *“As a teacher I felt that I must do something, no matter what, but to go with it all the way, commit yourself to this way.”*; Persistence: *“I stick with something I believe in and go with it.”*; and, a strong sense of responsibility: *“I have nightmares. There are several types of teachers. Some don’t worry ... they come and they teach, and if the students succeed it is great and if not, that is the students’ problem. I am not like that. I take responsibility for my students.”*

insert figure 6 about here

Finally, a Norwegian example of a bumpy trajectory is the case of Ole who experienced agency from the start of his work as a teacher (see figure 7). However, there was a time when this agency was contested by a principal trying to control the teacher’s work. He found himself to be oppositional in that period and did what he found reasonable to do. (It is important to decide on part of his job for himself because ultimately he is responsible for this students.)

Ole relates his experienced agency to his professional history as a student representative where he learned to discuss and disagree with people and drink coffee afterwards. He does not experience the same culture in schools where people can have a

“grouch on you for weeks”. Therefore he learnt to be pragmatic and maintain a good dialogue with the principal; although he has a mind of his own and sometimes slows up.

insert figure 7 about here

Also, Ole resents unification of teaching as he sees it occurring in other schools. He feels responsible for following the curriculum and the exams but chooses his own teaching methods and thereby claims agency. *“It is important to enjoy your work. You should not compromise your own values, but have to know the frames you have to work within.”*

Similar to the gradual growth trajectory, this trajectory also represents how contextual aspects and personal characteristics interact with teachers’ agentic behaviour which seems to be attributed to their values and beliefs. When the context of the school conflicts with those values, they experience a drop in the perceived space which finds expression in their agentic behaviour. Nevertheless, these teachers can be characterized by persistence and resilience which directs them to defend their values - even when the contextual aspects limit them. These teachers fight experienced limitations (some by taking their agentic behaviour to different places, some by engaging in conflicts with colleagues, some by just following their own route without telling others). We characterize this trajectory as ‘*contested agency*’. Different from the teachers in the growth trajectory, who act on their agency in spite of their awareness to the limits on their professional space, teachers in the bumpy trajectory experience conflict. The teachers in this trajectory are also active interpreters of the school context but seem to be willing to fight for their professional values and beliefs.

4.3 international comparison of achievement of agency

Comparing the cases across the three different contexts, Norway, Israel and Netherlands, we found both similarities and differences related to the interaction of perceived and exploited space.

In general, Norwegian teachers' exploited space storyline exceeds their perceived space. As Ole explains: "*The principal said all classes should have a mid-term test. I did not feel my students needed that, and I could well assign a grade without the test, so I just did not give them the test.*" Nevertheless exceeding the limits does not mean avoiding them, as Ole further explains: "*If there are lot of complaints or you are not prepared, you are in a more vulnerable position. What the principal does not want is to have complaints from the students. I avoid that.*"

Teachers in both Israel and the Netherlands act within the boundaries of their perceived space. The attention to boundaries is explained by Mira: "*after I knew what is going on in the school, I gently approached the principal with my idea. I knew she would agree because I acted within her limitation.*" Although, some actively 'fight' for their space, they don't disregard its limitations.

Having said that, it seems that the perceived space storyline of teachers in both the Israeli and the Dutch context is much higher on the 1-10 scale than the teachers in the Norwegian context. So it seems that, in all contexts, whether teachers act within the limits of their perceived space or whether their actions exceeds that space, the highest point in their exploited space storyline is somewhat similar. Thus, they report a rather similar level of agentic behaviour in all contexts, regardless of their perceived allocated space.

All teachers seemed to have strong *pedagogical* beliefs which they act upon. Acting upon these beliefs is characterized by persistence, resilience, commitment and responsibility. As Anna, a teacher in the Israeli context explains: "*The space exists, but without actively grabbing it taking it, it fades.*"; Michael, in the Dutch context, indicates that he takes

initiatives because otherwise he has to do things he does not agree with, *“so therefore I always take the initiative so I can do my way and bring colleagues in. The space is there and I take it at a certain point and the school management notices that.”*

Acting upon agency in the Israeli context seems to involve more conflicts than in the Norwegian or the Dutch context. Sita reported on one major conflict with her principal: *“We had a huge argument. Literally we shouted at each other. I was really mad at her about her entering my class and breaking my word. I told her that she stopped a wonderful learning process ... I also said, that I have autonomy in the class as to what's allowed and what is not.”*

We found that relationships with colleagues were often under pressure because of the innovative ideas of the teachers. Some of these tensions were also apparent in the Netherlands, but not so much in Norway. Daniel, a teacher in the Dutch context explains: *“I use more space therefore I sometimes have a disagreement with colleagues.”*

In the Netherlands we found that teachers often seek other contexts to enrich or stretch their space at school, these contexts all seem to ‘help’ them to use their space or take another perspective on this space. For example Audrey said that she deliberately chose to work for a homework institute for half of her appointment time at school. She indicates that she did this, *“because I could shape my RT skills and support weak students. I had chosen quite deliberately, I have since gotten great cooperation from school.”* And Maria says that, *“So I experienced less space for myself. That was when I decided to focus on that method. So outside school, but they did give me the space.”* These examples show how agency forms teacher leadership which exceeds the school boundaries.

In all countries support from the principal seems to be crucial and important for teachers. For example, Tom a teacher in the Norwegian context explains: *“Teachers are given confidence. The signal is that the principal trusts that the teachers do their job and spends little energy on control. As soon as we experience that we are pushed in certain directions the*

willingness to be creative decreases ... the teachers have permission to act on their own.”

Another example is Daniel in the Dutch context: *“If I go to the principal with an idea, I always get time to work on it.”*

While it seems that all teachers want to have more space and support from their principal, one case illustrates the consequences of a situation where the principal sets no boundaries at all. David, a teacher in the Israeli context reported that when the principal set no boundaries, he felt as though he was ‘left to himself’ and his agentic behaviour ceased to exist: *“There I could do literally whatever I wanted. It was as if nobody cared. I felt it was a total neglect, today I can say this, but I couldn’t at that time. The space was so large that it was chaotic. It stopped me from doing anything.”* David’s experience shows the importance of professional space within a given framework. Being active interpreters of professional space, teachers want space, but they also realize that they need boundaries.

5. Conclusion and discussion

In this study we aimed to gain insight into independent teachers’ perceived and exploited space in their school context in three different countries. We found that teachers’ perceived and exploited space changes over time and is influenced by personal and contextual factors.

Two trajectories were discerned of which one showed a steady increase of experienced as well as exploited space over time. We characterized this trajectory as ‘*bounded agency*’.

The other trajectory is characterised by ‘bumpy’ moments in both experienced and exploited space mainly caused by contextual factors. We characterized this trajectory as ‘*contested agency*’.

Reflecting on these results using the model of Priestley et al. (2015), we can state that teachers in the first trajectory achieve agency by actively evaluating and interpreting both cultural and structural circumstances and acting within these boundaries. Teachers in the

second trajectory interpret these cultural and structural circumstances but they mainly act according to their personal pedagogical beliefs. As acknowledged by Biesta et al. (2015) who state that teachers' beliefs matter for the extent to which they are able to achieve agency in the complex context of their work in schools. Not only do Biesta et al. (2015) claim beliefs play a role in the iterational dimension, but they are also oriented towards the future (projective) and they play a role in the here and now (practical-evaluative). Our data underlines the importance of teachers' beliefs in the achievement of agency.

Comparing the three different contexts in which teachers' experienced and exploited space was investigated, we found a number of similarities and differences. In all contexts support and trust from the school management was an important factor in the achievement of agency. Also, strong pedagogical beliefs played an important role in all the cases we studied, aligning with Priestley's (2011) study where he shows that teachers' powerful values and support from the principal are important factors in enhancing teachers' agency.

In comparing the countries, we found more conflicts in the Israeli cases between teachers and their colleagues and the school management resulting from the teachers desire to act on their personal beliefs - which may be contextual. In the Dutch context we found teachers consciously seeking other contexts to enlarge their professional space at school. It seemed that these contexts provided them with the agentic space they needed and did not experience in the school. This situation can be described as boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) which can bring new insights for teachers' work (Vahasantanen, Saarinen & Etelapelto, 2009). In Norway teachers often complain about lack of trust from the authorities and increasing top-down regulations which impede their professionalism (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009, 2010). However, the Norwegian teachers in the current study seem to maintain their professional values and act accordingly without experiencing being 'told off' by their principals.

Overall, our study aimed to gain insight into the perception and exploitation of teachers' professional space over time in three different countries. However, we are aware of the small sample size and the need to investigate these trajectories further. We chose a convenience sample in this study of teachers described as independent by their principals, and we realize that trajectories and personal and environmental influences maybe different for other teachers. Also, we recognize the influence of the different national contexts, which may influence teachers' experiences of professional space. In future, research could be conducted which might focus on a follow-up of these findings in a representative sample of teachers, both beginning and experienced, from different countries.

6. Relevance of the study for research and practice

Teacher agency was found to be an essential factor in teachers' use of professional space. Insights into the relation between the perceived space and agency can promote our understanding of teacher professionalism and the development of teachers as leaders of their own practice. Understanding the notion of teacher space, and the centrality of agency in the ability to use that space, can help define the concept of teacher leadership by referring to teacher agency and how it is influenced by their perception of space. Also, this study provides insights into the changes of perceptions and use of agency over time, and the personal and environmental factors contributing to these changes. Especially, teacher beliefs appeared to be a factor of considerable importance.

Our study can contribute to practice as it gives indications for identifying and developing teacher leaders. It can also give insights for the preparation of future teachers, by stressing the importance of strong pedagogical beliefs as they are one of the factors helping teachers to innovate in their practice. Finally, these findings can contribute to developing a professional learning culture in school.

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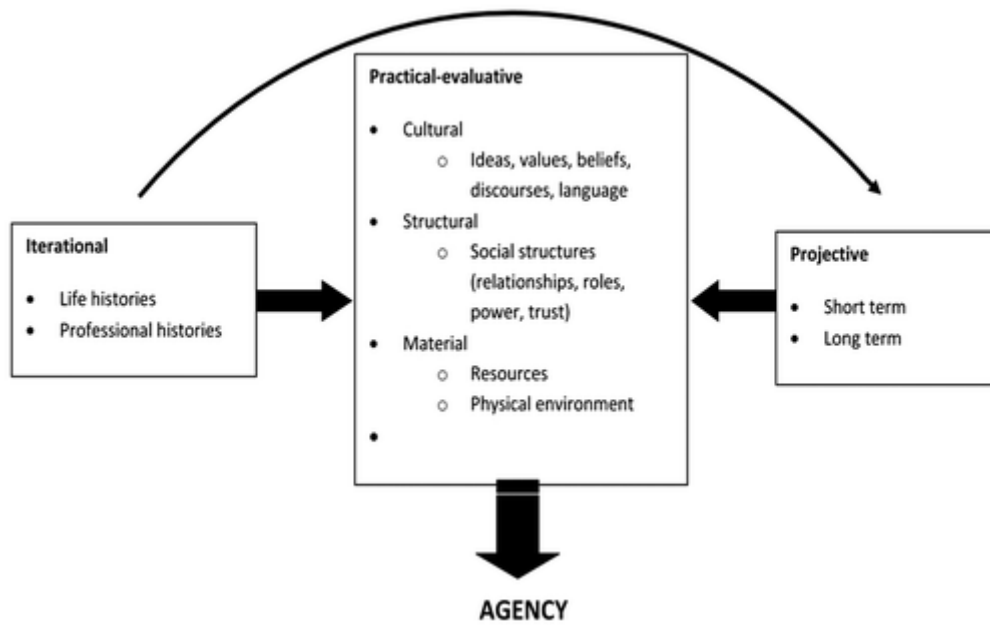


Figure 1: A model for Understanding the Achievement of Agency (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015, p. 4)

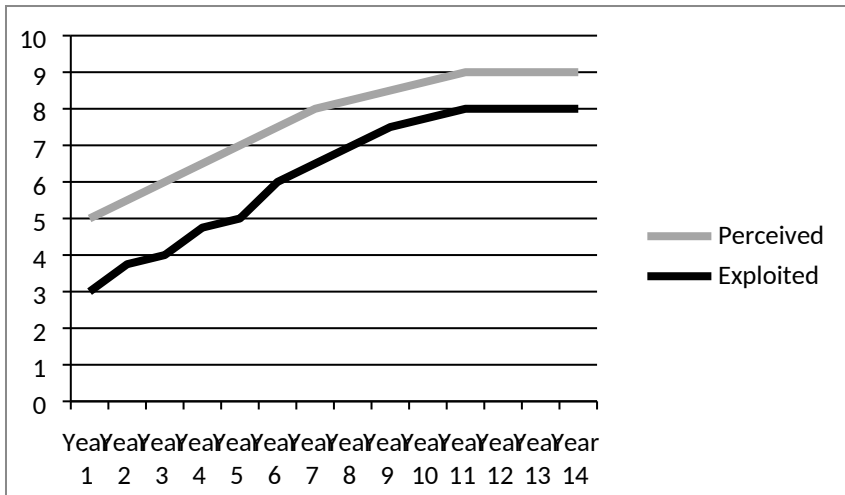


Figure 2: Daniel's storyline.

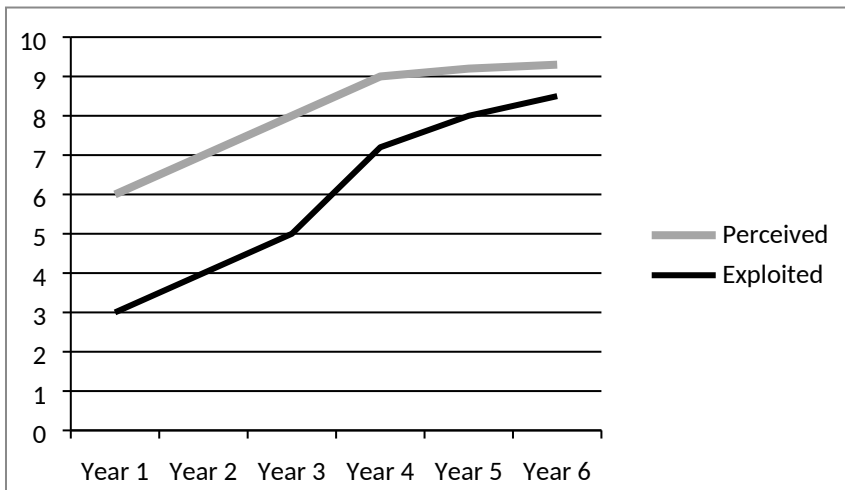


Figure 3: Ava's storyline.

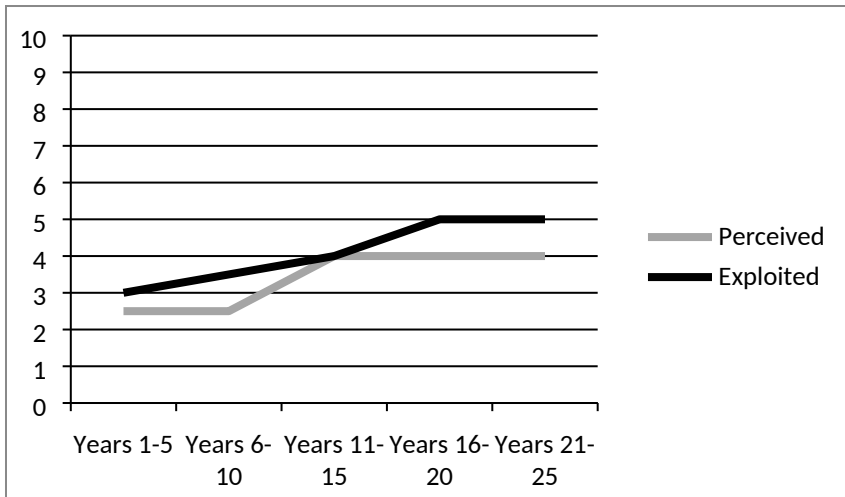


Figure 4: Per's storyline.

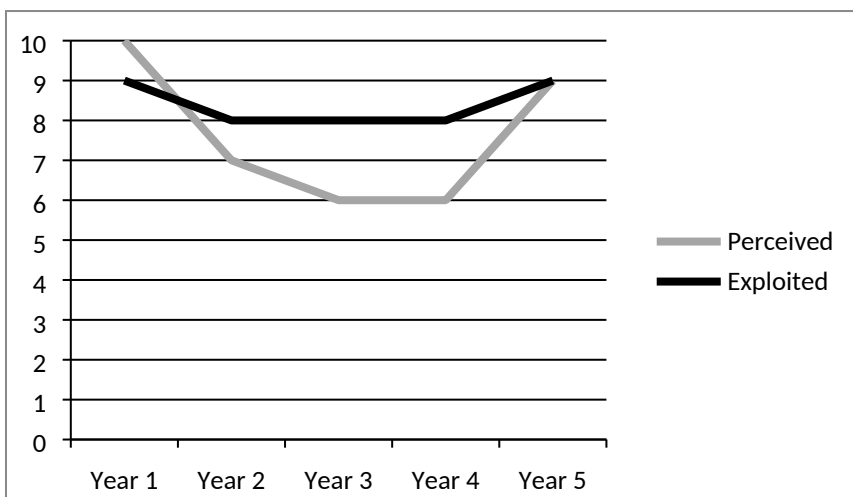


Figure 5: Maria's storyline

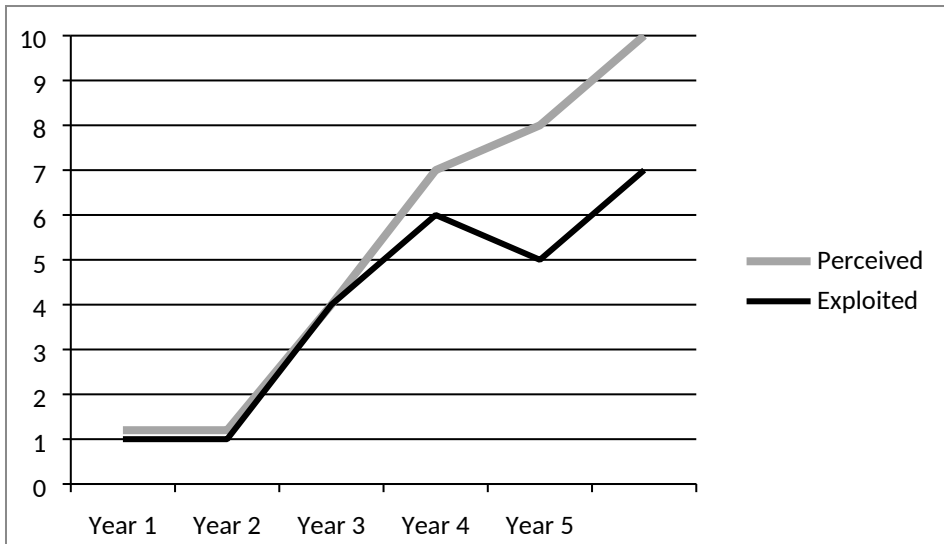


Figure 6: Anna's storyline.

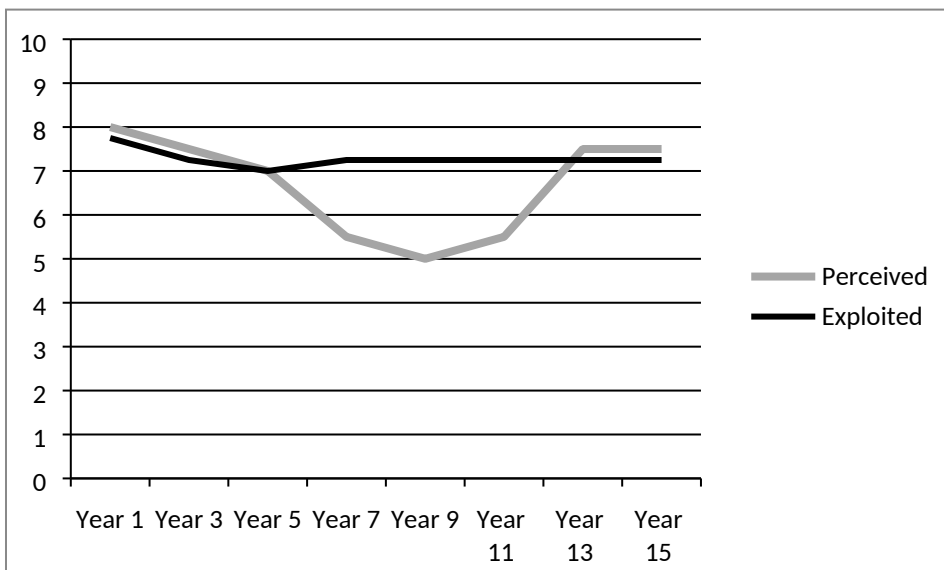


Figure 7: Ole's storyline.

Table 1: An overview of participating teachers

Teacher/ gender	Country	Experience	Role
Per (M)	Norway	27	Vocational, Electronics teacher
Knut (M)	Norway	16	Compreh sec, Norwegian teacher
Bitte (F)	Norway	8	Social science, Spanish and Religion teacher
Tom (M)	Norway	20	Mathematics and natural science teacher
Ole (M)	Norway	17	Norwegian and German teacher
Ida (F)	Norway	10	Social science, geography and religion teacher
Anna (F)	Israel	11	Teaches all subjects in high school, providing chance to low achieving students,
Ava (F)	Israel	7	Humanities teacher. Grade level coordinator.
Mira (F)	Israel	13	History teacher, Leads Project based learning in school
Sita (F)	Israel	3	Literature and History teacher
Hanna (F)	Israel	3	Homeroom teachers, head of evaluation in school, takes on the vice-principal role.
David (F)	Israel	5	Science teacher in an alternative school

Audrey (F)	Netherlands	16	Math teacher basic framework, school educator, support needs pupils
Daniel (M)	Netherlands	13	Chemistry and NLT (Nature, Life, Technology teacher).
Jesse (M)	Netherlands	5	History teacher, also school subject 'vital',
Juliet (F)	Netherlands	5	Biology teacher
Maria (F)	Netherlands	5	History teacher, teacher researcher, author of a digital history method, coach of the student council
Michael (M)	Netherlands	14	Biology teacher, postdoc researcher, member of the school research team.

Highlights

- Two trajectories of teachers' agency development were found: gradual growth and bumpy moments.
- Teachers' agency within these trajectories is described as 'bounded' and 'contested'.
- Personal and contextual factors influence the course of both trajectories.
- Similarities and differences in teachers' agency between three national contexts are identified.

Teachers' perceived professional Space and their Agency

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Abstract

In order to increase student performance, governments stress the importance of standardization for teaching which is seen as a threat to teachers' professionalism. In this small-scale study we investigated the way teachers use their professional space in these changing circumstances. We studied eighteen cases of secondary education teachers in-depth, using observations, interviews, and storylines. Our analyses revealed two types of trajectories which can be characterized by *bounded* and *contested* agency. In both trajectories the importance of personal factors and environmental factors were acknowledged. Insights into the relation between perceived space and agency can promote our understanding of teacher professionalism.

Keywords (4-5 keywords)

teacher agency, development of teacher agency, professionalism, professional space