

The Agency of Secondary School English Teachers and National Curriculum Change (2006) in Pakistan: Challenges and Problems

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This paper investigates two equally important and strongly associated phenomena i.e. curriculum change and teacher agency. Our interest in this paper revolved around the argument that curriculum change and capacity building of teachers are integral to each other. This paper focused at exploring, how teacher agency to implement change is strengthened or weakened by the challenges posed by the ecological conditions or social settings (culture, structure and materials) in which they work and the extent to which teachers feel empowered to reflect on and to improve their practices (reflexivity). The setting of this research was the province of Punjab during the implementation period of the change introduced in the secondary school National Curriculum for English (2006), (Government of Pakistan, 2006). To provide a richer illustration of the variables under investigation, case studies of four schools were produced. Data was collected through the technique of one to one interviews of the secondary school English teachers; head of schools; local education authority officials and representatives of the provincial curriculum and professional development bodies. The findings revealed that teachers were seldom consulted during the planning or design phase of curriculum change 2006. No formal support was available to teachers at the district or school level to prepare them to implement curriculum change. The absence of appropriate ecological conditions in schools weakened teacher agency, which gave rise to many challenges for teachers in implementing the new curriculum (2006) successfully. The findings lead to recommendations that the provincial and district Governments should develop support mechanisms and professional development activities to enhance teacher agency to ensure the successful implementation of curriculum change.

Keywords: *curriculum change, teacher agency, national curriculum change 2006*

Introduction

In recent times, one of the significant educational developments in Pakistan is the curriculum change of 2006 (CC2006), asserted as the biggest challenge educational reforms faced in Pakistan (Aziz et al., 2014). This CC2006 was legislated for classes I to XII, scheme of studies was reviewed and 25 core subjects including Secondary English curriculum were revised (Majeed, 2009). This study explores, the agency of English teachers as instrument of change to the Secondary English curriculum, where, agency in an ecological sense is defined as capacity of teachers to ‘critically shape their

responses to problematic situation’ (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11) with autonomy and causal efficacy (Archer, 2000).

Literature Review

Last two decades have witnessed enormous surges in the area of curriculum change with many potential issues and context-specific challenges. Two notions seem to be central for introducing curricular change. The first involves recognizing the conditions in which curriculum change will be implemented. The other involves providing sufficient help and support to those responsible for implementing change (Aquino, 2000). A great deal of school improvement research has highlighted the significant role teacher

agency may play in enabling teachers to enact curriculum change. Agency (See figure 1) has been theorized and interpreted differently in different disciplines (Priestley et. al, 2015), Biesta and Tedder explain the concept as follows:

[The] concept of agency highlights that actors always act by means of their environment rather than simply in their environment . . . the achievement of the agency will always result in 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).

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) conceptualized agency as an interplay between three dimensions i.e. iteration,

practical-evaluative and projective. According to these authors, the *iteration* dimension of agency refers to and regards teachers' personal and professional histories as significant factors in the formation of their agency; The *practical-evaluative* dimension postulates that resources, culture and structures of an institution can enable or inhibit teachers to achieve agency successfully implementing curriculum change and the *projective* dimension is primarily oriented towards future and encompasses the idea that problematic situations in the implementation process of change provoke teachers to reflect on their current practices and think of alternatives to achieve improved outcomes (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Compared to these authors Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2012) proposed agency as a connection to the practical world of teachers as an emergent phenomenon, a capacity already residing in individuals (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2012).

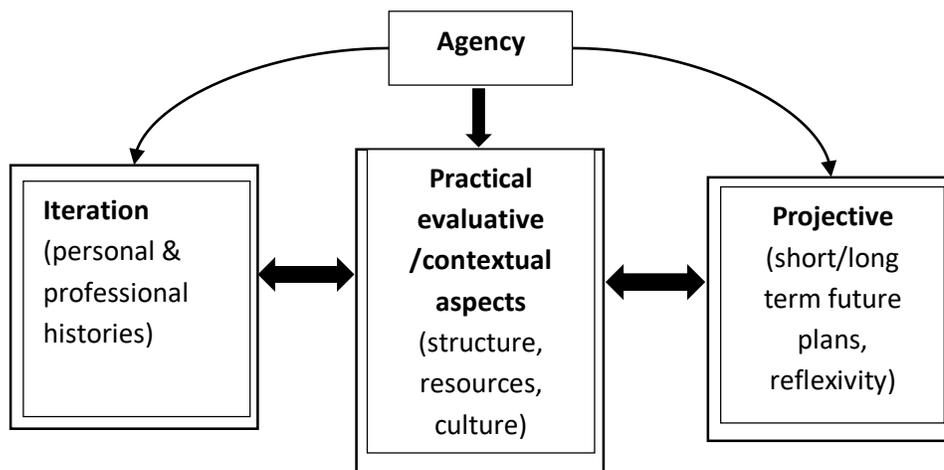


Figure 1. Agency model adapted from Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2012)

Several investigations have shown that the achievement of teacher agency for enacting change is always informed by teachers' professional and personal histories,

more specifically the age (Marker & Mehlinger, 1992; Cresdee, 2002; Hargreaves, 2005), qualification (Adey & Hewitt, 2004 in Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Maggioli Diaz, 2004; Yeung et al., 2012) and experience of teachers (Marker & Mehlinger, 1992; Hargreaves, 2005). These histories ultimately

shape teachers' perceptions and implementation strategies of curriculum change. For example, it is noted that teachers are more likely to exhibit reactive or passive agency if the change is directed from the top (Jenkins, 2014). Often, the powerful institutional forces that exist in most education systems delimit the possibilities for teachers to be agents within the re-contextualizing field (policymaking, textbooks/syllabus writing).

Marginalising teachers in the process of curriculum change minimizes the agency, and prohibits teachers to make sense of, and operationalize the ideas advanced by the reformers and other top authorities (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001). The involvement of practising teachers can generate more realistic and relevant reform projects. An example of this could be seen in Australia where teachers in most states were involved at all stages of curriculum development and performed roles such as members of curriculum advisory committee, writers, and participant in the piloting process of the curriculum (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001). Thus, involving teachers in the conceptual and development stages of curriculum change increased their professional competence and understanding of the innovation in question—and subsequently, developed an active agency essential to implement change (Franke et al., 1998; Flores, 2005; Bantwini, 2009; Rahman, 2014). Enlightening teachers about the focus and content of curriculum change help them identifying their teaching priorities and modify these priorities for learners' development in English (Rahman, *ibid*) and essential knowledge (Cross et al., 2002).

The accomplishment of teacher agency for the successful implementation of curriculum change also substantially depends on the contingencies of the contexts (Jenkins, 2014; Pantića, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). The institutional structure, culture and

resources (indicated as a practical-evaluative dimension in the agency model, Figure 1) can either foster or reduce teachers' capacity essential for the successful implementation of curriculum change (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). It has been noted that in comparison to the massive expectations and huge demands placed upon teachers and schools related to curriculum change, the resources and support they are provided with may be disproportionate to their needs (Guskey, 2002; Flores, 2005; Sheehan et al., 2013; So & Kang, 2014). An example from Kenya illustrates the gap between the intended, implemented and achieved Life Skills Education (LSE) curriculum, 2008. Only a few teachers were oriented on the contents and methodology of teaching the subject. Consequently, the few who ventured to teach LSE found it difficult to achieve the intended objectives (KIE, 2011 cited in Njeng'ere, 2014).

Fernandez et al. (2003) stressed the need for providing teachers with sufficient knowledge, time and support enabling them to enact change. If the resources necessary to implement change are not readily obtainable and simple to operate, teacher agency may be weekend (Aquino, 1976 cited in Köksal, 1995). Fernandez et al. (2003) quoted a teacher's remarks about the support available to teachers in order to implement change:

“What angered me was so many teachers working so [damned] hard to make it work in their own time and off their own backs without adequate support, materials and teacher guides, and the sheer time” (p.97).

Lack of collegial support and cooperative relationships among colleagues often act as an obstruction to effective implementation of curriculum change (Dinkelman, 2003; Fernandez et al., 2003;

Fullan et al., 2005; Jenkins, 2014). Establishing a culture of learning in schools so that teachers benefit from collegial knowledge and skills can support teacher learning and the implementation of the curriculum in more meaningful and practical ways (Fullan et al., 2005; Gibson & Brooks, 2012) and can build the internal capacity for change and development within the school (Harris, 2003).

Change in classroom practice requires more than the attainment of new knowledge and skills. It demands change in teachers' beliefs and their personal theories of teaching and learning (Guskey, 2002). Change in teachers' beliefs is difficult to achieve unless teachers have opportunities to reflect upon their practice and their own learning, to help them internalise new knowledge (Harris, 2003). The reflexive practice is a self-analysis and self-awareness process that enables teachers to divulge their assumptions and exercise their power constituents. Thus, teachers can achieve a better understanding of their beliefs, values, assumptions, and experiences to enable them to better understand the situations and external factors influencing their practice in a better way. Through a case study, Matthews and Jessel (1998) found that only one-third of the pupil teachers exemplified reflexivity by reflecting on their teaching, relating their practices to their past experiences (as a student and a teacher) and identifying the weak areas of their teaching and consequently changing them at later stages. Critical review of practices, values and assumptions allows teachers to assess their progress and also enables them to use their past experiences (iteration dimension of agency) to interpret and analyse their present situation (practical evaluative dimension of agency) with the intention of developing their action plan for the future (projective dimension of agency) (Matthews and Jessel, 1998; Bashiruddin, 2009). Thus, teachers can

become active agents in their own development (Ali, 2011) and improve the less successful aspects of their teaching practices.

Method

This research aimed to sought answers to the questions: how teacher agency may be obstructed or enhanced by ecological conditions that involve structures, culture and materials; does the new English curriculum (CC2006) entail change in the particular context, structures and materials enabling teachers to accomplish agency requisite to enact change; and how positively or negatively the iteration of the teachers could contribute to shaping agency for enacting change successfully?

Research design

To answer the questions posed in this research, a qualitative research design was employed. One of the distinct features of qualitative research is that it is considered appropriate for small samples and it allows a broad description and analysis of a research subject (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Within the qualitative approach, the critical instance case (CIC) design of case study design was found more suited to the research questions. The CIC studies help to critically study the effects of certain causes (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). The critical instance case studies offered great help to critically analyze the (negative or positive) effects of different factors (Presented in figure 1) on teacher agency and their enactment of CC2006. In order to acquire a profound understanding of the research phenomenon, four case study schools were selected where an initial analysis was performed in each case and then cross-case analysis was conducted across all the cases (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

Sample and sampling technique

Four case studies including eight secondary school teachers teaching English and four head of schools were formed through purposive sampling technique. The

purposive sampling technique which belongs to the category of non-probability sampling techniques allows selecting research participants on the basis of their knowledge, relationships and experiences regarding a research phenomenon (Freedman et al., 2007). In the present study, the selected case study sample that involved teachers and head of schools seemed to have a special relationship with the phenomenon under investigation i.e. teacher agency and curriculum change 2006. Recruiting participants through purposive sampling proved to be useful as it provided a ground to form four case studies. The case study schools were selected based on the following criteria:

- Length of service (Two old and two newly established schools)
- The geographical location (Two rural and Two urban schools)
- Gender balance (two girls' secondary schools & two boys' secondary schools)

Further, in order to investigate the practical evaluative aspect of teacher agency that involves supportive conditions such as presence of appropriate structure, culture and resources required for successful implementation of curriculum change, a sample comprising of 4 District Education Officers (DEOs); three personnel working on key positions in the Provincial Curriculum Authority (PCA)¹, the Punjab Textbook Board (PTB) and the Directorate of Staff Development (DSD, currently known as QAED), Lahore was also recruited.

Data collection

To encourage genuine and unhindered response from case study participants (teachers and head of schools), semi-structured interviews and field notes were used as methods of data collection. In-depth interviews of provincial and district

education administrators were also conducted. Using interviews as a source of data collection helped in determining the professional and contextual support teachers were provided with at school, district or provincial level enabling them to achieve agency for the successful implementation of curriculum change (CC2006).

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis has involved the responses to the semi-structured interview questions along with suitable probes. The interview data were coded. The coding process involved identifying concepts embedded within the data, organizing concepts into distinct sets and developing broad themes (Strauss, 1987). This practice allowed the researchers to identify the themes that emerged from the data (Patton, 2002). Based on the themes emerged, the interview transcripts and field notes were examined. To reduce the number, some coding categories were merged together. This rigorous process eventually led to the construction of the following three distinct themes.

1. Perceptions of CC2006
2. Help and support available to teachers to implement CC2006
3. Challenges and difficulties teachers encountered with respect to CC2006

A cross-case analysis was performed to identify the similarities and differences in the teachers' perceptions, practices and experiences regarding curriculum change and achieving agency in their individual contexts. The conception of agency (shown in figure 1) was used as a guiding framework in this research as it manifests our main research arguments about enhancing teachers' agency to implement change effectively.

¹ Merged with PTB in 2015, to establish one provincial curriculum body, named as Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Board (PCTB).

Findings

The demographics presented in table 1 show that amongst four, two schools; school A & D were located in rural communities either newly established (school A) or upgraded (school, D). The other two schools (B & C) were serving the urban community for decades.

With regards to leadership, school B and C

experience; Teacher 2: Male/5 years' experience).

Considering the claims that past histories of teachers (Iteration) may shape their perceptions of and capacity to implement change, it is worth noting that the qualification of the teachers at each case study school included MA English and MA in general subjects (History, Islamiyat, Urdu and Political Science). The school C had an exception in this regard, where teachers with general MA qualifications were teaching English. Talking about this discrepancy, the

Table 1
Demographics of the Participants of the Study

Case	School	Rank	Gender	Age (Years)	Education	Experience (Years)
School A	Newly established girls school, located in a rural community	Head of School	Female	36	MA, M.Ed.	6
		Teacher 1	Female	35	MA English	5
		Teacher 2	Female	39	MA (General)	11
School B	Old girls school, located in an urban community	Head of School	Female	48	MSC, B.Ed.	21
		Teacher 1	Female	36	MA English	6
		Teacher 2	Female	39	MA English, TOEFL	8
School C	Old boys school, located in an urban community	Head of School	Male	60	MA, M.Ed.	38
		Teacher 1	Male	36	MA (General)	6
		Teacher 2	Male	49	MA (General)	27
School D	New Boys school, recently upgraded to secondary school, located in a rural community	Head of School	Male	45	MPhil Linguistics	12
		Teacher 1	Male	42	MA English	6
		Teacher 2	Male	35	MA (General)	5

had older head teachers with more experience (Female: age=48 years/experience 21 years; Male: age=60 years/experience 38 years). In terms of teachers, School C had comparatively older teacher having more experience of teaching (Male: age=49 years/experience 27 years) than teachers in the other three case study schools. Amongst case study teachers, both teachers in case study school D seem prominent with comparatively lesser experience (Teacher 1: Male/6 years'

representative of the Punjab Curriculum Authority (PCA) said:

“In my opinion, for teaching English from class 6 to 9, the teachers must be MA English.....but, unfortunately, the Government and the school's management have their own issues and

justifications like the lack of qualified staff etc” (Interviewee 3, PCA).

In terms of professional experience, teacher 2 in school C stood out with 27 years of professional experience whereas, teacher 1 from school A had the least professional experience (5 Years) amongst all case study teacher participants. Concerning the nature and structure of CC2006, the perceptions of all the participants remained positive, for they all said that CC2006 was better than the old curriculum (2002). To them CC2006 is *more innovative, creative ...student centred and inquiry-based (Teacher 2, School C)* and reflects local and provincial needs. The case study participants perceived CC2006 centred on student learning outcomes (SLOs) and processes as compared to the content-driven approach of the previous English curriculum 2002. Teachers’ general perceptions of curriculum change (CC2006) remained positive.

“The spirit of the new curriculum is good” (Teacher 2, School B).

Minimal involvement of teachers during the change process is a dominant theme developed through the interviews data. All CC2006 related decisions were made without secondary English teachers or the heads of school (HoS) consultation claimed that they had not been involved at any stage of CC2006 and for school C (Boys, Urban) expressed concerns about most teachers know very little about the new curriculum but also argued that teachers alone cannot be held responsible as they had not been informed and orientated about English curriculum change 2006 in a timely manner.

“Since long, I have been serving as a teacher at various schools in district Narowal. However, I never heard about or met any such colleague who could

have ever been involved in any curriculum change-related activity” (Teacher 2, School C).

Much confusion and speculation were found among all the case study teacher participants about the purpose and focus of CC2006 and its implementation process. Lack of teacher involvement led to the lack of understanding of CC2006 on the part of teachers minimized their chances of achieving agency.

“We came to know about 2006 change when the process of textbooks publication was almost completed. No prior information was provided to the head of schools, and during the whole process of curriculum change, we were not asked to share our opinion and thoughts about curriculum change” (Head of School, School A).

On the issue of dissemination, a number of participants indicated the similar dichotomy of plans and practice caused by ineffective models of dissemination that ignored awareness raising, collaboration and involvement of teachers. The absence of a strong corresponding infrastructure made the situation worse. One of the teachers commented:

“Unrealistic goals were set for the implementation of CC2006. The authorities under-estimated the complexities involved in the change processes and specifically of textbook development and production” (Teacher 2, School A).

The analysis suggests that the initiators launched CC2006 without understanding the dissemination issues and its consequent impact. As insufficient attention was given to the dynamics of change (dissemination, implementation, resources etc.) not surprisingly, schools and teachers had little time to plan suitable teaching and learning activities. Delayed dissemination intensified local complications, which became evident through a lack of micro-level support available to teachers.

Regarding the provision of resources all the case study teachers expressed the same level of dissatisfaction:

“The school has no funds to spend on producing teaching-learning resources.... except the single resource blackboard in the class, writing on it with chalk, I feel is time-consuming. The colourful charts that you see in my classroom are all prepared for students’ expense” (Teacher 2, School B).

Due to teaching in a rural school, teacher 1 in school A, found herself in a more challenging context in this regard, as she stated:

“The guidelines for teachers given in the textbook suggest many things to use while teaching a certain content, but the reality is that we don’t have the recommended resources in our classroom.....I can hardly prepare charts to support students’ learning and this is even the edge point of botheration. Most

of my students belong to below average middle class and I do not want to put an extra financial burden on students by asking them to produce learning materials” (Teacher 1, school A).

Strikingly, urban and rural schools faced similar resources related challenges that impinged upon teachers’ capacity to implement CC2006. The basic elements of classroom infrastructure such as furniture, electricity, conditioning/fans were missing in all case study schools. This is echoed from the following statement of a teacher:

“I really want to use interactive teaching methods but due to the non-conducive classroom environment and lack of time, I could not use it often. I do not have ideal conditions for using interactive teaching methods” (Teacher 2, School D).

The absence of resources proved a big barrier (Teacher 1, school D) to implement CC2006 effectively and this is what made CC2006 ironical from teachers’ point of view. It is evident from the following remarks, how the absence of appropriate teaching-learning resources inhibited teachers’ agency to implement CC2006 effectively:

“Other subjects may be taught without AV Aids, but so far as the teaching of language is concerned, it is not possible without the use of AV Aids” (T1, Male, aged 42, MA English, 6 years’ experience, school D-urban).

Our Government has changed the curriculum without proper planning....actually, this is a bitter reality that the people who design the curriculum content in Pakistan are completely unaware of the ground reality. They remain sitting in their offices and unaware of the miserable condition of our schools and the (intelligence) level of our students. We are the teachers, we are in the field; we have to face these things (in the classroom)” (Teacher 1, School C).

In response to teachers’ complaints about the absence of suitable materials and support, one of the heads of the school commented:

“... I believe that if we are craved to do something, no hurdles can stop us from reaching our goals” (Head of School, School B).

The cross-case analysis further indicates that teachers were available with minimal professional development opportunities within their work context, as their schools were not allocated with sufficient funds to raise their professional knowledge and skills beneficial to the implementation of CC2006. Criticizing the one shot all kind of training, teachers remarked:

Thinking of effective change without upgrading teachers’ capacities is just a daydream (Teacher 2, School C)

It was found that most teachers attended a two-week training workshop, organized by the Directorate of Staff Development Lahore; the only responsible

body in the public sector for coordinating TPD in Punjab. As no other training/support was available to teachers at either district or school level to facilitate the implementation of CC2006, and no discrete funds were allocated to secondary schools for the purpose of TPD.

“I have been teaching for the last four years but cumulatively, I had been provided with only one professional development, which I feel is insufficient. There must be at least, one formal training for English teachers every year” (Teacher 2, School B).

Teachers’ point of view was endorsed by one head of school who stated:

“Professional development must be an integral component of the curriculum change process. The desired benefits of curriculum change can never be achieved until or unless the teachers are trained to implement the proposed change” (Head of School, School A).

Many teachers highlighted the culture prevailing in their schools and perceived it least supportive. The collegial culture and support (practical evaluative dimension of agency), which is significant in envisioning and implementing change in the schools, was largely missing in the case study schools.

“The mouths are open to criticize but there is no word of appreciation on good work. This is very discouraging. We need to change this attitude” (Teacher 2, School D).

“Our system in itself works as a barrier. Usually, the training programs are held during term time and the school administration does not want to send the teachers on professional training, as it is thought that teachers’ absence during peak teaching time will affect students’ results” (Teacher 2, School C).

Compared to school B (urban/girls) and school C (urban/boys), collaborative school culture was less prevailing in school A (rural/girls) and school D (rural/boys) where teachers appeared working in isolation. Poor collegial relationships adversely affected teacher agency to enact CC2006.

“What hurts me the most is teachers’ reluctance to share anything with each other....I don’t blame others, in fact, we the teachers need to change ourselves and our traditional mindset (Teacher 1, School A).

The following remarks of a District Education Officer (DEO) confirm the absence of suitable social structure and culture of the school (Practical evaluative) needed for successfully implementing curriculum change:

“Our teachers lack in sharing the knowledge and skills they learn through professional development” (District Education Officer, 3).

About the short-term and long-term objectives and plans of improvement, (the projective dimension of agency), many excerpts from the interviews with teachers

illustrate that teachers were aware of the significance of reflexion and generally re-thought their conventions and experiences to meet the implementation challenges of CC2006.

...I always want to do something new which could help me to explore my potentials as a teacher (Teacher 1, School A).

However, due to the unavoidable challenges and pressures prevented teachers to act upon their self-development and improvement plans. The most striking finding from our research is that no significant influence of age and experience had been seen on teachers’ agency, however a notable contrast among teachers because of their academic qualification can be seen. Compared to other academic qualifications, teachers with an MA English had a more positive agency to face the challenges posed to them by the CC2006.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, the researchers investigated two equally important and strongly associated phenomena i.e. curriculum change and teacher agency. Most researchers (Fullan, 2001; Jones and Anderson, 2001; Cross et al., 2002; Craig, 2006; Shkedi, 2006; Bantwini, 2009; Shower, 2010; Rahman, 2014) highlight the significance of involving teachers in change related activities and indicate the critical consequences in the form of minimal teacher agency (Pantića, 2015), if teacher participation during curriculum change is neglected.

Corresponding to the earlier researches (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001; Fullan et al., 2005; Westbrook et al., 2013; Jenkins, 2014) the present research found that the CC2006 was introduced without consulting teachers and building their capacity to enact change. The top-down strategy employed to

introduce CC2006 made teachers feel ignored, uninvolved and uninformed about CC2006. This also resulted in teachers' lack of understanding, ownership and collaboration regarding CC2006. This did not only challenge the teachers but also affect the entire process of the implementation of CC2006.

With regard to the role of iterations in building agency, the findings of cross-case analysis appear similar to the findings of earlier researches (Marker and Mehlinger, 1992; Cresdee, 2002; Van Driel, Beijjaard & Verloop, 2000) that indicate substantial influence of personal and professional histories of teachers on teacher agency either positively or less positively. The findings imply that the teachers with a relevant teaching qualification and appropriate teaching experience had more positive teacher agency and the ability to better cope with the challenges they encountered during the implementation process of curriculum change 2006.

The previous studies concur that teacher agency substantially depends on the contingencies of the contexts and factors that shape the ecologies of teachers' work. An imbalance between pressure and support could lead to miserable consequences. (Jenkins, 2014; Pantića, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). On a similar tone, the findings of this study imply that in comparison to the massive expectations and huge demands placed upon teachers and schools related to the implementation of the curriculum change 2006, the resources and support they provided with were disproportionate to their needs.

This study found that the absence of appropriate structures, culture, materials and professional support made it hard for teachers to enact change effectively. The cross-case analysis suggests that a culture of collegial cooperation and support which helps teachers to enhance agency was apparently missing in

the case study schools. It is concluded that if teachers had been provided with appropriate ecological conditions and supportive mechanisms, they might have exercised considerably high agency, essential to implement change effectively (Guskey, 2002; Flores, 2005; Sheehan et al., 2013; So and Kang, 2014)

As the CC2006 was introduced mechanically without involving teachers and considering the consequences (Braund et al, 2013 cited in Westbrook et al., 2013) thus this imposed change created lack of interest in and understanding of curriculum change among the teachers. It is concluded that if teachers were properly involved in the planning and design phase of the CC2006, and provided with sufficient help and support in their immediate context, they might have achieved positive high agency to implement CC2006 more meaningfully.

To address the agency issues in future we suggest that personal and professional histories of teachers and their reflexive abilities may be taken into account while expecting them to enact curriculum changes successfully.

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