

Abstract

There is a growing demand for attention given to the complexity of teacher work within the early childhood context. Teacher work hinges on making ethical decisions in their professional practices to address children's diverse needs and concerns, such as those of socioeconomically disadvantaged children. In Hong Kong, kindergarten teachers encounter multiple challenges in working with socioeconomically disadvantaged children, many of whom live in poverty and suffer from severe financial constraints and adverse living conditions. This study argues that professional agency grounded in caring ethics and social justice is crucial to building teachers' capacity for ethical decision-making, not only for supporting vulnerable children but also for negotiating changes in the influence of neoliberal policy on work environment. Such policy discourse increasingly emphasises managerial accountability (e.g. universal standard for early childhood services) and market force in kindergartens' daily operations, often narrowing the focus to performativity, commodification, competition and efficiency. It is in conflict with teachers' professional values and may affect their ethical judgments, which may in turn impact how kindergarten teachers conceive and experience professional agency at work. Recent critical scholarship advocates the importance of teachers' professional agency in reconstructing their sense of professionalism in neoliberal times. This alternative viewpoint has been discussed in current literature, but how kindergarten teachers perceive, exercise and negotiate their professional agency in the face of a highly complex work environment is largely unexplored. The proposed study addresses this gap by adopting a phenomenographic approach to investigate kindergarten teachers' conceptions and experiences of professional agency in their daily work. Data will be collected through interviews with kindergarten teachers from Hong Kong districts with high poverty ratios to identify different ways of interpreting and experiencing professional agency when working with socioeconomically disadvantaged children. Classroom observations and participation in teacher collaborative meetings will be conducted to enrich the data set. This study will yield an in-depth contextualised account of professional agency manifested within the constraints in different socio-cultural and institutional contexts. It will advance the knowledge of professional agency for reconstructing the meaning of teacher professionalism. The findings of this study will inform practical ways to help kindergarten teachers in the face of challenges and search for opportunities by exercising professional agency in a complex work environment. The study will also generate recommendations for policymakers and academics to review early childhood teacher education and professional development in support of kindergarten teachers working with socioeconomically disadvantaged children.