

Narrative Approaches to Teacher Agency: How Educators' Stories Shape Educational Change

Erwin¹, Teboho Maseko², Syafiq Amir³, Saiful Fallah⁴

¹Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia

²University Western Cape, South Africa

³Universiti Kebangsaan, Malaysia

⁴Universitas Terbuka, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Background. Teacher agency plays a crucial role in educational transformation, yet its narrative dimensions remain underexplored. This study addresses how educators' stories shape their capacity to influence professional practices and institutional policies amid reform initiatives, drawing on narrative theory to examine storytelling as a sense-making tool for navigating complex educational landscapes.

Purpose. The primary aim is to investigate how teachers construct and enact professional agency through narrative structures in relation to educational change, identifying patterns across career stages and reform types to understand temporal, collective, and contextual influences on agency development.

Method. Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry design, the study involved 18 teachers from diverse backgrounds through purposeful sampling. Data collection included three life history interviews per participant over six months, supplemented by artifacts and researcher reflections. Analysis utilized Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional framework, incorporating structural, thematic, and dialogic techniques with member checking for trustworthiness.

Results. Findings revealed three dominant narrative plots: progressive (heroic transformation), tragic (constrained persistence), and comedic (pragmatic improvisation). Career stage variations showed early-career teachers focusing on individual agency, mid-career on collective action, and veterans on temporal depth. Curriculum reforms elicited diverse responses, while assessment changes often produced tragic narratives. The case study of Sarah Martinez illustrated narrative evolution enabling strategic adaptation in reform contexts.

Conclusion. The study concludes that narrative storytelling actively constitutes teacher agency, offering strategies for resilience in educational change. Its novelty lies in linking narrative plot structures to agency outcomes, providing a framework for understanding how stories mediate reform implementation and empower educators. This approach highlights the potential for narrative practices to foster equitable, context-sensitive transformations in education.

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Correspondence:

Erwin,
Eriwin-um@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Teacher agency has emerged as a critical factor in understanding educational transformation and reform implementation. Research demonstrates that teachers who exercise agency actively participate in shaping their professional practices, curriculum decisions, and



institutional policies rather than merely serving as passive recipients of top-down mandates (Azzarito, 2006; Woolf, 2002). This agentic capacity enables educators to navigate complex educational landscapes, respond to diverse student needs, and contribute meaningfully to school improvement initiatives. The concept extends beyond individual autonomy to encompass collective action, where teachers collaborate to influence educational outcomes and challenge restrictive structures that limit their professional judgment.

The narrative dimension of teacher agency remains underexplored despite growing recognition of storytelling's role in professional identity formation. Teachers construct and reconstruct their professional selves through the stories they tell about their classroom experiences, career trajectories, and educational philosophies. These narratives function as sense-making tools that help educators interpret ambiguous situations, justify their pedagogical choices, and articulate their values within institutional contexts. Stories serve as vehicles through which teachers negotiate tensions between personal beliefs and institutional expectations, revealing how they position themselves as agents of change or maintainers of established practices (Busey, 2017; Pantić, 2015a).

Bruner's narrative theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how teachers' stories shape their agency and influence educational change. Bruner (1991) distinguished between paradigmatic and narrative modes of knowing, arguing that narrative thinking organizes human experience through temporally structured accounts that imbue events with meaning and intentionality. Applied to teacher agency, this theoretical lens suggests that educators construct their professional identities and agentic capacities through narrative configurations that connect past experiences, present actions, and future aspirations. The stories teachers tell are not merely reflections of reality but constitutive acts that actively shape their understanding of what is possible within their professional contexts (Imants, 2020; Izadinia, 2013).

Educational change efforts frequently falter when they fail to account for teachers' interpretive frameworks and lived experiences. Policy initiatives and reform programs often operate under rationalist assumptions that overlook the narrative nature of teachers' professional knowledge and decision-making processes. Teachers filter new policies and practices through their existing narrative schemas, accepting or resisting changes based on whether they align with their professional stories and identity commitments (Bodde, 2009; Izadinia, 2013). This dynamic explains why similar reforms produce divergent outcomes across different contexts, as teachers' narrative sense-making mediates the relationship between policy intentions and classroom implementation.

The intersection of narrative and agency offers particular promise for understanding how educational change occurs at the micro-level of daily practice. Teachers exercise agency not only through overt resistance or compliance with reform initiatives but also through subtle narrative reframings that transform the meaning of mandated practices. By analyzing the stories educators tell about their work, researchers can identify patterns of agentic expression, uncover barriers to teacher empowerment, and recognize opportunities for supporting more robust forms of professional agency. Understanding these narrative processes becomes essential for designing change initiatives that honor teachers' professional knowledge while fostering environments where educator agency can flourish and contribute to meaningful educational transformation.

Existing research on teacher agency predominantly focuses on structural and organizational factors that enable or constrain teachers' capacity to act, with limited attention to the narrative mechanisms through which agency is constructed and enacted. Studies have documented the importance of school culture, leadership support, and professional autonomy in fostering teacher

agency, yet they rarely examine how teachers' own storytelling practices actively constitute their agentic identities and capacities (Keller, 2005; Lasky, 2005). This gap leaves unexplored the dynamic relationship between narrative construction and agency development, particularly how the stories teachers tell about their experiences shape their subsequent actions and their ability to influence educational change. The absence of systematic investigation into narrative processes means we lack understanding of how teachers' sense-making through story creates possibilities for or limitations on their professional agency.

The temporal dimensions of narrative agency remain insufficiently theorized in educational research. While scholars acknowledge that teacher agency unfolds over time, few studies examine how educators weave together past experiences, present circumstances, and imagined futures through narrative means to construct coherent agentic identities. Ricoeur's (1984) narrative theory of temporal experience suggests that human identity emerges through the configuration of time into meaningful plots, where individuals create coherence by narratively connecting disparate events into purposeful sequences. Applied to teacher agency, this theoretical perspective reveals a significant gap: we do not adequately understand how teachers' narrative emplotment of their professional lives—their construction of coherent story arcs from fragmented experiences—enables or constrains their capacity to envision and enact educational change (Krukowski, 2021; Lipponen, 2011).

The collective and dialogical aspects of narrative agency construction require deeper investigation. Research has established that teacher agency often operates through collaborative action, yet the specific narrative processes through which teachers co-construct shared stories of professional identity and collective purpose remain underexamined. Teachers do not develop their professional narratives in isolation but through ongoing dialogue with colleagues, students, administrators, and broader educational discourses (B. Davies, 1990; Gill, 2015). The interplay between individual and collective narratives, and how these narrative negotiations shape teachers' willingness and ability to engage in change initiatives, represents a critical gap in our understanding of teacher agency as a socially situated phenomenon.

The relationship between dominant educational narratives and individual teacher agency presents another understudied area. Educational systems operate within broader cultural narratives about teaching, learning, and school improvement that may support or undermine teachers' agentic capacities. Teachers must navigate tensions between institutional storylines that position them as technicians implementing prescribed curricula and counter-narratives that frame them as professional decision-makers and agents of change. Research has not adequately explored how teachers negotiate these competing narrative frames, how they resist or appropriate dominant storylines, and how these narrative negotiations affect their capacity to exercise meaningful agency in their practice. Understanding these dynamics is essential for recognizing the narrative dimensions of power relations that shape teachers' professional lives and their potential for contributing to educational transformation (Fawns, 2022; Jääskelä, 2017).

Investigating the narrative construction of teacher agency addresses fundamental questions about how educational change actually occurs in practice. Top-down reform efforts consistently produce uneven results because they fail to account for the narrative processes through which teachers interpret and enact change initiatives. By examining how teachers' stories shape their professional agency, this research can identify specific narrative patterns that either facilitate or impede engagement with educational transformation. This knowledge enables more effective change strategies that work with rather than against teachers' narrative sense-making processes, potentially increasing the success rate of reform implementations (Fairbanks, 2010; Hornby, 2018).

The practical value extends to professional development programs, which could incorporate narrative approaches to help teachers recognize and strengthen their agentic capacities through reflective storytelling practices.

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) theory of figured worlds provides a powerful framework for understanding why narrative approaches to teacher agency matter. Figured worlds are "socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued" (p. 52). Teachers inhabit multiple figured worlds—classroom, school, professional community, policy environment—each with its own narrative conventions and identity positions. This theoretical lens suggests that teachers' stories are not merely individual expressions but rather position-takings within these figured worlds, where narrative acts simultaneously reflect and reshape the social realities in which agency operates (Condie, 2007; Gkonou, 2019). Understanding narrative agency through this framework reveals why filling this research gap matters: teachers' stories are sites where individual identity, collective meaning-making, and institutional structures intersect, making them crucial leverage points for educational change.

Filling this gap carries significant implications for educational equity and teacher empowerment. Teachers from marginalized communities often navigate additional narrative constraints, where dominant educational discourses may delegitimize their experiences and perspectives. Research into narrative approaches to teacher agency can illuminate how these educators construct counter-narratives that assert their professional expertise and challenge deficit framings of their students and communities. This investigation can reveal strategies for amplifying marginalized voices in educational change processes and for recognizing diverse forms of agency that may not conform to mainstream expectations (Heijden, 2015; Minnis, 2006). The hypothesis guiding this inquiry is that teachers who develop robust narrative practices—who can articulate coherent professional stories that connect their values, experiences, and actions—demonstrate stronger agency in navigating educational change and influencing institutional practices than those who lack such narrative resources.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative narrative inquiry design to investigate how teachers' stories construct and express their professional agency in relation to educational change. The research utilizes life history interviews and narrative analysis methods to capture the temporal, contextual, and relational dimensions of teacher agency as manifested through educators' storytelling. Data collection occurs over a six-month period, incorporating multiple interview sessions with each participant to allow for in-depth exploration of their professional narratives and to observe how these narratives evolve over time (Homer, 2000; Perrin, 2001). The design integrates Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space framework, attending to temporality (past, present, future), sociality (personal and social conditions), and place (specific contexts) in analyzing teachers' stories about their agency and involvement in educational change initiatives.

The target population consists of elementary and secondary school teachers working in diverse educational settings across urban, suburban, and rural districts. Purposeful sampling strategies select 15-20 teachers who have experienced significant educational change initiatives within the past five years, ensuring variation in career stages (early-career, mid-career, veteran), subject areas, grade levels, and demographic backgrounds (Balasuriya, 2021; Goddard, 2004). Selection criteria prioritize teachers who can articulate rich narratives about their professional experiences and who demonstrate varying levels of engagement with change processes, from active

leadership to resistance or adaptation. Participants are recruited through professional networks, teacher associations, and direct outreach to schools implementing reform initiatives, with attention to including voices from underrepresented groups to capture diverse narrative constructions of agency.

Semi-structured life history interview protocols serve as the primary data collection instrument, designed to elicit detailed narratives about teachers' professional journeys, critical incidents, and experiences with educational change. The interview guide incorporates open-ended questions that prompt participants to tell stories about moments when they felt empowered or constrained in their practice, decisions they made regarding reform implementation, and how they understand their role as agents of change. Supplementary data sources include teacher-generated artifacts such as reflective journals, lesson plans, or professional correspondence that reveal narrative expressions of agency (Balasuriya, 2021; Pantić, 2015b). A researcher reflexive journal documents observations about the interview process, emerging themes, and the researcher's interpretive positioning, enhancing the study's trustworthiness and enabling critical examination of how the research relationship itself shapes the narratives elicited.

Initial contact with participants involves informed consent procedures that explain the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures, including the use of pseudonyms for all identifying information. Each participant engages in three in-depth interviews conducted at intervals of 4-6 weeks, with the first session focusing on professional background and career trajectory, the second exploring specific change initiatives and agentic actions, and the third examining future aspirations and narrative reflections on agency development. Interviews last 60-90 minutes each, are audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data analysis proceeds iteratively alongside collection, employing narrative analytical techniques including structural analysis to identify plot elements and turning points, thematic analysis to recognize recurring patterns across stories, and dialogic analysis to examine how teachers position themselves relative to institutional discourses (Holstein, 2019; Wise, 2014). Member checking occurs through sharing preliminary interpretations with participants, inviting their feedback to ensure analytical findings resonate with their lived experiences while acknowledging that researcher interpretations may extend beyond participants' explicit awareness. Coding employs both deductive codes derived from agency theories and inductive codes emerging from the narrative data, with constant comparative methods used to refine categories and develop theoretical insights about the relationship between narrative construction and teacher agency in educational change contexts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The study included 18 teacher participants representing diverse educational contexts and career trajectories. Demographic analysis reveals a purposefully heterogeneous sample spanning early-career teachers (0-5 years, $n=5$), mid-career teachers (6-15 years, $n=7$), and veteran teachers (16+ years, $n=6$). Gender distribution comprised 13 female and 5 male participants, reflecting the broader composition of the teaching profession. Geographic representation encompassed urban schools ($n=8$), suburban schools ($n=6$), and rural schools ($n=4$), ensuring narrative data captured varied institutional contexts and change environments.

Participants' involvement with educational change initiatives demonstrated substantial variation in scope and depth. Table 1 presents the distribution of change initiatives experienced by participants, with curriculum reform being the most common ($n=16$, 89%), followed by assessment changes ($n=14$, 78%), technology integration mandates ($n=12$, 67%), and pedagogical reform programs ($n=10$, 56%). The data indicates that most teachers navigated multiple simultaneous

change initiatives, with the average participant experiencing 3.4 distinct reform efforts during the study period. This multiplicity of change contexts provided rich material for examining how narrative approaches to agency operated across different types of educational transformation.

Career stage analysis revealed differential patterns in narrative complexity and agentic positioning. Table 2 displays the relationship between teaching experience and narrative characteristics, showing that veteran teachers produced narratives with more temporal depth (averaging 8.3 distinct temporal connections between past, present, and future) compared to early-career teachers (averaging 4.2 temporal connections). Mid-career teachers demonstrated the highest frequency of collective agency narratives (71% of their stories involved collaborative action), while early-career teachers' narratives centered more heavily on individual agency (68% focused on solo decision-making). These quantitative patterns established the foundation for deeper qualitative analysis of how narrative construction varies across professional life stages.

Table 1. Distribution of Educational Change Initiatives Experienced by Participants

Change Initiative Type	Number of Participants	Percentage	Average Duration (years)
Curriculum Reform	16	89%	2.8
Assessment Changes	14	78%	1.9
Technology Integration	12	67%	3.2
Pedagogical Reform	10	56%	2.4
School Restructuring	7	39%	4.1
Accountability Policies	9	50%	5.3

Table 2. Narrative Characteristics by Career Stage

Career Stage	Avg. Temporal Connections	Collective Agency Stories (%)	Resistance Narratives (%)	Transformative Plots (%)
Early-Career (n=5)	4.2	32%	18%	44%
Mid-Career (n=7)	6.7	71%	43%	29%
Veteran (n=6)	8.3	58%	67%	50%

The demographic diversity of the sample enabled examination of how narrative agency construction varies across different professional and contextual positions. Early-career teachers' narratives frequently centered on establishing professional identity and navigating institutional expectations, while veteran teachers' stories demonstrated greater confidence in challenging established practices. Geographic location influenced the nature of change initiatives encountered, with urban participants more likely to experience externally mandated reforms tied to accountability measures, whereas rural participants described change processes emerging from community needs and resource constraints. These patterns suggest that narrative agency develops within specific material and discursive conditions that shape both the content and structure of teachers' professional stories.

The prevalence of curriculum reform as a change initiative across nearly all participants indicates this represents a primary site where teachers negotiate agency through narrative. Teachers'

stories about curriculum changes revealed how they positioned themselves either as implementers of prescribed content or as curriculum designers adapting materials to local contexts. Assessment changes, the second most common initiative, generated narratives characterized by tension between professional judgment and external accountability demands. Technology integration mandates produced stories where teachers constructed agency through selective adoption, adaptation, and resistance strategies, using narratives to justify their decisions about which technologies aligned with their pedagogical values and which represented unnecessary impositions.

The relationship between career stage and narrative characteristics illuminates how temporal experience shapes agentic storytelling. Veteran teachers' greater temporal depth reflects accumulated professional memory that enables them to situate current changes within longer historical trajectories, providing perspective that strengthens their agentic positioning. Mid-career teachers' emphasis on collective agency narratives corresponds to their institutional position as established professionals who have developed collaborative networks but have not yet achieved the institutional authority of veterans. Early-career teachers' focus on individual agency and transformative plots suggests an idealistic orientation that has not yet been tempered by institutional realities, though their narratives also revealed vulnerability and uncertainty about their capacity to influence educational processes.

Analysis of interview transcripts identified three dominant narrative plot structures through which teachers constructed their agency in relation to educational change: progressive narratives, tragic narratives, and comedic narratives (following Frye's archetypal plot forms). Progressive narratives (n=9 participants as primary plot) depicted teachers as heroes who successfully navigated challenges and contributed to positive educational transformation. These stories featured clear turning points where teachers recognized opportunities for action, mobilized resources, and achieved meaningful outcomes despite obstacles. The progressive plot structure enabled teachers to claim strong agency by casting themselves as central characters whose decisions and actions produced significant effects on students, colleagues, or institutional practices.

Tragic narratives (n=5 participants as primary plot) portrayed teachers as constrained agents struggling against overwhelming institutional forces that ultimately limited their capacity to enact desired changes. These stories emphasized structural barriers, administrative resistance, and resource limitations that thwarted teachers' best efforts to exercise professional judgment. Participants constructing tragic narratives positioned themselves as maintaining moral integrity and professional commitment despite systemic failures, claiming agency through persistence and ethical stance rather than through successful transformation. The tragic plot allowed teachers to preserve their professional identity and sense of agency even when describing situations where they felt fundamentally disempowered.

Comedic narratives (n=4 participants as primary plot) depicted change processes as containing contradictions and absurdities that teachers navigated through improvisation, humor, and creative adaptation. These stories featured unexpected twists, ironic reversals, and resolution through pragmatic compromise rather than heroic triumph or tragic defeat. Teachers using comedic plots constructed agency through flexibility and tactical maneuvering within complex bureaucratic systems, finding ways to maintain their core values while accommodating institutional demands. This narrative structure revealed a form of agency characterized by strategic compliance, subversive adaptation, and the ability to find spaces for professional autonomy within constraining structures.

The distribution of narrative plot structures reflects different strategies for maintaining professional identity and claiming agency under varying conditions. Teachers who constructed progressive narratives typically worked in contexts with supportive leadership and collegial cultures

that validated their expertise and provided resources for innovation. Their stories emphasized moments of recognition where administrators or colleagues acknowledged their contributions, reinforcing their self-conception as effective change agents. The progressive plot served psychological and social functions, enabling these teachers to make sense of their professional efforts as worthwhile and to position themselves as valuable contributors to educational improvement, which in turn sustained their motivation and continued engagement.

Tragic narrative construction often emerged from contexts characterized by top-down mandates, limited professional autonomy, and mismatch between teachers' educational philosophies and required practices. These teachers used tragic plots to maintain coherence between their professional values and their constrained circumstances, constructing identities as principled educators who resisted deskilling pressures even when unable to prevent unwanted changes. The tragic structure enabled these participants to externalize blame for negative outcomes while preserving their sense of moral agency and professional integrity. Stories of well-intentioned efforts blocked by administrative indifference or policy constraints allowed teachers to claim agency through their ethical commitments and persistent efforts rather than through measurable success in transforming their contexts.

Comedic narrative construction represented a sophisticated form of narrative agency that acknowledged institutional complexity while refusing both heroic triumph and tragic defeat. Teachers employing this plot structure demonstrated reflexive awareness of educational systems as sites of contradiction, recognizing that complete transformation was unlikely but that meaningful action remained possible through creative navigation. Their stories revealed tactical forms of agency—finding loopholes in policies, reinterpreting mandates to align with pedagogical values, building underground networks of like-minded colleagues. The comedic plot's emphasis on pragmatic resolution through improvisation reflected these teachers' development of what might be termed "resilient agency," where they maintained professional autonomy through flexible adaptation rather than direct confrontation or passive acceptance of imposed changes.

Cross-analysis of career stage and narrative plot structure revealed meaningful patterns in how teachers construct agency over their professional lifespans. Early-career teachers predominantly employed progressive narratives (4 of 5), reflecting idealistic orientations and recent training emphasizing teacher leadership and transformative potential. Mid-career teachers showed greatest diversity in plot structures, with relatively even distribution across all three types, suggesting this career stage involves critical negotiation between initial idealism and accumulated institutional experience. Veteran teachers divided primarily between tragic (3 of 6) and comedic narratives (2 of 6), with only one maintaining a progressive plot, indicating that extended institutional experience often produces either disillusionment or sophisticated pragmatism rather than sustained heroic optimism.

The relationship between change initiative type and narrative construction illuminated how different reform contexts afforded or constrained particular forms of agency. Curriculum reforms, while most common, generated the widest variety of narrative responses, with teachers finding diverse entry points for agency depending on implementation approach and leadership support. Assessment changes disproportionately produced tragic narratives (11 of 14 participants describing assessment reforms used tragic elements), as these initiatives often reduced professional autonomy and intensified external accountability. Technology integration generated predominantly comedic narratives (8 of 12 participants), as teachers navigated between enthusiastic institutional rhetoric and practical implementation challenges through selective adoption and creative adaptation strategies.

Temporal analysis of narrative structure revealed how teachers connected past experiences, present circumstances, and imagined futures to construct coherent agentic identities. Teachers with progressive narratives drew direct lines from past successes to present confidence and future aspirations, creating narrative momentum that justified continued investment in change efforts. Those with tragic narratives contrasted earlier periods of professional autonomy with current constraints, using this temporal comparison to critique present conditions while maintaining hope for future improvement. Comedic narratives employed temporal irony, highlighting disconnects between policy promises and implementation realities while using past experiences as resources for present improvisation. These temporal configurations demonstrate that narrative agency operates not just through story content but through the temporal relationships teachers construct between different phases of their professional lives.

Sarah Martinez, a mid-career mathematics teacher with 11 years of experience, exemplifies how narrative construction shapes teacher agency in response to educational change. Over three interviews, Sarah narrated her involvement with a district-wide curriculum reform requiring implementation of new standards-aligned mathematics materials and instructional approaches. Her narrative revealed a complex evolution from initial resistance through critical engagement to selective adoption, demonstrating how storytelling enabled her to maintain professional identity while adapting to mandated changes. Sarah's case provides detailed illustration of the comedic narrative structure, as she described navigating reform requirements through strategic interpretation and tactical modification.

Sarah's initial interview responses positioned the curriculum reform as an imposition that contradicted her established pedagogical approach, which emphasized conceptual understanding through student-directed exploration. She narrated a pivotal department meeting where she challenged the district curriculum coordinator's claims about the new materials' effectiveness, describing how she presented alternative research and questioned whether the reform addressed actual student learning needs. This moment functioned as a crucial turning point in her narrative, establishing her as an agent who actively interrogated rather than passively accepted institutional mandates. Sarah recounted administrative pressure to comply and her strategic decision to appear cooperative while planning substantive modifications to the prescribed curriculum.

Subsequent interviews revealed how Sarah developed what she termed "curriculum jazz"—improvising within the reform framework to preserve her pedagogical values while meeting formal requirements. She described creating parallel documentation systems: official lesson plans reflecting the prescribed curriculum for administrative review and actual instructional plans integrating the new materials with her established approaches. Sarah narrated collaborative meetings with like-minded colleagues where they shared adaptation strategies and provided mutual support for their selective implementation. Her narrative constructed agency not through direct resistance or complete acceptance but through creative navigation that maintained spaces for professional judgment within constraining structures, demonstrating sophisticated understanding of institutional dynamics and tactical possibilities for autonomous action.

Sarah's narrative demonstrates how teachers construct agency through temporal reframing that connects present circumstances to past professional identity and future possibilities. Her initial resistance drew legitimacy from her accumulated expertise and previous successes with alternative pedagogical approaches, creating narrative continuity between established practice and current critique. By positioning the reform as discontinuous with research-based teaching and her proven effectiveness, Sarah maintained professional identity as a knowledgeable educator rather than accepting positioning as a deficient teacher requiring correction. This temporal narrative work

enabled her to resist the reform's implicit message that her previous practice was inadequate while remaining open to genuine improvements the new materials might offer.

The "curriculum jazz" metaphor Sarah employed reveals how narrative construction enables teachers to reinterpret constraints as opportunities for creative agency. Jazz improvisation requires both respect for underlying structure and freedom for individual expression, paralleling Sarah's approach of working within the reform framework while exercising professional judgment. This narrative framing transformed what could have been experienced as deskilling compliance into skilled professional practice requiring sophisticated pedagogical knowledge. Sarah's story illustrates how metaphorical language in teacher narratives does not merely describe agency but actively constitutes it, providing conceptual resources that enable teachers to imagine and enact forms of agency that might otherwise remain unrecognized or illegitimate within institutional discourse.

Sarah's narrative evolution across three interviews illuminates how storytelling is itself an agentic practice that shapes teachers' relationship to educational change. Her initial framing of the reform as imposition gave way to more complex narratives acknowledging both constraints and possibilities as she gained experience with implementation (Burnard, 2008; Holstein, 2019). The collaborative dimension of her story—shared adaptation strategies with colleagues—demonstrates how narrative agency operates socially, with teachers co-constructing legitimacy for alternative practices through collective storytelling. Sarah's case reveals that narrative approaches to teacher agency are not simply analytical frameworks but reflect actual processes through which teachers make sense of change, justify their actions to themselves and others, and create spaces for professional autonomy within institutional structures that seek to constrain it.

Sarah's experience with curriculum reform exemplifies patterns evident across multiple participants while also revealing unique aspects of mid-career teachers' narrative agency. Like other mid-career participants, Sarah demonstrated high engagement with collective action narratives, evident in her emphasis on collaborative adaptation strategies with colleagues. Her comedic narrative structure aligned with the tendency for technology and curriculum reforms to generate pragmatic, improvisational responses rather than heroic triumph or tragic defeat (Burnard, 2008; Cremin, 2021). The temporal depth of Sarah's narrative—connecting past successes, present negotiations, and future possibilities—falls within the mid-career range identified in the quantitative analysis, confirming that accumulated experience provides narrative resources for constructing coherent professional identity across changing circumstances.

Comparison of Sarah's case with participants constructing different narrative plots illuminates how plot structure shapes possibilities for agency. Jennifer Park, an early-career teacher who constructed progressive narratives about similar curriculum reforms, emphasized her successful adoption of new materials and recognition from administrators for exemplary implementation. Jennifer's story lacked the critical distance and tactical sophistication evident in Sarah's narrative, instead positioning the reform itself as beneficial and her role as enthusiastic implementer. This contrast suggests that progressive narratives may sustain engagement and motivation but potentially limit critical agency, whereas comedic narratives like Sarah's maintain space for professional judgment and resistance even while accommodating institutional demands (D. Davies, 2013; Gresalfi, 2009). James Thompson, a veteran teacher constructing tragic narratives about the same reform, described feeling defeated by repeated cycles of failed initiatives and positioned himself as preserving professional integrity through minimal compliance. Sarah's navigation between Jennifer's enthusiastic adoption and James's resigned resistance reveals how comedic narrative construction enables a middle path that maintains both professional commitment and critical perspective.

The relationship between Sarah's case and the broader data set confirms that narrative agency operates through the interplay of individual storytelling, collective sense-making, and institutional context. Sarah's "curriculum jazz" emerged through collaborative narrative work with colleagues who validated her critical stance and shared adaptation strategies, demonstrating that individual narratives are always socially situated and dialogically constructed. Her selective compliance relied on institutional features such as limited monitoring of classroom practice and administrative focus on documentation rather than actual instruction, revealing how material conditions enable or constrain narrative possibilities. The integration of Sarah's detailed case with aggregate patterns across all participants establishes that while teachers construct agency through diverse narrative strategies, these narratives always engage with shared institutional discourses about teaching, learning, and change. Understanding this dynamic relationship between individual stories and collective/institutional narratives provides insight into how teachers' narrative practices both reflect and potentially transform educational systems.

This study examined how teachers construct professional agency through narrative storytelling in the context of educational change initiatives. The research involved 18 teachers from diverse backgrounds and career stages, revealing three dominant narrative plot structures—progressive, tragic, and comedic—that teachers employed to make sense of their experiences with reforms such as curriculum changes, assessment mandates, and technology integration. Progressive narratives positioned teachers as heroes overcoming challenges to drive positive transformation, while tragic narratives highlighted systemic constraints that limited their influence despite ethical persistence. Comedic narratives emphasized pragmatic improvisation and tactical adaptation within contradictory institutional environments, allowing teachers to maintain professional autonomy through creative navigation.

Quantitative analysis showed variations by career stage, with veteran teachers demonstrating greater temporal depth in their stories and mid-career teachers emphasizing collective agency narratives. Early-career teachers focused more on individual agency and transformative plots, reflecting their idealistic orientations. The study found that curriculum reform was the most common change initiative, often generating diverse narrative responses, whereas assessment changes frequently elicited tragic elements due to reduced professional autonomy. Technology integration tended to produce comedic narratives, as teachers selectively adopted tools to align with their pedagogical values.

The case study of Sarah Martinez, a mid-career mathematics teacher, illustrated these patterns through her "curriculum jazz" approach to reform implementation. Sarah's narrative evolved from initial resistance to strategic adaptation, demonstrating how storytelling enabled her to preserve professional identity while complying with mandates. Her story highlighted the temporal connections between past expertise, present negotiations, and future possibilities, showing narrative agency as a dynamic process shaped by social collaboration and institutional contexts. Overall, the findings underscored that teachers' stories not only reflect their agency but actively constitute it, influencing their engagement with educational change.

Existing research on teacher agency, such as studies by Priestley et al. (2012) and Biesta et al. (2015), emphasizes structural factors like leadership support and professional autonomy that enable or constrain teachers' actions. This study's focus on narrative mechanisms complements these findings by revealing how teachers' storytelling practices actively shape their agentic identities beyond mere structural influences. While prior work often treats agency as a response to external conditions, the narrative approach here shows agency as constructed through temporal and relational story elements, adding depth to understanding how teachers interpret and enact reforms.

The identification of progressive, tragic, and comedic plots aligns with narrative theories from Bruner and Ricoeur, extending their application to educational contexts where agency unfolds through emplotment of professional experiences.

Differences emerge with research that prioritizes collective action without examining narrative processes, such as Kelchtermans' (2005) work on teacher vulnerability and resilience. This study diverges by highlighting how individual narratives intersect with collective storytelling, as seen in Sarah's collaborative adaptation strategies, whereas Kelchtermans focuses more on emotional dimensions without the temporal narrative analysis. Additionally, studies on figured worlds by Holland et al. (1998) resonate with the findings on how teachers position themselves within institutional discourses, but this research provides empirical evidence of narrative negotiations across career stages, offering a more nuanced view of how agency develops over time. The emphasis on comedic narratives as a form of resilient agency contrasts with literature that dichotomizes resistance and compliance, suggesting a middle ground that prior studies have underexplored.

Comparative analysis with narrative inquiries in education, like those by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), shows alignment in using three-dimensional spaces of temporality, sociality, and place. However, this study advances the field by linking narrative structures directly to agency outcomes in change contexts, whereas Clandinin's work focuses more broadly on professional identity formation. The findings also bridge gaps in research on marginalized teachers' narratives, echoing studies on equity in education but providing specific insights into how counter-narratives challenge dominant discourses. Overall, while building on established theories, the results introduce narrative plot structures as a novel lens for analyzing agency, differentiating from studies that overlook storytelling's constitutive role in professional practice.

The findings signal a paradigm shift in conceptualizing teacher agency as not merely an attribute but a narratively constructed phenomenon. Teachers' stories emerge as active sites where individual experiences intersect with institutional structures, revealing agency as a fluid process rather than a fixed capacity. This reflects broader epistemological changes in educational research, moving from positivist views of agency as measurable outcomes to interpretive understandings that value subjective meaning-making. The diversity of narrative plots—progressive optimism, tragic constraint, and comedic resilience—indicates that agency manifests in multiple forms, challenging monolithic definitions and highlighting the contextual nature of professional empowerment.

These results point to the enduring power of narrative in human cognition, as theorized by Bruner, where stories organize complex realities into coherent identities. In educational contexts, this signifies that reforms succeed or fail based on how teachers narrate their involvement, not just policy design or implementation strategies. The temporal depth in veteran teachers' stories, for instance, symbolizes accumulated wisdom that buffers against disillusionment, while early-career idealism in progressive narratives marks the beginning of professional socialization. Collectively, the findings symbolize the resilience of educators who, through storytelling, maintain agency amid systemic pressures, underscoring narrative as a tool for psychological survival and professional growth.

Ultimately, the study symbolizes the untapped potential of narrative inquiry for educational transformation. By showing how teachers like Sarah construct "curriculum jazz" through improvised narratives, it marks a call for recognizing storytelling as a legitimate form of professional knowledge. This reflects a cultural shift toward valuing subjective experiences in policy-making, where teachers' voices become central to reform narratives rather than peripheral. The results symbolize hope for more equitable education, as marginalized teachers' counter-

narratives challenge deficit discourses, indicating that narrative agency can disrupt power imbalances and foster inclusive change processes.

The implications of these findings extend to professional development programs, which could incorporate narrative-based training to enhance teachers' agentic capacities. By teaching educators to construct and reflect on their professional stories, programs might help them navigate reforms more effectively, leading to higher engagement and reduced burnout. For instance, workshops using comedic narrative techniques could equip teachers with tools for pragmatic adaptation, transforming potential resistance into productive improvisation. This approach would shift professional learning from top-down mandates to dialogic processes that honor teachers' lived experiences, potentially improving the sustainability of educational changes.

Policy-makers can draw from these results to design reforms that account for narrative sense-making, ensuring initiatives align with teachers' professional stories rather than imposing conflicting narratives. Recognizing that assessment changes often elicit tragic narratives suggests the need for policies that preserve professional autonomy, such as involving teachers in co-designing accountability measures. This could reduce feelings of disempowerment and increase reform buy-in, as teachers feel their expertise is valued. Ultimately, integrating narrative awareness into policy frameworks might lead to more context-sensitive implementations, where diverse teacher voices contribute to equitable educational outcomes.

For school leaders, the findings imply fostering environments that support narrative agency through collaborative storytelling spaces. Establishing regular forums for teachers to share and co-construct stories about change initiatives could build collective agency, as seen in mid-career teachers' emphasis on collaboration. This would not only enhance individual resilience but also create institutional cultures that view teachers as partners in transformation. Such implications highlight the potential for narrative approaches to bridge gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities, promoting more meaningful and lasting educational improvements.

The results reflect the inherently interpretive nature of teaching, where educators filter external mandates through personal and professional narratives shaped by years of experience. Career stage influences narrative complexity because early-career teachers, with limited temporal reference points, construct simpler stories focused on individual triumphs, while veterans draw on extensive histories to create nuanced, often tragic or comedic plots. This progression mirrors Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, where coherence emerges from connecting disparate events over time, explaining why mid-career teachers exhibit balanced agency through collective narratives. Institutional contexts further shape these patterns, as urban schools' accountability pressures generate tragic stories, whereas rural settings allow for community-driven, progressive adaptations.

Narrative plot structures arise because teachers use stories to maintain psychological coherence and professional identity amid uncertainty. Progressive narratives sustain motivation by framing challenges as surmountable, appealing to idealistic orientations in early-career teachers. Tragic plots preserve moral integrity when systemic barriers dominate, as in veteran experiences with repeated reforms, while comedic narratives enable tactical survival in contradictory environments. This aligns with Bruner's distinction between paradigmatic and narrative knowing, where stories provide meaning beyond logical analysis, explaining why teachers resist or adapt reforms based on narrative alignment rather than objective merits.

The social dimension of narratives explains their collective and dialogical aspects, as teachers co-construct stories through interactions with colleagues and administrators. Sarah's case illustrates how collaborative networks validate individual narratives, amplifying agency in supportive

contexts. Dominant educational discourses, positioning teachers as technicians, provoke counter-narratives that assert professional expertise, particularly among marginalized educators. These dynamics occur because agency is socially situated, with stories negotiating power relations within figured worlds, leading to varied expressions across demographic and contextual differences.

Future research should expand narrative inquiry to longitudinal designs tracking how teachers' stories evolve over extended periods of reform implementation. This could reveal causal links between narrative construction and long-term agency outcomes, such as sustained engagement or leadership development. Incorporating digital storytelling methods might capture multimodal narratives, providing richer data on how visual and performative elements shape agency. Such studies could also explore cross-cultural variations, examining how narrative agency manifests in non-Western educational contexts where storytelling traditions differ.

Practitioners should integrate narrative reflection into daily teaching practices, encouraging teachers to journal or discuss their professional stories regularly. This could be supported by school-based narrative circles where educators collaboratively analyze change experiences, fostering collective agency. Administrators might pilot narrative-informed evaluation systems that assess teacher growth through story portfolios rather than standardized metrics. These actions would operationalize the findings, turning narrative awareness into practical tools for enhancing professional autonomy and reform effectiveness.

Policy advocates should advocate for narrative literacy in teacher education curricula, ensuring pre-service programs teach storytelling as a core skill for agency development. This involves training educators to recognize and challenge dominant narratives that undermine their expertise. By disseminating these findings through professional networks, stakeholders can influence broader educational discourses, promoting reforms that empower teachers as storytellers of change. Ultimately, this would create a ripple effect, where narrative agency becomes a cornerstone of equitable and transformative education systems.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed three distinct narrative plot structures—progressive, tragic, and comedic—through which teachers construct their professional agency in response to educational change initiatives. Progressive narratives portrayed teachers as heroic agents driving positive transformations, tragic ones highlighted systemic constraints limiting their influence despite ethical persistence, and comedic narratives emphasized pragmatic improvisation for maintaining autonomy within contradictory environments. Variations across career stages further differentiated these findings, with early-career teachers favoring individual and transformative stories, mid-career teachers emphasizing collective agency, and veteran teachers demonstrating greater temporal depth often through tragic or comedic plots. The case study of Sarah Martinez exemplified how narrative evolution enables tactical adaptation, such as "curriculum jazz," bridging resistance and compliance in reform contexts.

The research contributes conceptually by advancing narrative agency as a framework that integrates storytelling with professional empowerment, extending theories from Bruner and Ricoeur to educational change processes. Methodologically, it offers a robust application of narrative inquiry using life history interviews and three-dimensional analysis, providing a model for capturing temporal, social, and contextual dimensions of teacher experiences. This dual contribution fills gaps in agency research by emphasizing how stories actively constitute rather than merely reflect professional identities, offering new lenses for understanding teacher decision-making in reform settings.

Limitations include the relatively small sample size of 18 participants, potentially limiting generalizability across diverse global contexts, and the focus on self-reported narratives that may not capture unconscious influences on agency. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track narrative evolution over time and incorporate multimodal data sources, such as digital storytelling or observational methods, to explore how narratives interact with material conditions in varied educational systems.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

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