Chapter 6
Exploring Teacher Professional Identity and Agency in Local, National and Global Policy Contexts

Janet Lord

Abstract Teachers' professional lives are situated at the intersection of local, national and global educational policy contexts. What they purposefully do (agency) and how they see themselves and their roles as teachers (identity) dynamically interact with such contexts. This chapter argues that in order to understand the meaningful professional development work of teachers, it is important to understand this interplay. Current dominant policy discourses concerning the 'improving teacher' and 'teaching as a craft' are examples of an over-reliant emphasis on more insular narratives of agentic teachers and teaching. Such narratives fail to consider the complexities of factors and discourses that impact on the beings and doings of teachers and are therefore inadequate. Based on an iterative dialogue between particular theoretical ideas and emerging case study data, the research that I report in this chapter proposes a multi-level integrating framework for understanding the experiences of teachers as they develop and locate a sense of their professional identity. Taking a critical realist approach, I report on a case study of one teacher, Jill, from an English secondary school. Drawing on narrative data and on Archer's work (e.g. 2012) on reflexivity, the ways in which Jill's thinking mediates links between her agency and identity and structural educational policy contexts and discourses are considered. The understandings drawn from this work can be applied to show the explanatory usefulness of reflexivity as a concept in understanding teachers' professional thinking and doing.

Keywords Critical realism · Teacher · Agency · Identity · Reflexivity

J. Lord (✉)
Faculty of Health and Education, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK
e-mail: j.lord@mmu.ac.uk

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2023

D. Mifsud and S. P. Day (eds.), *Teacher Education as an Ongoing Professional Trajectory*, Teacher Education, Learning Innovation and Accountability,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28620-9_6

6.1 Introduction

Using a critical realist framework, this chapter considers the ways in which teacher agency and identity relate to structuring influences of educational policy contexts and discourses. In particular, I argue that what teachers purposefully do (agency) and how they see themselves and their roles as teachers (identity) dynamically interact with such contexts and discourses through the mediating role of their reflexivity. Throughout the chapter, the importance of viewing teachers as active agents, whose professional education as teachers is on a developmental continuum (see Chap. 1), will be articulated and exemplified.

In this chapter, I introduce ideas about identity, agency and reflexivity, particularly focussing on Margaret Archer's concepts from a critical realist approach. I propose a conceptual framework which shows the relationship between a number of factors that impact on teacher agency and identity. I introduce the narrative of one teacher, Jill, and discuss her identity and agency using the conceptual framework, showing understandings of reflexivity and agency which can be used in professional development work with teachers.

Thinking about agency further and expanding the notion that it is what actors 'purposefully do', Priestley et al. (2013) point out that agency can be defined as the way in which actors 'critically shape their responses to problematic situations' (Biesta & Tedder, 2006, p. 11). In the ecological view that I have taken in this chapter, agency is positioned within the contingencies of contexts in which agents act upon their beliefs, values and attributes that they mobilise in relation to their situations and contexts. Agency is a process, and rather than being possessed, or a capacity that resides within individuals, it comes about through engagement with specific contextual and situational conditions; it is not free floating, but situated and contextualised. As Biesta and Tedder (2007, p. 137) put it, 'the achievement of agency will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors as they come together in particular and, in a sense, always unique situations'. Drawing on the work of Margaret Archer (e.g. 2003), we can see that there are close interconnections between the concepts of agency and identity, in that identity may be seen as determining a set of fluid parameters for viewing the development and course of an individual's agency, their chosen actions and relations with the world. For teachers, identity and agency are enabled and constrained by the various discourses of education that underpin the everyday professional worlds of teachers and which, in part, form the social and cultural contexts for their professional activities and for their thinking. Teachers (as agents) are whole persons, with accompanying and individual life experiences, emotions and concerns, identities and role obligations in education.

6.1.1 Critical Realism as a Framework

Critical realism (CR) explicitly discusses a relationship which is central to an understanding of the social world—that between ontology and epistemology (e.g. Bhaskar, 1989). As Scott (2010) suggests, this relationship is perhaps particularly central in relation to education, because critical realism concerns itself with knowledge and its formation, and how this is key to notions of schools and schooling as social objects. Despite there being a natural affinity between a CR approach and education, there have been few empirical studies applying critical realism (CR) to the collection and analysis of data in this area. Although Archer herself has theorised widely about reflexivity, Archer's ICONI (Internal Conversation Instrument) measure of reflexivity (Archer, 2007) is her only systematic attempt to undertake empirical work in this area. Other work includes that of Scott (2010); he makes a powerful argument for the superiority of critical realism in relation to knowledge and understandings of schools. However, there is a gap in the applied field in terms of a CR approach to understanding the lived realities of teachers in schools and the ways in which teachers negotiate the relationship between structure and agency; the work I describe here starts to plug that gap. It particularly concerns the role of inner conversations or individual reflexivity in relation to the development of individuals' personal projects and actions and to an understanding of their identity and agency.

6.1.2 Archer's Notions of Identity and a Sense of Self

In regard to the question 'how do teachers become, be and develop as teachers?', the relationship between structure and agency is central. Archer proposes that individuals' reflexivity mediates the link between structure and agency. She defines reflexivity as

> …the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts. Archer (2012, p. 1)

In everyday terms, reflexivity can perhaps be best described as our 'inner conversations'. The exercise of reflexivity, or the use of inner conversations, allows individuals to direct their own actions and projects, and enables us to be agentic shapers of our own lives. Reflexivity is the model for engagement with the world that leads to agency and identity. Although reflexivity is ubiquitous, Archer argues that it is not a homogenous concept; rather, there are a number of ideal reflexive modes, or different ways in which inner conversations are conducted. The different ideal modes are used more frequently and are more dominant for different individuals (Archer, 2012). Archer explains the ways in which the modes differ:

> …practitioners of each of the…different modes of reflexivity adopt generically different 'stances' towards society and its constraints and enablements…Each 'stance' goes above and beyond the manner in which a given subject responds to any given constraint or enablement

> and represents an overall pattern of response to the totality of structural powers.' (Archer, 2003, pp. 342–343)

Archer suggests that we all engage in each of the ideal modes of reflexivity described here at different times and in different situations, and to different degrees:

- Communicative reflexives (CRxs) have an 'evasive' stance on life, and are collectivist towards the social. For CRxs, internal conversations need to be confirmed and completed by others before they lead to action. CRxs express doubt that a fully autonomous internal conversation could lead them to the 'right' action.
- Autonomous reflexives (ARxs) have a 'strategic' stance on life, and are accommodative towards the social. For ARxs, internal conversations are self-contained, leading directly to action. ARxs take part in the lone exercise of a mental dialogue with themselves and have self-confidence in their own internal conversations.
- Meta reflexives (MRxs) hold a 'subversive' stance on life, and are transcendental towards the social. For MRxs, internal conversations critically evaluate previous inner dialogues and are critical about effective action in society. Self-interrogation is a feature of their thought and talk. They are idealists—this makes them social critics.

To illustrate this, consider an example that is based on a conversation I had with Margaret Archer at a conference in 2015. The example concerns the different ways in which different individuals might engage with a situation where their car has broken down and needs some expensive work to be done:

> A ***communicative reflexive***, for whom internal conversations need to be confirmed by others before they lead to action, might need to discuss the situation with their partner before booking the car in to the garage.
> An ***autonomous reflexive***, whose internal conversations are more self-contained and lead more directly to action, is likely to confirm to themselves that they can afford to have the work done and that it needs doing before making the call to the garage.
> A ***meta-reflexive***, for whom internal conversations analytically evaluate previous inner dialogues and are critical about effective action in society, might spend some time debating with themselves about the merits and ethics of owning a car at all.

If reflexivity is indeed the bridge which mediates 'deliberatively between the objective structural opportunities confronted by different groups and the nature of people's subjectively defined concerns' (Archer, 2007, p. 61), then it has a crucial role in determining social action, and is potentially powerful and emancipatory. Certainly, interventions based on reflexivity could be very valuable in teachers' professional development. The nature of the context in which teachers and teaching are embedded, the type of reflexive mode(s) that teachers favour and the sense of the personal and social self that develops and is narrated and changed through reflexivity, all lead to changing forms of agency and action. However, the concept of reflexivity and of its impact on agency has been ignored in much social research; even Archer's own empirical research has been less developed in this area than the emphasis she puts on

reflexivity might predict. This chapter draws on the notion of reflexivity to illuminate how the mediation process that is done by reflexivity operates for teachers living and working in the real world in real social and cultural contexts.

6.1.2.1 The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework here shows the dynamic intersectionality of a number of factors that may influence the professional lives and identity of teachers, and how this intersectionality might influence their agency.

The vertical axis of the framework corresponds to the conceptual 'closeness' of the influencing factors to the discourses with which a teacher may be engaged. For example, the impact of the UK government's policy on teachers' pay. Some factors will be 'close' to all teachers—for example, recent career history will affect every teacher's professional identity, albeit differently. The horizontal axis relates to the structure/agency continuum. In relation to this axis, factors that are more related to structure would include the geographical location of a school, as well as its sociocultural context. Other factors are more intrinsically linked to agency, such as psychological factors or an individual's self-concept, for example Lord (2012). These interactions exemplify the 'agency through engagement' concept discussed above.

The interacting cascade of clusters within the conceptual space is central to the framework and represents factors at macro, meso and proximal levels. The macro level includes a cluster of factors such as government policies and the particular norms and values of the culture in which the individual operates. The factors in this cluster provide a 'wash' of the socio-historical-political milieu over the whole of an individual's professional identity. The influence of these macrosystemic factors cascades down through the other clusters (Lord, 2012), creating discourses that permeate through the education system, interacting to generate further discourses about policies such as standardisation of testing and performativity (Sahlberg, 2011). The meso-level cluster in the framework comprises factors that are closer to the individual and more related to her/his sense of agency, again emphasising the importance of interplay between individual efforts and contextual/situational factors. For example, whether the school in which a particular teacher works is a faith school or if it is in a disadvantaged area. The proximal-level cluster includes factors such as an individual's age, gender and ethnic origin, factors that are close to the individual teacher. This cluster also includes the individual's own professional background, her/his values and her/his personal ideas about the functions of education. As is shown in Fig. 6.1, although the clusters of factors at each level have their own defining features, they also overlap and interact, reflecting the idea that identity can usefully be thought about as a constellation of concerns.

Figure 6.2 shows how the mediating processes of reflexivity may operate in conjunction with this model. In the figure, the inner core represents the teacher as agent, including proximal factors such as age, race, social background and so on. The outer ring represents the discourses that are currently relevant in education and

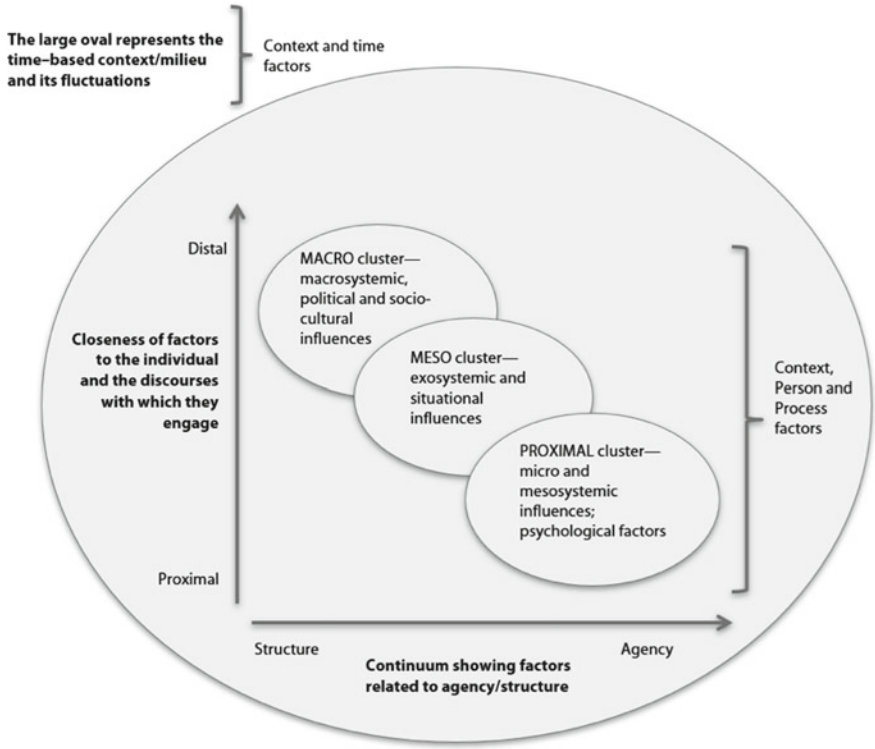

Fig. 6.1 Conceptual framework showing the interacting influences of factors at a number of levels on a teacher's professional identity and agency (Lord, 2012)

in forming the educational milieu. The middle ring shows the two-way diffusion of the determining processes of reflexivity, including, but not limited to, contextual continuity/discontinuity; form of the internal conversation; and the types of dialogic relationships and dialogic partners with which the teacher engages.

Archer discusses how the dominant mode of reflexivity employed by individuals reproduces or changes their situations. There is a need for specificity about *how*, *when* and *where this* mediation happens that is important in looking at the work of reflexivity. To this end, this next section introduces a thinking tool, TRAIt: the Teacher Reflexivity, Agency and Identity tool. TRAIt explains how reflexivity might be a key mediator between the individual as agent and the factors and discourses of her/his contexts, illuminating the '*how*, *when* and *where*' of these complex relationships. TRAIt develops an idea about the integration of reflexivity and this conceptual framework that draws on theory, the belief that Archer's work is under-socialised, and on empirical data (Fig. 6.3).

In the three concentric rings of TRAIt, the inner circle shows the teacher as an agent, with agentic powers, located within the socialising structures of society and more particularly of education. This circle has a clearly defined circumference,

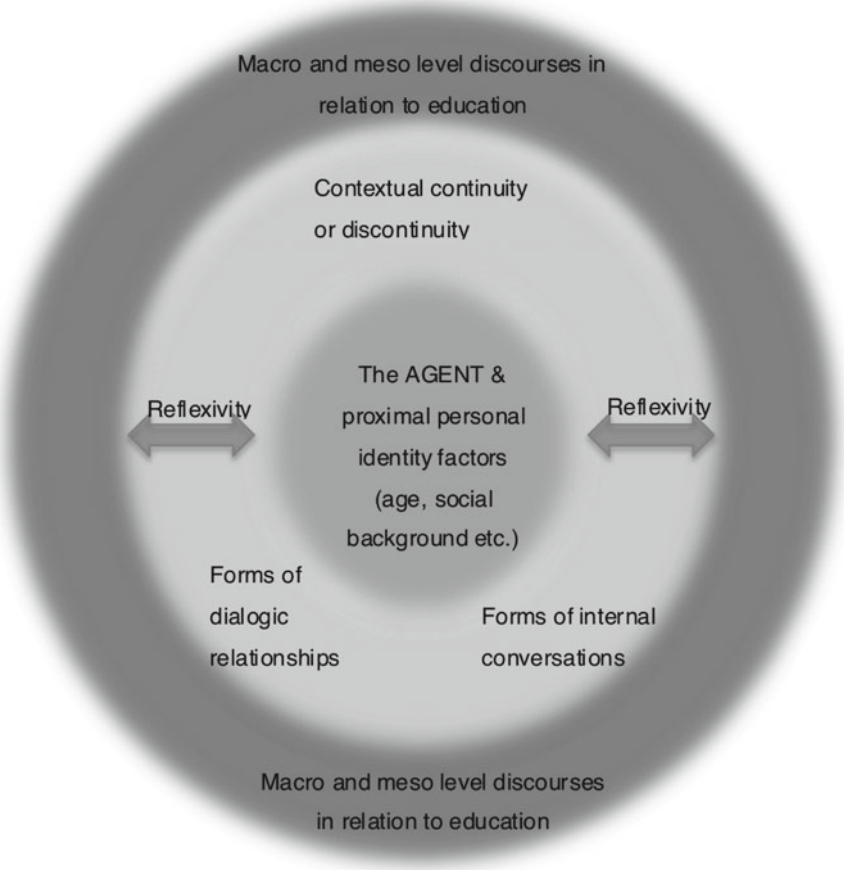

Fig. 6.2 The mediating relationship between reflexivity and the macro, meso and proximal levels of the conceptual framework

suggesting the analytical separation of agent and structure. The middle ring represents the two-way determining and mediating processes of reflexivity. Reflexivity is a two-way interactional process, as the double-headed arrows in the diagram illustrate. According to Archer's critical realist approach (e.g. 2012), the determining and mediating processes of reflexivity are: forms of dialogic relationships and of internal conversations, the ways in which the personal projects of participants are determined and facilitated, and contextual continuity or discontinuity. This ring has fuzzy boundaries that represent the interactional and mediating role of these processes of reflexivity. The outer ring represents (macro level) discourses and policies and (more meso level) policy enactments and conditions, local to particular schools and areas, that impact on teacher identity and agency. This ring also has clearly defined perimeters to denote the analytical separation of structure and agency.

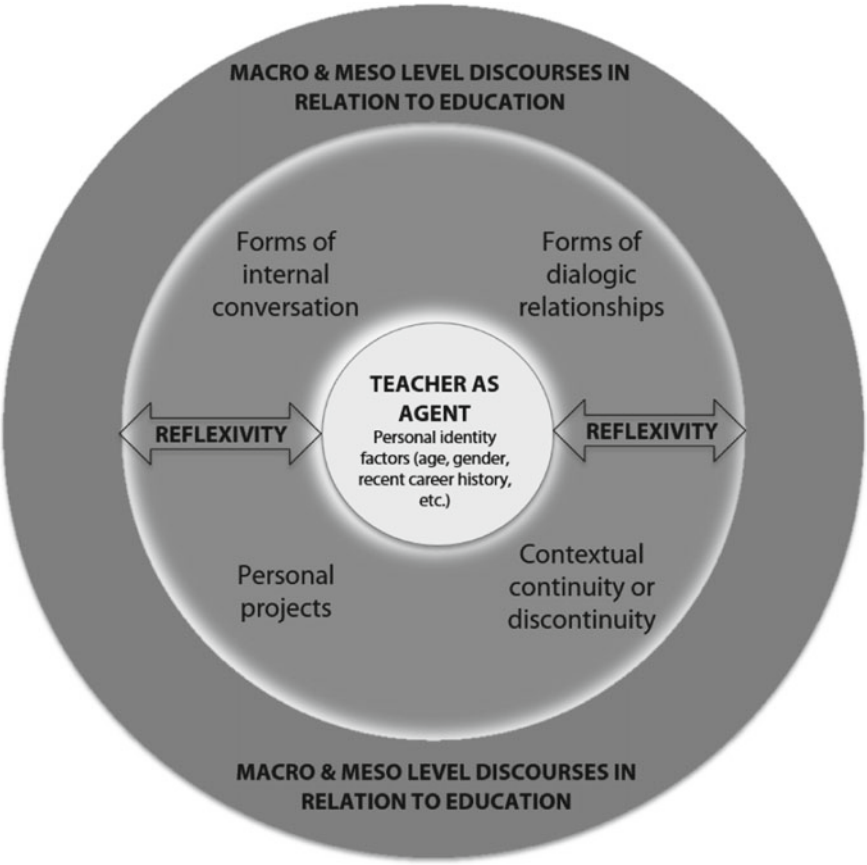

Fig. 6.3 TRAIt: teacher reflexivity, agency and identity tool

In my research, and using this model, I worked with four teachers; this chapter focuses on one illustrative case, Jill. Jill's case study has been chosen to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of the complex issues surrounding identity and the lived realities of teachers' being and doings, in their real-life nested contexts. Although of course there is limited generalisability from this case study, to some extent this limitation was addressed in the production of the case study by the facts that the sampling used was theoretical sampling (which drew on a my conceptual framework), the co-construction of Jill's portrait with Jill herself and transparency throughout the research process (Crowe et al., 2011; Stake, 1995), which was achieved by making clear in the description of the methods used to elicit the case study the steps involved in case selection, data collection, the reasons for the particular methods chosen and my own positionality. Explanatory power of the model is limited to a single case of a teacher while it pretends to explain macro and meso levels. The work investigated the following research questions:

- What are the personal/psychological factors that impact on the development of teacher identity?
- What are the factors and processes of education that underpin teachers' beings and doings? How do these factors and processes interrelate?
- What part does individual reflexivity play in mediating this interrelationship and in generating particular forms of agency? How do this agency and reflexivity inform identity development?

6.2 Methods

A case study methodology using multiple sources of evidence was used in order to encapsulate the large number of relevant factors. I used a number of empirical data collection methods focused on participants' narrations of their beings and doings as teachers. In this paper, I focus on one teacher, Jill and her narrative. Jill is an English teacher in her mid-40s and has responsibility for 'more able' students in a large 11–18 Catholic college, St. Gervase's, in an industrial town in the north of England. St. Gervase's has a reputation locally for being a good school, although it obtained a 'requires improvement' grade at a recent government (Ofsted) inspection.

I met Jill five times over the data collection year. In the first two sessions, she was asked to talk about her career to date and her views on teaching. She also completed a timeline for her career as a teacher, showing any life events that affected her career or career choices, as well as any events in the wider world that might have been significant to her. Jill also constructed a 'concept map' on a corkboard with the central concept 'Me as a teacher—what I think, feel and do' (an operationalisation of the linked terms of identity and agency, that are suggestive of being and doing). In order to do this she was given a set of concepts from which she could choose, derived from the literatures, and was also told that she could add others of her own. I also observed Jill teaching twice during the year, and discussions were held after each observation. In the final meeting, she was asked about her school context and personal reflexivity. The timeline and concept map were designed as narrative elicitation techniques and as such it was the narratives about then that were analysed, rather than the map/timeline themselves. Photographs of Jill's completed timeline and concept map are shown in Figs. 6.4 and 6.5.

The work of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot on portraiture (n.d.) was used for guidance on thematic analysis. Lawrence-Lightfoot suggests that thematic analysis is both an iterative and a generative process, bringing 'interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny and aesthetic order' to the data, which involves constructing emergent themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, n.d.)

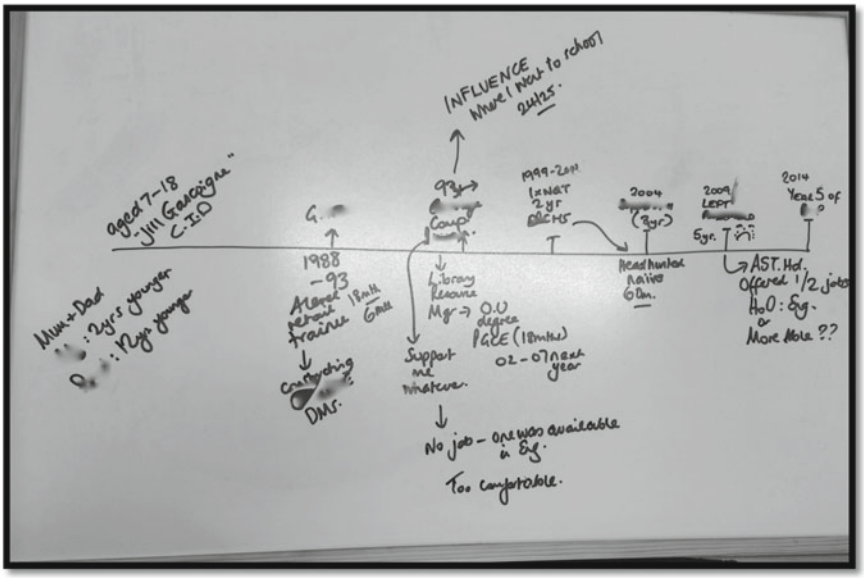

Fig. 6.4 Jill's timeline (identifying places/schools have been blurred out)

Fig. 6.5 Jill's concept map

6.3 Jill's Portrait and Its Analysis

6.3.1 Factors That Impact on Jill

The themes that run though Jill's interview relate strongly to her family, both her natal family, and her husband and daughters. Equally, key in Jill's narrative is the link between family and work, and the constraints and enablements that this interplay brings to her life. Archer's critical realist approach, in particular the aspects concerning the role of inner conversations or individual reflexivity in relation to the development of individuals' personal projects and actions and to an understanding of their identity and agency, is key to this discussion. According to Archer structure and agency are commonly conflated, either 'upwardly,' 'downwardly' or 'centrally.' Such conflation suggests that either structure or agency is given more prominence than the other, or that both are seen as equally influential, with the consequence that neither retains adequate explanatory power. Archer's alternative, which she calls 'morphogenesis', a word she borrows from biology that means 'the process that causes something (in biology, usually a cell or organism for example) to develop its shape.' offers an account of social action and space provided via social interaction and structural elaboration. A personalised conceptual framework relating to the factors that were key for Jill at proximal, meso and macro levels was populated by drawing on Jill's data (see Fig. 6.5). The intersectionality of local, national and global policy contexts runs throughout Jill's story, as we shall see.

Jill's case study was chosen to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of the complex issues surrounding identity and the lived realities of teachers' being and doings, in their real-life nested contexts. Although of course there is limited generalisability from this case study, this limitation was addressed in the production of the case study by the facts that the sampling used was theoretical sampling (which drew on a my conceptual framework); the co-construction of Jill's portrait with Jill herself;. and transparency throughout the research process (Crowe et al., 2011; Stake, 1995), which was achieved by making clear in the description of the methods used to elicit the case study the steps involved in case selection, data collection, the reasons for the particular methods chosen and my own positionality. Explanatory power of the model is limited to a single case of a teacher while it pretends to explain macro and meso levels (Fig. 6.6).

6.3.1.1 Macro-level Cluster

Jill's narrative account reflected the discourses of accountability, performativity and achievement that are currently prevalent in education (e.g. Ball, 2008; Department for Education, 2015, 2016). Achievement and data featured large in her narrative, perhaps as a function of her relative seniority in school and her trajectory to her current job via a head of English post, both of which emphasised the consequences of examination results for her personally. Jill suggested that for many people, the

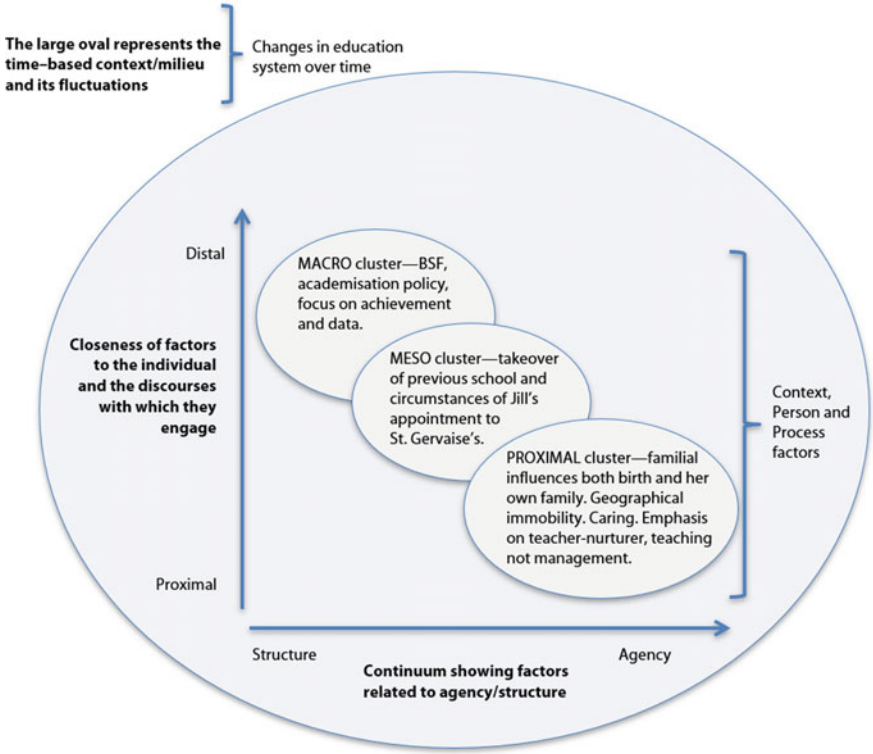

Fig. 6.6 Cascading clusters of factors in Jill's beings and doings

primary objective of the school system '*could be* [seen as] … *the dreaded GCSE… A-level results.*' This quote exemplifies—in just a few words—the complexities of the intersection between national policy discourses and the enactment of policy locally in school.

The other set of macro-level discourses that affected Jill were those to do with the government's 'Building Schools for the Future' (BSF[1]) programme (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) and its academisation project (Education Act, 2002) that were joint factors in the closure of the Ashfield school and its takeover by Ladywood School. Jill expresses her response to these discourses very clearly; '*I felt I was forced to move because of what happened with the 'federation'*… Both of these sets of discourses had penetrating effects on other clusters of factors that were key to Jill's beings and doings.

[1] The Building Schools for the Future was a 2003 government initiative, involving private sector partners, of investment in secondary school buildings. The policy included aims relating to securing educational transformation in low-performing schools as well as to improving school buildings.

The story of how Jill ended up at St. Gervase's is an interesting one; her move there is a defining one in her career and home life. Jill moved to St. Gervase's from Ashfield School, where she was head of English. Despite the challenges of the job, Jill did not ever intend to move from her head of department position at Ashfield. However, after some political manoeuvring at local government level, Ashfield was federated with Ladywood, a larger school nearby; although in fact, this was much more of a 'take over' by Ladywood than a federation. Jill wasn't at all pleased about the Ladywood takeover of Ashfield, nor did she want a position in the new federated school. Hence, when Jill moved to St. Gervase's, it was a rather unhappy move, and more of a decision to avoid joining the new federated school than a positive move towards St. Gervase's. It took Jill a while to become established in her new job. One of the ironies about her current position at St. Gervase's is that from her classroom window, she has an excellent view of the sports fields and the classrooms of the new buildings of Ladywood School. Occasionally in our meetings, Jill would refer to Ladywood and nod over towards the new buildings in a slightly hostile way;

> *…but I'm OK now I can sit here and look out across there* [to Ladywood] *and I don't get bitter… much* [laughs].

6.3.1.2 Meso-level Cluster

At the meso level, St. Gervase's school—Jill's immediate context—was of critical importance in shaping her beings and doings. Jill was ambivalent about the move to St. Gervase's, and this ambivalence coincided with what she and her husband Stuart perceived as a qualitative change in family dynamics; for the first time, she and Stuart felt that their elder daughter was able to babysit the younger one. This combination meant that for the first time in years Jill was able to focus on herself and on family projects. As well, Jill was thinking about moving on from St. Gervase's. In fact, as a result of her disquiet with her position at St. Gervase's and as a conclusion to her internal deliberations about whether she should remain as a classroom teacher or move into senior leadership, she left St. Gervase's to move to a new school at the end of the study year.

6.3.2 Moving on from St. Gervase's

After four years at St. Gervase's, Jill was wondering whether to continue to apply for assistant head teacher posts. She had had a number of interviews but had been unsuccessful. Jill explained that data was not really her forte; rather, she was much more interested in teaching and learning. However, she knew that for assistant headship posts, an easy familiarity with data and systems is essential. Perhaps as a result of Jill's ambivalence about data, one of the things that comes over strongly from Jill is that she is in a quandary about whether she really wants an assistant head's job, which would mean less time in the classroom.

> So I don't know…I'm quite happy, and I am quite happy to just be an English teacher with responsibility for more able students because that's a lovely job…but at the moment I am in a bit of a… so it could be a very different conversation we're having this time next year couldn't it?

In fact, the conversation a year on was indeed very different. Jill had decided that she wanted to focus more on family life, and her longstanding interest in teaching and learning was winning through. In April 2015, she secured a post as head of English in a local high school, St. Charles', which was in special measures.[2] Jill had decided to apply for the job there because of a unique combination of its location, the challenging nature of the role and her increasing sense of dissatisfaction with her current job. The decision to apply was not an easy one. Jill had however changed her mind about what kind of job she wanted:

> It just excites me because… this is like building your own department…and thinking, this is going to work and when you take on board the changes that have happened at that school this year plus the positivity of the staff, it will be…a very quick rise. It's that bad because they have no systems, they have no systems for data management, no systems for assessing, no data, there is just nothing there…it's like the blind leading the blind.

6.3.3 Life Projects

It is clear from her career trajectory that work is an important part of Jill's life, and in our discussions, Jill described work as one of two undertakings that were important to her: the other is her family. However, work and family are more than interrelated undertakings; they are her key 'life projects' that reflect her driving concerns.

The family 'project' features prominently in Jill's narrative. She was born and brought up with her brother Pete and sister Louise in a working-class family in a local town. Jill's parents were always supportive of their children:

> Jill: *They've always they've always supported what we choose to do, whatever, even now, what we choose to do, they know that we are our own people, and whether that's sort of in relationships, or…*
>
> J: *So they weren't massive influences like 'you must be a detective' or 'you must be a teacher' or anything like that?*
>
> Jill: *No, and if that's what we said we wanted to do, see Pete wanted to be a pigeon boy for years because the guy next door had a pigeon loft but they never said 'No you won't.' …Louise wanted to be a sweet shop… they always said 'Yes, if you want a sweet shop, you go and get yourself a sweet shop.' But like I say it's just been a case of 'let them see which way which they want to go.'*

---

[2] A school may be placed in 'special measures' if a government Ofsted inspection concludes that the school is failing to provide an acceptable standard of education and if the governors and leadership team do not show the capacity to secure the necessary improvement. As a result of being placed in special measures a school will be subject to monitoring visits and inspections until necessary changes are deemed to have been put in place successfully.

Now Jill has a husband and children of her own, she still sees family as a prime concern and motivator, but work and family are always closely intertwined for her. For example, one of the reasons for her to have applied for and subsequently accepted her new job is because of its proximity to where her elderly parents live—the school is on the same road. Her parents are pleased about this:

> I say, 'In September, Dad, I could come here every night from work for my tea'. He said, 'you could even come at lunchtime, we'll have your lunch ready.'

One of the functions of Jill's family is to provide an enabling context which supports her in her other significant 'project' of 'being a teacher'. In one sense, the family is closely integrated with this project and supports it because Jill 'is' a nurturing teacher. Jill acknowledges that the two projects are intertwined: '*to quote Jane* [a friend] *every day is a school day*'. And yet, there is also a sense in which Jill keeps the two projects of home and work quite separate, rarely having work colleagues as Facebook friends, ensuring that her planning for school takes as little time as possible and making sure that she makes the most of her evenings, weekends and holiday times. Her work is underpinned by her values and sense of moral purpose, which is to do with caring, nurturing and mentoring. This moral purpose manifests itself in at least two linked ways: firstly, in the cultivation of a nurturing, caring persona in relation to both the students and colleagues; secondly, a sense in which Jill acts as and sees herself as someone who can be a role model in school for younger or less experienced staff.

Although Jill's narrative is characterised by a relative lack of geographical movement, this stasis is not mirrored in her career or her family life. The symbiotic and intertwined concerns of work and family are sometimes facilitating (for example, when her husband makes her job possible through many of the things he does at home). In the same way, these intertwined factors can be constraining; for example, when Jill is away on a school trip, she puts plans in place to ensure that the family can run efficiently for a few days without her:

> …like tomorrow I go to London for two days overnight with school so I have to organize my home life so everyone, Dad's to the dentist, the oldest is going to go to school to pick the other one up because Dad's not going to be… But he's going to have to go on Wednesday and the child minder needs informing she might even need her hair doing because he might forget things; so the two do sort of blend together.

Despite this co-constraint of work and family, in Jill's narratives there is a real sense of purpose, of movement, of agency and of self-determination. The themes that run though Jill's interview relate strongly to her family, both her natal family, and her husband and daughters. Equally key in Jill's narrative is the link between family and work, and the constraints and enablements that this interplay brings to her life.

6.3.3.1 Proximal-Level Cluster

At the proximal level, Jill's definition of herself as a teacher-nurturer was very important. Jill first talked about this in one of our early meetings, and this theme sets the

scene for much of what she said afterwards. Caring was key to much of what she said and did. Jill's values were rooted in her stable family network, both her birth family and her own family. Over the time she was at St. Gervase's and her focus has shifted from one of her life projects, her work, to another: her own family. This was partly as a function of age, and partly to do with the logistics of the family situation. A stable family network, with a focus on stasis and on geographical proximity, is a very much feature of Archer's communicative reflexives (e.g. Archer, 2012). Yet in Jill's case, her reliance on her family as sources of rationality and as sounding boards for her reflexive inner conversations is entwined with a sense of moral purpose, of projects and of idealism, that reflects the features of meta-reflexivity. This moral purpose and idealism are associated with her teacher-nurturer role. For example, when Jill is promising to take out for a meal the disadvantaged pupils with whom she works, she says *'yes I'd take my daughters out for a meal, these kids need to go out for a meal'*, showing the intertwined nature of these concerns in her articulation of her moral purpose.

A striking theme in Jill's narratives is her focus on caring for students, which perhaps in part derives from her strong sense of family and of her nurturing role there. In this extract, she explains how she makes the link between how she nurtures her own daughters, and how she treats some of her year 10 students.

> Jill: *…I said to them come May next year just before you leave if you do work hard, I'll take you out for a meal…somewhere posh, not McDonald's - somewhere we'll have to use knives and forks. But then I did the 'if you show me up …' and they were 'we won't, we won't' and they're thrilled by this…. Again it's all part of, 'yes I'd take my daughters out for a meal, these kids need to go out for a meal'…*

This was a recurring theme; in this discussion, Jill described how being a 'teacher-nurturer' was 'what I am'.

> I've always had that teacher-nurturer inside of me I think…the teacher aspect has always been there. And so it is central to what I do because it's what I am, I think that's what it comes down to: it's what I am.

This role as a carer/nurturer is integrated with a moral purpose about work that manifests itself through a self-imposed mentoring role for other members of staff. For example, Jill sees it as important that she gives advice to the member of staff at St. Gervase's who has been appointed as the new temporary head of English.

6.3.4 Intersectionality

The interaction of factors at a number of levels in the conceptual framework is clear in Jill's narrative. For example, the Building Schools for the Future (BSF), academisation policy and performativity/accountability discourses that were features of the macro-level context permeated through and had cascading effects on factors at the other levels. National discourses relating to academisation were enacted locally in the policy that resulted in the takeover of Ashfield School by Ladywood School.

The discomfort that this takeover caused for Jill interacted with her personal circumstances and the concerns she had relating to family and resulted in her subsequent move to St. Gervase's. Interestingly, Jill did not articulate any tensions between the performativity pressures and discourses (that are features of the macro cluster of factors), her own values and her self-image as a teacher-nurturer, perhaps due to the importance of her family values and nurturing approach to teaching and learning in determining her reflexivity and agency.

Similarly, the intersection between local, national and global policy contexts is seen throughout Jill's narrative. For example, the focus on accountability for results, which is a pervasive global discourse, interacts with national imperatives relating to the datafication of education and to local policy contexts relating to BSF.

How does Jill's reflexivity mediate the structural and proximal to suggest the privileging of particular forms of beings and doings?

Jill is an individual who uses both meta-reflexivity and communicative reflexivity as dominant modes of inner conversation, both her professional and personal life. Meta-reflexivity, where the social order is problematised, is key to her actions and the way that she sees the world. For example, she talks about how she had seen a news report about how many children go hungry in the school holidays because they do not have their term-time school dinner, expresses her concern that many of her pupils may be hungry and explains what she can do about it. Interestingly, however, although Jill expresses her concern, this concern is not politicised, nor does it impact on her agency in any significant way. She does not start a school breakfast club, nor does she lobby the local MP about disadvantage. She deals with the issue more individually, by bringing in apples and breakfast bars that she knows the pupils will eat.

As well as demonstrating some of the features of meta-reflexivity, in many ways Jill truly embodies the 'thought and talk' form of internal conversation that is described by Archer (2007, p. 94) as a feature of the communicative reflexive. Jill is a social animal, who could well be described as an 'extroverted chatterer'. This was obvious from the length of the interviews (Jill talked, quite openly and willingly, for almost twice as long over the year as any of the other teacher-participants I interviewed) and the wide-ranging nature of the discussions that she and I had. Communicative reflexives 'attach supreme importance to inter-personal relations' (Archer, 2007, p. 283) and remain deeply embedded in their original social context; Jill's key project of 'family' is significant to her agency. Her concern for what Archer describes as 'relational goods'—which in Jill's case include love, reliance, caring and trust—and the reproductive projects to which this concern leads 'act[ed] as a filter, sifting friendships, social activities and leisure pursuits to ensure congruity with their families' normativity' (Archer, 2012, p. 99). Indeed, in Jill's case, her nurturing and caring approach was evident in her professional capacity as well as in relation to her husband and daughters. There is a sense in which Jill's nurturing approach to her pupils at school was an extension of that same caring approach, developed from her

natal family background, that she expressed in relation to her own husband and children. So when she is explaining about taking her class out for an end of year meal, in her own mind this action is firmly linked to her familial caring values. Jill's thoughts about her family exemplify Archer's view of communicative reflexives who, in terms of marital/family relations, 'appear to endorse "togetherness"' (Archer, 2007).

The forms of reflexivity which are evident in Jill's inner conversations direct her agency and shape her actions. For instance, it is partly as a result of her concern with family and with her elderly parents' welfare that she moves to a school near to where her parents live. But there is a dual-purpose to her intention: the move to a school where she feels her skills are more useful, where she can make a difference and where her values sit comfortably, but moreover where she can reconcile her personal and professional projects without compromising on either.

Jill is indubitably a communicative reflexive, but she also uses meta-reflexivity as an auxiliary mode in key professional moments. At home and with her family, Jill clearly uses communicative reflexivity as her dominant mode. Family and the values of care are important and are also associated with strong elements of communicative reflexivity. These are privileged for her. At school, and in her wider professional life, although communicative reflexivity is still dominant, there are also features of meta-reflexivity. Those of her values that are associated with caring in the classroom and in the school are documented as elements of meta-reflexivity, but are secondary (and yet correctly part of the whole story). In Jill's professional life, her communicative reflexivity is dominant still, and interlinks with her meta-reflexivity. The higher-order purpose and project that is evident in Jill's inner conversations is related to caring. That particular combination of her concerns for family, caring and values plays out in relation both to her family and to the pupils at school. The dominant and auxiliary modes are intertwined in a symbiotic fashion, and direct her actions in relation to her professional development and journey as a teacher, and her projects and concerns. Jill's meta-reflexivity is predicated on her caring values, derived from her family background. It is not a well-developed meta-reflexivity, predicated on a sense of moral purpose—but moments of meta-reflexivity, relating to the ethos of caring, are nonetheless there for Jill. It is an auxiliary mode and has a supportive function in relation to her communicative reflexivity. TRAIt is populated here, using Jill's data (Fig. 6.7).

In the TRAIt representation for Jill, the inner circle shows her as an agent, with agentic powers, located within the socialising structures of society and more particularly of education. Her age, her experiences as a teacher (both recent and over time) and the caring values that are encapsulated in the stability of her family are important in the determination of her agency and the modes of reflexivity that she employs. The middle ring, representing the two-way determining and mediating processes of reflexivity, can be exemplified as follows for Jill.

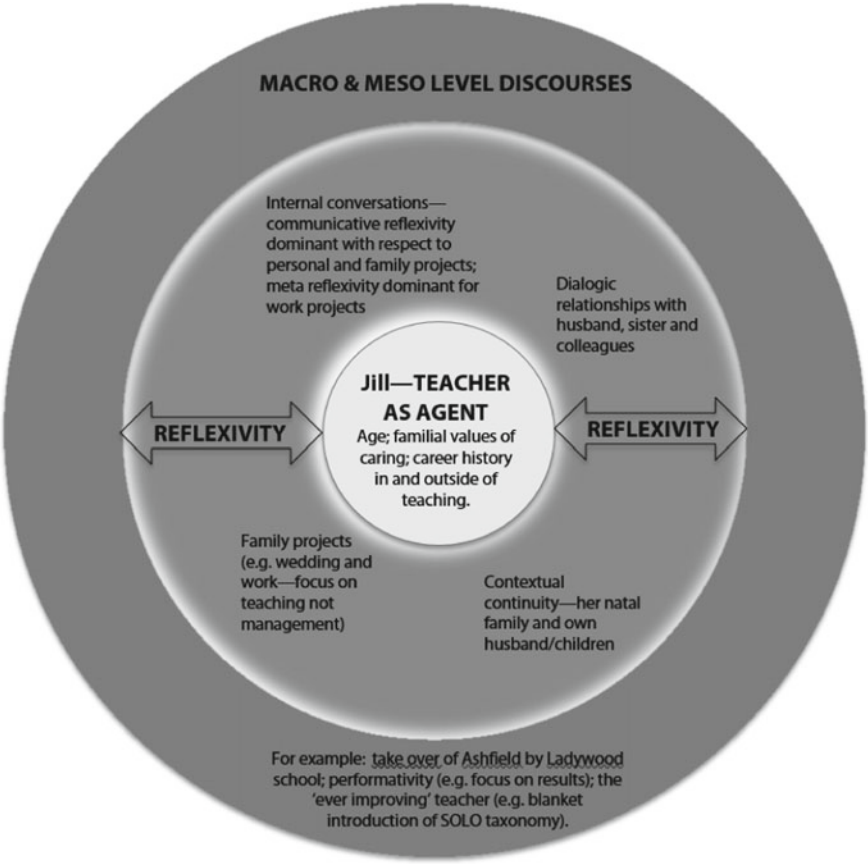

Fig. 6.7 TRAIt populated with Jill's data

6.3.5 Contextual Continuity

The contextual continuity denoted by Jill's family and the close stable relationships between her and her parents and siblings, as well as her emphasis on stable relationships in her own family, are evident in Jill's narratives. Archer (2012) argues that such stability and a focus on relational goods—such as love, reliance and trust—are likely to result in communicative reflexivity being the dominant mode that an individual employs. As I have shown, Jill does demonstrate such communicative reflexivity, particularly in relation to her personal projects. However, she also employs meta-reflexivity as an auxiliary mode, and this is related to the different nature of her professional projects from that of her personal projects.

6.3.6 Personal and Professional Projects

Jill's personal projects were to do with the family. For example, she was planning a renewal of marriage vows when we first met. Professionally, her projects were related to her career trajectory and were her ambitions related to senior leadership, with all that entails, or was she more concerned with teaching English and with her classroom practice? This was a dilemma that Jill mentioned on a number of occasions, and in the academic year following our final meeting she started a challenging teaching job in a school near her parents' house. The rationale for this decision was substantially instrumental: Jill wanted her personal and professional projects to be interwoven. In this instance, she wanted to be near to her elderly parents as well as to be able to have a fulfilling career. These personal and professional concerns and their intertwined nature are key to the fact that Jill employs both meta-reflexive and communicative reflexivity, although they are employed differently for different projects.

6.3.7 Types of Dialogic Relationships and Dialogic Partners

As a communicative reflexive, Jill discusses both personal and professional issues with her family, being impelled to check on her thinking with her close relatives, particularly with her husband and sister. She also has a close group of colleagues on whom she particularly relied when she wanted to discuss professional concerns. However, when it came to making decisions about actions, Jill felt that she took those individuals' ideas on board and then made her own decisions that felt right for her and that closely aligned with her values. The dialogic relationships are important for her, but they are not the sole determining factor of her agency.

The outer circle of the TRAIt model represents macro-level discourses and policies and more meso-level policy enactments and conditions, local to particular schools and areas, that impact on teacher identity and agency. In Jill's case, the discourses that she articulated as being particularly significant to her agency and identity concerned discourses at a national level concerning performativity. For example, she talked about a focus on examination results. Other national discourses that impacted on Jill's agency included a concern with the 'ever improving teacher' that was a continuing priority for the government (Department for Education, 2016). More locally, Jill has been affected by the academisation programme that resulted in Ladywood School taking over the school where she was head of English, and the consequential imperative for her to move to St. Gervase's.

As we have seen throughout the discussion of Jill's work, it is the case that teachers' professional lives and their agency are situated at the intersection of local, national and global educational policy contexts. Global discourses such as accountability, performativity and achievement that are currently prevalent in education and which play out at both local and national level are significant in the expression of Jill's agency. The way in which her reflexivity interacts with these discourses—and in

particular with her articulation of how performativity has impacted on her beings and doings—is significant in regard to her agency. This shows the importance of considering modes of reflexivity in relation to an individual's context and personal projects.

6.4 Conclusions and Implications

The understandings drawn from Jill's case study and from the other teachers I worked with (not described in this chapter) show the potential explanatory usefulness of Archer's conceptualisations of reflexivity (e.g. 2012) in understanding teachers' professional thinking and doing. Thinking about reflexivity through a critical realist lens allows us to develop a deeper understanding of how the mediation process that Archer describes as a function of reflexivity (e.g. 2012) operates for teachers living and working in the real world in real social and cultural contexts.

The essence of the daily work of teachers reflects an intersection of personal biography and the situational structures and cultures of schools in which teachers operate, which brings about differences in professional thinking and doing. In considering this daily work, as exemplified through Jill's narrative, we can see the importance of viewing teaching—and teachers—as being or embodying more than a set of competencies, as Day points out in Chap. 10.

By identifying the modes of reflexivity that Jill used and considering how her reflexivity determines and mediates her agency in her personal and professional contexts, this work showed how individuals generate the elaboration of structure and culture, but also how they themselves simultaneously undergo elaboration as people (Archer, 1995, p. 253). The study illuminates the intersectionality of a number of factors at a variety of levels that may influence the professional lives and identity of teachers, and how this intersectionality might influence their agency. The intersection of local, national and global policy contexts with each other and with Jill's concerns and beings and doings; what Jill experiences in regard to these intersections does indeed shape her responses to problematic situations (Biesta & Tedder, 2006).

As a result of this study, I was able to increase understandings of and develop ways of thinking about reflexivity and agency that could be used in professional development work with teachers, generalising from the empirical to demonstrate the applicability of the theoretical. TRAIt is a thinking tool. Thinking tools are often used in education and serve a number of functions, including being useful in making thinking more transparent and in providing ways to think specifically about different content and ideas (Mappen, 2015). Certainly, interventions based on reflexivity could be very valuable in teachers' professional development. TRAIt could be utilised for any particular individual teacher, and this could be done by asking particular questions of individuals and their contexts. To this end, further work could develop a rudimentary prototype toolkit based on TRAIt, which could enable individuals to have a better understanding of how professional identity and agency develop and to bring insights into the determining processes of reflexivity and agency that are

important to teachers. Teachers could use the toolkit reflectively for their own developmental purposes, or it might be used by managers in conjunction with teachers to work collaboratively in relation to teacher development and agency. Further research in this area could usefully fill the gap that Archer's work leaves in regard to practice; the application of work on modes of reflexivity and on teacher agency could be used to enhance teachers' reflective practice. In addition, a consideration of the work of Michael Eraut (e.g. 2012) on trajectories, or the developmental pathways we create for ourselves, but which are also influenced by other individuals—and by contexts—as we journey through our lives would be helpful in filling out/developing the explanatory power of the model in relation to the macro and meso levels. Eraut talks about development being a function of the opportunities we have for experiences that will enable us to fulfil roles and tasks and, in that process, develop ourselves, on the assumption that we have the capability to occupy the role. This resonates strongly with the work I have described in this chapter. Considering TRAIt and the work on Eraut in conjunction would be a helpful development to facilitate the explanation of the power of the macro and meso levels of influence.

The TRAIt approach and conceptual model I have presented focus on the proximal level, with less of a focus on meso and macro levels of the ecological systems which impact on and are impacted by individuals' beings and doings. Further work is currently addressing this limitation, with analysis of the meso- and macro-level factors which the TRAIt model may be able to explain being considered.

This is an area where this paper on identity, agency and reflexivity in teachers, using a critical realist lens and approach to reflexivity, adds to the currently flourishing debate concerning the role of reflexivity. Importantly, this work also contributes to a critical re-reading of the concept of teacher education, focusing on the complex negotiations that teachers make in their developmental journeys in order to stablish themselves in the complex, precarious and often contradictory world which is teaching and teacher development in the twenty-first century.

References

Archer, M. S. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach.* Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (2003). *Structure, agency and the internal conversation.* Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (2007). *Making our way through the world: Human reflexivity and social mobility.* Cambridge University Press.

Archer, M. S. (2012). *The reflexive imperative in late modernity.* Cambridge University Press.

Ball, S. J. (2008). *The education debate: Policy and politics in the twenty-first century.* The Policy Press.

Bhaskar, R. (1989). *The possibility of naturalism.* Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2006). *How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as-achievement. Learning lives: Learning, identity, and agency in the life course* (Working Paper Five). Teaching and Learning Research Programme.

Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 39*(2), 132–149.

Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., Robertson, A., Huby, G., Avery, A., & Sheikh, A. (2011, June 27). The case study approach. *BMC Medical Research Methodology* [online].

Department for Education. (2015). *Progress 8 measure in 2016 and 2017*. Department for Education.

Department for Education. (2016). *Educational excellence everywhere. Cm 9230.* Department for Education.

Department for Education and Skills. (2003). *Building schools for the future. Dfes/0134/2003.* Department for Education.

Education Act. (2002). Available at: http://www.Legislation.Gov.Uk/Ukpga/2002/32/Contents. Accessed January 29, 2022

Eraut, M. (2012). Developing a broader approach to professional learning. In *Learning trajectories, innovation and identity for professional development* (pp. 21–45). Springer.

Lord, J. (2012). *The development of professional identities in early career teachers: A conceptual synthesis of the literature.* Unpublished Paper submitted for the Degree of Doctor in Education, University of Manchester.

Mappen. (2015) *What defines a thinking tool?* [Online]. Available at: http://getmappen.com/info/professional-learning-for-teachers/what-defines-a-thinking-tool/. Accessed February 17, 2016

Priestley, M., Biesta, G. J. J., & Robinson, S. (2013). Teachers as agents of change: Teacher agency and emerging models of curriculum. In M. Priestley, & G. J. J. Biesta (Eds.), *Reinventing the curriculum: New trends in curriculum policy and practice* (pp. 187–206). Bloomsbury Academic.

Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* Teachers College Press.

Scott, D. (2010). *Education, epistemology and critical realism.* Routledge.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Sage Publications Ltd.

Janet Lord is Director of Education for the faculty of Health and Education at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. She has worked as a social sciences teacher then as a lecturer in higher education for many years, specialising in education studies, teacher education and social sciences. She has experience in school governance and educational consultancy. Janet's research and writing concerns educational technology, pedagogy, student experience and the nature of critical spaces in HE, and in initial teacher education.