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Subdued by the system: Neoliberalism and the beginning teacher

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HIGHLIGHTS

- This narrative inquiry examines the impact of educational neoliberalism on teachers.
- It retells a teacher's struggle to teach against the grain in a Singaporean school.
- It portrays how a teacher was subdued by a neoliberal school culture in 2 years.
- It proposes strategies to help teachers navigate neoliberal thinking and practice.

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ABSTRACT

This article reports a study that examined, through the lens of narrative inquiry, the lived experience of a beginning teacher during her first two years in a neoliberal school system. Situated in the sociocultural context of Singapore, the study traced how Natalie, a beginning teacher of a constructivist bent, floundered in a neoliberal school culture characterised by accountability, work intensification, performance appraisal, regulation of teacher motives/competence, and competition. The findings help to illuminate some of the issues that beginning teachers are likely to face in their struggles to implement alternative pedagogies against the grain of increasingly neoliberal school systems.

1. Introduction

Of 21 countries included in a recently released global teacher status index (Varkey GEMS Foundation, 2013), school teachers in Singapore are the highest paid, drawing an average annual salary of US$45,755. While teachers in the other countries are widely regarded as being underpaid, Singaporean teachers are perceived to be overpaid by "almost 14%" (p. 43). Yet, the current attrition rates of Singaporean teachers range between 10% and 15%, according to a recent article in Singapore's national press (Lim, 2011). These inconsistent yet pregnant numbers indicate that something is amiss. This paper reports a longitudinal study that tells a story behind the numbers. Our study examined, through the lens of narrative inquiry, the lived experience of a beginning teacher during her first two years in a neoliberal school system. The focus on the beginning years of teaching was motivated by the understanding that this is a critical period highly influential in forming positive attitudes to teaching as a career (Bezzina, 2006). Our narrative inquiry traced how Natalie, a beginning teacher of a constructivist bent, floundered and was subdued by a neoliberal school culture characterised by accountability, work intensification, performance appraisal, control of teacher motives/competence, and competition. Natalie's story helps to illuminate some of the issues that beginning teachers are likely to encounter in their struggles to implement alternative pedagogies against the grain of neoliberal thinking and practice that prevail in many an educational system. It also raises the important question of what teacher education programmes can do to help beginning teachers to negotiate and resist a neoliberal school culture successfully.

2. Neoliberalism and education

2.1. Rising tides of neoliberalism

Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best

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be advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and skills … characterized by … free markets, and free trade" (p. 2). Essentially, it is an economic philosophy grounded in the belief that the free market uses resources most effectively and efficiently and that the responsibility of the state is to ensure that such a "free market" exists in the public spheres, including education. The most discussed tenets and practices of neoliberalism, collectively referred to as the Washington Consensus, include privatisation, liberalisation, market deregulation, accountability, branding, and pursuit of profit (Harvey, 2005; Lee & McBride, 2007). Since the 1970s, there has been a neoliberal turn in many parts of the world (Harvey, 2005; Peters, 2011). The UK and the USA are among the best known neoliberal states. Through various policies, the two states have privatised, liberalised, and deregulated the market, reining in the government's role in numerous sectors of the economy. The state's role is merely to ensure and maximise opportunities for entrepreneurship, competition, and profit in the economic and public sectors (Lee & McBride, 2007). Apart from these two leading exporters of neoliberal ideas and practices, such international economic bodies as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization have also promoted and enforced neoliberal policies around the world (Harvey, 2005; Lee & McBride, 2007).

Since Singapore's independence in 1965, the government, led by the People's Action Party, has been goaded by a crisis mentality to develop its economy and create jobs in the face of global competition. Its growth into a major economic and business centre has been well-documented (Huff, 1994; Rodan, 1989). Pursuit of economic interests has been essential for Singapore's survival, as the island-state has no hinterland (The New York Times, 2007). Thus, pro-market policies have been enacted to ensure that the state is able to survive and thrive in a neoliberal world. Back in 1987, the Public Sector Divestment Committee recommended a ten-year plan for the privatisation of a number of public sectors. Since then, the telecommunications, public transport, national health services, postal services, public utilities, and two national banks have been privatised or given an autonomous status, i.e., semi-privatised management (see Ng, 1989; Phua, 1991; The Economic Committee, 1986). Inderjit Singh, a Member of Parliament chairing the Government Parliamentary Committee for Finance, Trade and Industry, voiced the prevalent ideology when he asserted that Singapore "must get close to the Washington Consensus model" and give markets freer rein to drive economic growth for the state (Lim & Lee, 2008).

2.2. Recontextualisation of neoliberalism in education

Over the past few decades, market principles have made huge inroads into educational systems that previously were structured and ordered differently (Apple, 2006a; Ball, 2007; Gray & Block, 2012). As a result of these neoliberal ideologies, education is viewed primarily as a mechanism for producing "human capital" so as to "service" and "compete" in the global economy (Furlong, 2013; Gray & Block, 2012, p. 120). In the UK, for example, the Thatcher government passed a flurry of education acts in the 1980s and early 1990s. These policies were designed to enhance parental choice, and reassign responsibility of academic rigour and standards from local education authorities to individual schools (Whitty & Power, 2000). Competition akin to that among private enterprises was encouraged among schools to attract potential "clients." Since parents are free to choose schools for their children, they are the clients that schools market themselves to. Similarly, in the US, the "No Child Left Behind" act and the Race-to-the-Top funding under two different political administrations have required schools to implement market-driven accountability strategies of developing high-stakes state-wide standards and assessments (Hopmann, 2008; Klein, 2009).

Educational neoliberalism often takes the form of managerial control systems (Ball, 2012), benchmarking of academic standards and assessment (Assaf, 2008; Au, 2007), fostering of competition between schools by ranking them publicly and instituting various academic and non-academic awards (Ross & Gibson, 2006), encouraging parental choice of schools (Shiller, 2011), and imposing compliance through accountability measures (Valli & Buese, 2007). Such neoliberal policies have proliferated in various educational systems around the world. Forsey (2009), for example, studied "neoliberalism in practice" (p. 457) in Australian schools, showing how educational reforms based on neoliberal ideals led to more school autonomy and specialisation, which in turn increased competition between schools. The increased competition for school funding and students resulted in a more explicit marketisation of the schools' academic achievements and practices characteristic of the neoliberal discourse. Similarly, Thomas and Yang (2013) demonstrated that neoliberal interests in Taiwan gave rise to a forced obsession with top-down evaluations and accentuated the competition between educational institutions, leading to market-driven reforms of pedagogy and curricula. Piller and Cho (2013) also noted that neoliberal structures in South Korea perpetuated the "ideology and practice of competitiveness" (p. 26) in its educational system. Likewise, Sattler's (2012) analysis of Ontario's education governance reforms introduced in the last two decades revealed an increased neoliberal emphasis on accountability, marketisation, and competition.

Singapore's educational system is no exception. Overseen by the Ministry of Education (MOE), schools, school leaders and teachers are appraised with a model adapted from "the various quality models" (Ng, 2003, p. 28) used by both international and local business organisations. The former **Minister for Education, Teo Chee Hean**, publicly espoused neoliberal principles by declaring that "education is driven by the needs of the economy" and that "(w)e … train people to fit into jobs in those sectors" (MOE, 1999). Thus, the primary purpose of education in Singapore has been viewed as that of meeting the market's needs. This was tellingly revealed through the implementation of the Compulsory Education Act in 2003. This law was enacted because of the government's concern that young Singaporeans were "not being equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to be productive citizens in a knowledge-based economy" (MOE, 2012a). The neoliberal turn of Singapore's educational system demands competition and is profit-driven. From this perspective, Singapore's economic survival depends on its citizens' preparedness to compete globally – they must have the necessary skills to help "Singapore Inc." vie for profits in the global economy. Education is perceived as key to winning the global competition. Thus, the needs of capital (i.e., economy) require an educational system that can efficiently provide future workers for the economy.

The neoliberal policy initiatives have joined forces with the time-honoured practice in Singapore of benchmarking schools based on their students' test results. All primary six pupils (age 12) are required to sit the national Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) for secondary school placement. The annual PSLE scores have been a primary source of information for the public to rate and compare schools. Although the MOE in 2012 ended its longstanding practice of naming the top PSLE scorers, it now provides a list of pupils who have performed well in both academic and non-academic aspects (MOE, 2013). In addition, each primary school principal is given a list of comparable schools to be benchmarked against. These schools are "comparable" in terms of the family socio-economic status of their pupils, the ethnic ratios of the school population, and the parents' educational attainment. This list is