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Agency, shame, and identity: Digital stories of teaching

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The construction of agentive teacher identities is complicated by social class.
- Teachers' own classed backgrounds and hierarchical policy making silences teachers.
- Authoring digital stories of their work in low-income schools enables deep reflection.
- Reflection and exchange of stories among peers breaks silence grounded in class-based shame.
- Digital Storytelling is a step toward building agentive identities.

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ABSTRACT

In the digital stories that teachers author, I explore the social class positioning of teachers in low-income schools in the U.S. and the tensions between professional agency and shame in emerging teacher identities. I consider traces of teachers' own classed backgrounds, the hierarchies of power and class within which their work is surveilled, and the social interactions of daily life within which subordinate class status become embodied. This project attests to the potential of multimedia authoring as a way of knowing about the contradictions of teaching in schools structured against teachers' and students' success.

In this paper, I consider the construction of teacher identities within schools serving low-income children – economically segregated schools that are "primarily about… inscribing failure" (Reay, 2015, p. 14). In the digital stories that they author, I explore the social class positioning of teachers in low-income schools in the U.S. and the tensions between professional agency and shame in emerging teacher identities. I consider traces of teachers' own classed backgrounds, of the hierarchies of power and class within which their work is surveilled, and of the social interactions of daily life within which subordinate class status become embodied (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Holland, Lachiocotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Reay, 2005; Sayer, 2005; Steedman, 1987; Sue, 2010; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001).

My interest in agency, shame and social class in teacher identity is grounded in a long commitment to teacher agency in my work as a teacher educator, even while aware of the long history of teacher acquiescence within schools serving low-income children (Cohen, 2015; Freedberg, 2012; Goldstein, 2014; Hyland, 2005; Johnson, 2012; Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; McNell, 2012; Perlstein, 2008).

This work on agency is part of my support of teachers and teacher candidates as they try to situate their work within complicated cultural and political discourses about schooling as the means to opportunity in the United States. Childhood poverty rates are considerably higher in the U.S. that in other economically advanced countries (United National Children's Emergency Fund, 2012) while social safety nets for low-income families remain relatively weak (Economic Policy Institute, 2012). Meanwhile, a deep cultural belief in opportunity through success in school (Haskins, 2014) has been translated into policies that require that teachers – under threat of sanctions – equalize achievement within classrooms, even while resources available to teachers varies widely across and within districts (Education Week Research Center, 2016) and children come to school lacking secure shelter, medical care, or even food. With many other teacher educators in the U.S., I believe that teachers can and should part of creating more just, caring, and equitable schools via individual and collective professional agency and through contributing their distinct

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perspectives to public debates around education and opportunity. A question in the project that I describe in this paper is whether social class matters in whether even excellent teachers instead remain silent.

While many students in highly selective research universities may be from relatively privileged backgrounds, my work with hundreds of teacher education students from poor and working-class backgrounds[1] has made me wary, along with Lensmire et al. (2013, p. 429), of shorthand reference in the literature to teachers of low-income children as "white and middle class" and that frames teacher acquiescence as evidence of unexamined class and race privilege. My work with these students and my own background have also taught me that the construction of a teacher identity can instead become entangled with complicated class mobility and the subsequent classed judgement of middle class others (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Walkerdine et al., 2001). As Jones and Vagle (2013, p. 134) observe, poor and working-class teacher education students face "institutional no win situations" as those "passing" as solidly middle-class are presumed to bring unexamined privilege to their studies, while more visibly working-class students risk judgment as incompetent or unprofessional.

A long sociological literature documents the relative ease with which the middle class navigate power relations and the parallel embodied unease of subordinates in cross-class interactions (Reay, 2003, 2005, 2015; Bourdieu, 1984, 1990; Sayer, 2005; Skeggs, 2005), Lareau (2000, 2011) and others have powerfully documented working class children's socialization to deference, even as middle class children learn of their entitlement (Calarco, 2011, 2014–2015). Yet in a literature that commonly describes teachers as "white and middle class" (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lensmire et al., 2013; Seglem & Garcia, 2015) we know little about how teachers from poor or working class homes navigate professional agency, particularly as they work within the professional isolation of "failing" schools. Yet as Lawler (2014, p. 14) notes, "not only… are all identities relational, but all are produced within systems of inequality".

Indeed, all teachers work within deepening class inequalities. As Rose (2015) notes, the common element in a long history of school reforms in the U.S. is a public disdain of teachers by higher status policy makers and by academics who "maintain [a] position of judgment" over them (Skeggs, 2005, p. 977). Hargreaves (1998, 2000, 2001) has poignantly documented the pervasive shame and guilt over falling short of one's ideals as teachers of low-income children within increasingly hierarchical policy landscapes. My interests in the project that I discuss here are in understanding how class-based shame may displace agency in teachers' work to create more just schools, and in then learning more about breaking silences seeped in shame.

1. Class, agency, and shame

Sayer (2005, (p. 1)) writes of the shame infused within complex class relationships: "Condescension, deference, shame, guilt, envy, resentment, arrogance, contempt, fear and mistrust, or simply mutual incomprehension and avoidance typify relations between people of different classes".

Writing also of identity construction within systemic inequalities, Boler (1999, Loc 2274 [Chapter 6, Section: The Twilight Zone of Powerlessness, Paragraph 1]) argues that stratified social settings that inscribe failure on children also inscribe gendered and classed powerlessness on teachers as an inherent part of social control. She calls for scholarly attention to

> how powerlessness functions, effects, feeds on, and drains our sense of agency and power as active creators of self-and and world-representations. By powerlessness I mean a state that is usually silent and mutates into guilt and denial that gnaw at us.

Similarly, Sayer (2005, p. 157) argues that the relative powerlessness of subordinated classed status begets not the politicized teacher agency that teacher educators may hope for, but instead shame and silence: "Low-level shame often cannot be articulated, indeed it can *lead to* withdrawal and inarticulacy in terms of feeling a lack of authority to speak and hence lack of practice in articulating one's situation …".

In this project, I sought modes of inquiry that would support alternative means of articulating the contexts of one's work as a teacher. I believed that it would be instructive to witness the stories that teachers author around narrative arcs in which they, as protagonist of their own story – enact *desire.*

With Tuck (2009) I see desire as a "third space" between the binaries of deference and resistance that shape much of the literature on the construction of agentive teacher identities. Desire, Tuck writes:

> more closely matches the experience of people who, at different points in a single day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/fist/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures – that is everybody. . . . Desire, because it is an assemblage of experiences, ideas, and ideologies, both subversive and and dominant, necessarily complicates our understanding of human agency, complicity, and resistance (p. 420).

I believed that listening closely to what teachers *desire* would shed light on their perceptions of constraints on their own power to create more just schools. I hoped that this would also complicate an understanding of teaching, social class, and professional identity.

2. Digital stories of teaching

In this paper, I discuss 8 years of work in *Telling our Stories as Teachers*, a summer course that I teach in a M.Ed. program for inservice teachers. Teachers in the course author multi-media pieces about pivotal moments of their teaching, narrating themselves as protagonists in their stories.

My work with this course is grounded in the workshop methodologies developed by the Story Center (formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling) (Lambert, 2009, 2012) in Berkeley, California. Participants collectively workshop story ideas and then individually develop first-person story scripts around any story they want to explore. Stories are audio recorded and imported into video editing software. Images, video clips, sound, and music are then woven together in a three-to-five minute production that are collectively screened at the end.

I believed that digital storytelling would support reflection on the embodied tensions between agency and shame as teachers work within deeply inequitable social structures. Boler (1999) argues that within inequitable social relationships, injustice is not simply rationally analyzed but is also often experienced *viscerally*. She writes: "We 'feel power' in the sense that we understand and

[1] While data on the race and ethnicity of teachers as overwhelmingly white are readily available, I have found no data on the class backgrounds of those going into teaching. Given that the largest teacher education programs are found in large, non-competitive regional state schools and the growing socio-economic segregation of higher education (Bidwell, 2014), it seems reasonable to assume that many teachers are from low-income or working-class homes, not the middle class. Rose (2015) also notes that many of the teachers in his research are from "modest" socio-economic backgrounds.