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Teacher identity work in neoliberal schooling spaces

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Negotiation of teaching identities in neoliberal schooling spaces is examined.
- Dissonance between a teacher's values (e.g. care for students) and neoliberalism's tenets is documented.
- A model of teacher identity work is applied to data, illuminating teacher identity work processes.
- Opening identity work spaces of potentiality is recommended.

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1. Introduction

Language teachers do much of their identity work, constructing and (re)negotiating their teaching identities, in the social, political, and ethical contexts of schools, which are ideologically heteroglossic sites where multiple, differentially-powered voices conflict and converge around what makes for 'good' teaching and teachers. Lately, neoliberal ideologies have pervaded discussions of schools, curriculum, and teaching in North America, Europe, and beyond (Ball, 2003; Buchanan, 2015; Clarke, 2009, 2013; Fisher-Ari, Kavanagh, & Martin, 2017; McKnight, 2016). We see this in a prevalent discourse of marketization in education in which teachers are configured as "highly individualized, responsibilized subjects" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 248) who must prove their worth primarily (or even solely) through their students' standardized test scores. As agentive actors situated within schooling climates where job success is increasingly defined as production of high test scores, how are teachers negotiating their teaching identities in these spaces? One teacher's identity work within a schooling context marked by neoliberalism, as reported here, provides insights into the interplay between neoliberal contexts and teachers' identities.

2. Neoliberal schooling contexts

Neoliberalism is "the idea that everything should be run as a business–that market metaphors, metrics, and practices should permeate all fields of human life" (Tarnoff, 2016), including–or especially–schooling. It is, in short, viewing education through a market lens.

> The manifestations of neoliberalism in education include increasing central control of what is taught in the form of national or state curricula; the detailed specification of teachers' work through professional teacher competencies and standards, coupled with the introduction of performance management systems and other audit mechanisms to monitor and control teachers and teaching; and the introduction of centralized high-stakes testing regimes to continually evaluate the output of teaching by rendering it visible, calculable and comparable. (Clarke, 2013, p. 230, p. 230)

Schooling policy in the United States and other nations around the world in the early decades of the 2000's has been run through with neoliberal ideology, including two seemingly contradictory impulses: market-based free choice, in which individual consumers (parents, students) are empowered to choose their schools, and a master narrative on curriculum and teaching, in which knowledge and how it is to be delivered and measured is prescribed. Neoliberalism, paradoxically, advocates for more free-market power and individual choice (e.g. school choice) and, at the same time, for increased centralized oversight and quality control (e.g. standardized testing regimes). Curriculum and teaching receive centralized oversight, and schools and teachers are expected to subject themselves to the master narratives of good and effective teaching, measured primarily by standardized exam scores, in order to provide consumers (the public) with information upon which to base their schooling choices (Clarke, 2012; Clarke & Phelan, 2015;

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Parkison, 2013; Stoten, 2013).

Student achievement on standardized tests has become the primary (or even only) measure of good teaching in the public sphere. As Buchanan (2015) notes, "The last decade in US education policy and practice has emphasized increased accountability for teachers and schools; the mechanism for that accountability has been student performance on standardized test scores" (p. 702). Few would argue that good teachers are not concerned with student performance, but it is the narrowing of the definition of good teaching to only student test scores that causes concern. Additionally, this narrowing is at the heart of neoliberal discourses on teaching. Student learning and, by extension, teachers' teaching within a neoliberal framing of education, can purportedly be measured through criterion-referenced exams, and comparison of testing results can tell us which schools and teachers are succeeding, and which are not.

Continual inspection and appraisal of teacher performativity (Ball, 2003; Clarke, 2009; 2012) within neoliberal settings has been observed to serve as a de-stabilizing, de-professionalizing force for teacher identities as teachers are "re-worked as producers/providers, educational entrepreneurs" (Ball, 2003, p. 218). In neoliberal systems of schooling, teachers' professional judgment, principled beliefs, and philosophies of teaching become secondary or even irrelevant to the primacy of performance and compliance with the accountability regime.

> [Standardized curricula] also designed to be 'teacher-proof' in a misguided belief that this will ensure that learning is uniform for all students and that central curriculum writers know better than teachers what it is that students should learn. Yet, in so doing, they remove teachers' professional autonomy and undermine their exercise of judgement through this act of prescription. Teaching is thus reduced to a technical rather than an ethical, critical or creative act. (Clarke & Phelan, 2015, p. 267, p. 267)

If, as Ball (2003) notes, the pervasiveness of an ideology of neoliberalism changes not just what teachers do, but 'who they are' (p. 215), then more investigation of teacher identity within such contexts is certainly called for.

2.1. Curriculum standardization

Curriculum standardization often accompanies a neoliberal approach to education (Buchanan, 2015; Fisher-Ari et al., 2017; Meshulam & Apple, 2014; Stoten, 2013; Weaven & Clark, 2015). When curricula are standardized, when all classrooms use the same texts and instructional approaches, opportunity and achievement are flattened out, resulting, ostensibly, in all students being given an equal chance. Performance differences within a standardized curriculum, therefore, lie within the individual teacher or learner and not the curriculum or educational system. Any variations in teaching contexts or salient differences in students (e.g. lack of proficiency in the language of the standardized curricula) are rendered invisible and seemingly unimportant. Policy makers and the general public can compare schools' achievement via test scores, which are commonly published in local papers across the U.S., and they may assume the results indicate poor teaching or poor learning at low-performing schools. Standardization, therefore, may appear to allow for a fair sorting of learners by their abilities and teachers by the quality of their teaching.

Standardization, however, may offer little more than a veneer of equality. When student individuality and variability are not taken into account in curricular choices, instruction is ill-fitted to some students leading to student under-performance, as observed in a recent study by Fisher-Ari, Kavanagh, and Martin's (2017). The researchers found that student poor performance stoked teachers' deficit views of students—placing the blame for poor performance not with the ill-fit of the curriculum but within the students, whom they came to view as unmotivated, lazy, or simply unintelligent. Rather than ameliorating inequality, then, curriculum standardization may exacerbate it.

Teachers' experiences of the standardization of curriculum are similarly troubling. Standardization has been observed to de-professionalize teachers by restricting teachers' use of their own discernment before and during instruction (Buchanan, 2015; Stoten, 2013). Within a neoliberal view, teaching is framed as a technicist job in which the teacher's role is transmitter rather than thinking, knowledgeable actor and decision-maker (Sawyer, 2004). Yet, little research has explored how schooling contexts infused with a neoliberal ideology actually shape and constrain teacher identity negotiation.

3. Teacher identity

Teacher identity is "dynamic, multifaceted, negotiated and co-constructed," (Edwards & Burns, 2016, p. 735) and it is negotiated at the nexes of "the social and the individual, of discourse and practice, of reification and participation, of similarity and difference, of agency and structure, of fixity and transgression, of the singular and the multiple, and of the synoptic and the dynamic" (Clarke, 2009, p. 189). Complex in nature, teacher identity has proven a rich site for exploring teachers' teaching lives as it involves the complex, shifting interplay between differentially powered forces, both internal and external to the individual teacher. Neoliberal educational settings, exerting powerful external forces on curriculum and assessment, may bring the dualities of external pressures and teachers' values and beliefs into conflict. If, as Ball (2003) asserted, neoliberalism changes not only what teachers do but who they are, how does teacher identity weather, adapt to, or resist neoliberal ideologies of their school settings?

3.1. A model of teacher identity work

Clarke (2009), exploring how teachers might develop and employ their agency in light of the 'paradoxical aspects' (p. 185) of identity that often constrain agency, proposed a model of identity formation utilizing Foucault's axes of ethical self-formation. Noting the duality of the "pervasiveness of power relations constituting us as subjects, along with the corollary pervasive existence of freedom" (p. 190), Clarke turned to Foucault's later work focused on the formation and care of the self, and found in Foucault's work a similar focus on individuals' navigation between freedoms and constraints. Foucault explored ethical self-formation as the practice of freedom (including the freedom to resistance constraints on one's self) that also requires consideration of the other (Infinito, 2003). The elements of Foucauldian self-formation, as Clarke points out, map onto much recent work on teacher identity and offers a model for how the dualities of freedoms and constraints, the internal and external, and the self and the other might be accounted for during identity construction and negotiation, which Clarke calls "identity work" (p. 191). Borrowing from Foucault's four axes of ethical self-formation, Clarke's identity work model consists of the following four elements: 1) the substance of teacher identity; 2) the authority sources of teacher identity; 3) the self-practices of teacher identity; and 4) the *telos* (ultimate objective) of teacher identity (Fig. 1). Each is discussed in turn below.

3.1.1. Substance of teacher identity

The substance of teacher identity is to be found in internal