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Reclaiming Agency And Its Limits in Teacher Education
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Learning To Teach 'Finally': Reclaiming Agency And Its Limits in Teacher Education

In teaching, professional agency is viewed as the capacity to make evaluations based on what matters to you as a professional, interpret complex problems and bring to bear the ‘best resources’ available to understand and handle them (Edwards, 2015). The idea of teacher agency is a powerful but often unstated assumption underlying teacher education. Programmes reflect either i) a ‘blank subjectivity’ – where there is no recognition of the complicated interaction between inner psychic life and outer societal discourses; or, ii) an ‘uncomplicated subjectivity’ – reinforcing a humanist vision of the self as autonomous and encountering language as a free agent (Parker 1997, p. 2). In both instances, teachers not only remain unaware of historical a priori conditions, which always limit one’s thought and action, they never learn to appreciate the intrinsic role of uncertainty and desire in living and teaching. Without such understandings, we argue, the teacher cannot cultivate the capacity to confront seductive and problematic ideological fantasies and dominant discourses.

Recently, for example, we have witnessed many political efforts to recast teachers’ agency in terms of performativity (Ball, 2008) – holding teachers accountable for a prescribed set of outcomes and results (Hopmann, 2008) – thereby reducing teachers’ ‘freedom’ to think and make judgements about what is educationally desirable (Rülselbæk Hansen, Phelan, and Qvortrup, 2015; Courtney and Gunther, 2015). Teachers still appear free to make decisions as long as they align with dominant policy discourses (Masschelein and Simons, 2013). The upshot is that the teaching subject is always both free and unfree at the same time. In this sense, limits represent a site of tension – a conceptual and practical threshold – that cannot be avoided (Clarke and Phelan, 2017). Foucault (1997) captures something of this sense when he endorses a limit attitude,
“an ethos, a philosophical life in which a critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed upon us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them” (p. 319). Paradoxically, our sense of agency is premised on our appreciation of our subjective limits.

The inescapability of limits, and the enduring paradoxical challenge they pose, offer an important antidote to the teaching subject of new liberal democracies wherein, “man believes himself capable of everything” (Agamben, 2011, p. 44) and when the precariousness of life is overshadowed by dogmatism and orthodoxy. The responsibility of teacher educators is critical: it must engage what Derrida (2007) terms “an unrelenting war against the doxa” (p. 28) - open up subtlety, aporia and paradox and call teachers back to a recognition of precariousness. In his final interview, Derrida (2007) asks: What does learning to live ‘finally’ mean? The ambiguity of the phrase evokes inquiry into a difficult question: “is living something that can be learned? or taught?” (p. 24). Can one learn, he asks, “through discipline or apprenticeship, through experience or experimentation to accept or, better, to affirm life,” in its uncertainty? (p. 24).

Echoing Derrida, the question that preoccupies us in this paper is: What might learning to teach ‘finally’ mean? What role might limits play in teacher education? The concern for legacy and death surely resonates with parents and teachers whose fervent hope it is that their children undertake life while affirming the truth of “a death that is coming, always already there yet impossible to anticipate” (Birnbaum, 2007, p. 13). So too the teacher must learn to appreciate the frailty of one’s being-in-the-world as historical, existential, and circumstantial; condemned to make meaning in a meaningless world but also recognizing the significant role played by contingency in a teacher’s agency.

**Method**

Our approach is to illustrate how teacher educators might engage limits in our daily work. We begin by introducing the ‘case’ (a constructed vignette) of a student teacher in a two-year teacher education program:

“The children are animated and noisy, chatting excitedly to one another. When addressed by Cari, the student teacher, to settle down and listen to her, one child utters with a defiant air: “I don’t have to do as you say; you’re not the real teacher.” Silently, with eyes steadily fixed on the floor, Cari moves to the back of the classroom and through the door.”

Drawing on ethical (Judith Butler, 2004), existential (Maxine Greene, 2004), and psychoanalytical (Zizek, 2008a,b) theorists, we offer three readings of the vignette in which we identify and explore three sources of human limitation - a) the Other; b) knowledge and experience; and c) lack and desire, respectively. Each theoretical frame allows us to read the vignette variously but each also “return[s] us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense” (Butler, 2004, p. 151). Each respective reading invites us “to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense” (p. 151). Each prompts teacher educators and student teachers toward a consideration of contingency, risk and possibility; each invigorates “the intellectual projects of critique, of questioning, of coming to understand the difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent”, and to create a sense of a public profession and educational community in which complexity is not feared or dismissed, but valued as part of “a sensate democracy” (p. 151).

**Expected Outcomes**

Teacher professional agency is always played out in a field of tension between inner as well as outer matters, as our different readings of the vignette will show. With our a) ethical reading (the other) it becomes clear that we as human beings are addressed by the other in such a way that we cannot avoid and that is “‘against our will … or prior to the formation of our will” (Butler, 2004, p. 130). Obligations are pressed upon us from “a nameless elsewhere … unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned” (p. 130), in fact, often ruining our plans. Turning to our existential reading b) (knowledge and experience), the role of reflection should not be conflated with the ability to know(Greene, 1973). While the teacher acquires knowledge in the context of relating to the educational world in the everyday; “the knower [is] a person in a concrete situation, not as ‘man’ in the abstract of as ‘scientist' or as ‘inquirer’” (p. 137). The teacher responds to questions arising out of her situation, which remains only partly known to her. Finally, and with our c) psychoanalytical reading, we begin to appreciate and address the fantasies from which the teacher can never escape once and for all. Yet, it is possible for the teacher to traverse her fantasies – the undoing of her intentions, existential anxieties, and desires - in teacher education. One way to do so is to fully identify with these fantasies and to bring them out into the open. If this is encouraged for the student teacher (and subsequently the teacher), we as teacher educators have constructed a different starting point for developing teacher agency, where limits are not avoided but appreciated.

**References**


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