The subordination of teacher identity: Ethical risks and potential lines of flight

Matthew Clarke
School of Education
University of Aberdeen
Scotland

matthew.clarke@abdn.ac.uk

The subordination of teacher identity: Ethical risks and potential lines of flight

Introduction

As we tentatively emerge from the imposed isolation of the Covid-19 pandemic and as – despite initial optimism about rethinking schooling in light of the lessons of the pandemic – the status quo reasserts itself, it seems timely to consider the current state of teacher professionalism. This task seems critical, given the wider backdrop of the neoliberal policy pandemic (Levin, 1998; Vidovich, 2009) that has driven the commodification and instrumentalization of education over the last forty years (Porfilio & Malott, 2008) and contributed to the eclipsing of discourses of occupational professionalism, a profession-led discourse comprising collegiate forms of authority, by organisational professionalism, a management-led discourse involving more hierarchical forms of authority (Evetts, 2009; Moore & Clarke, 2016). But equally important and timely, is the insight that neoliberalism – which has always been about the free market *and* the strong state, rather than just the former (Davies, 2017; Peck & Theodor, 2019) – far from being replaced by an emergency-driven, state-led Keynesianism during the recent Covid-19 pandemic, has used the latter to enhance its position (Šumonja, 2021). In this regard, "we should remember that the strong hand of state, whose supposed return in action is cheered and feared today, has actually been the organising force of neoliberal assault on all political obstacles to the profitability of capital accumulation" (Šumonja, 2021, p. 217).

In many global settings the neoliberal context is characterised by intensified cultures of competition, instrumentalism, individualism and performativity in education (Arar, Örücü, & Wilkinson, 2021; Clarke, 2012; Glynos & Howarth, 2009). But in addition, in some specific global contexts – the USA and, especially, the UK, which is my focus, spring to mind here – the impact of neoliberal performativity has been redoubled by the rise of less-frequently commented upon neoconservative cultures of authoritarian leadership and hierarchical management, with their associated practices of discipline, punishment and control. Such cultures and practices, working in concert with the performative pressures arising from neoliberalism, pose significant risks to the ethical core of teaching. Identifying and naming these risks is a key aim of this paper, reflecting the notion of critique as diagnosis or problematisation; however, effective critique also requires critique in its utopian, anticipatory mode, reflecting the notion of critique as reconstruction (Benhabib, 1986; Koopman, 2013). These two critical modalities, diagnostic/problematising and anticipatory/reconstructive, need to work together in reciprocal fashion: without problematisation, reconstruction risks becoming ideological polemic; without

reconstruction, problematisation is indistinguishable from objective social scientific commentary (Benhabib, 1986, p. 226). In order to answer the call for reconstructive critique, in addition to identifying three specific ethical risks confronting teachers today, the latter part of the paper explores potential conceptual resources, drawn from the work of contemporary thinkers, Simon Forti, Adriana Cavarero and Mari Ruti, for attenuating and ameliorating, if not entirely negating, these ethical risks. These thinkers are relatively unfamiliar to education audiences – but so too were now familiar figures such as Bourdieu, Foucault and Deleuze at one time. However, my main reason for drawing on them is not their novelty but the aptness of the concepts from their thinking that I draw on to offer potential lines of flight from the ethical risks to teachers' practices and identities highlighted in the paper.

I should note at the outset, that although the paper does draw in part on some interview data, it is not primarily an empirically-driven paper, but a theoretically-oriented critical, conceptual exploration of philosophical ideas that may open up new possibilities – new lines of flight as the title puts it – for thinking ethically, rather than instrumentally, about teachers' practices and identities in the face of what Ball (2003) described two decades ago as 'the terrors of performativity". As such, the paper embodies a view of "theory as theōria [which] involves a kind of speculation or seeing anew… [it] opens opportunities to speculate on a new mode of critique, particularly in the question of what non-instrumental critique is and does" (Carusi, 2021, p. 249). In particular, a key objective of the paper is to speculate on and explore what non-instrumental (i.e. not driven by familiar imperatives to raise test scores or improve 'outcomes') might be opened up by engaging with the philosophical ideas of friction, inclination and singularity drawn respectively from the work of Simona Forti, Adriana Cavarero and Mari Ruti and discussed in more detail in the second, speculative, anticipatory, reconstructive, critical analysis.

The neoliberal-neoconservative nexus
England has served as something of an experimental laboratory for neoliberal education policies – Ball (2016, p. 1047) refers to the country as "the social laboratory of neoliberal education reforms" – initiating, adapting and recycling ideas and practices within the competitive arena of the global education race (Meyer & Menavot, 2013; Sellar, Thompson, & Rutkowski, 2017; Thomson, 2019). This experimentalism has included promoting a new type of school, untethered from forms of local democratic accountability, as a means of "breaking the monopoly" of local government provision of schooling, thereby "allowing the best schools and leaders to extend

their influence, taking over from weaker ones" (Department for Education (DfE), 2016, p. 10). Since the 2010 Academies act in the UK, 77% of Secondary Schools have become academies (Department for Education, April 2020). These schools are state funded but lie outside local government control, instead having direct responsibility to the Secretary of State for Education. In reality, the lines of accountability are often tenuous, while the pressures to perform have given license to abusive behaviour in schools of all types (Courtney & Gunter, 2015), with a 2019 teachers' union survey of 2000 of its members finding that four out of five teachers had experienced workplace bullying.[1]

But, as I suggested above, the rise of authoritarian cultures in education also bears the traces of – and needs to be understood against the background of – neoconservatism and its preoccupation with notions of family, nation and tradition. Such preoccupations may seem at odds with neoliberalism's signature themes of freedom and choice; but as Melinda Cooper (2017, p. 63) has noted in the US context, neoliberalism and neoconservativism are

> tethered together by a working relationship that is at once necessary and disavowed: as an ideology of power that only ever acknowledges its reliance on market mechanisms and their homologues, neoliberalism can only realize its objectives by proxy, that is by outsourcing the imposition of non-contractual obligations to social conservatives. In extremis, neoliberals must turn to the overt, neoconservative methodology of state-imposed, transcendant virtue to realize their dream of an immanent virtue ethics of the market.

The convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism reflects the nexus of an increasingly crisis-ridden late capitalism and a progressively-more-authoritarian nation state. "The neoliberal triumph – which is in reality a crisis that was never surmounted but only worsened – has forced the political class into slashing the institutional mediations that pacified the working class in a previous era… a development that is challenging the reproduction of the political system and which makes it necessary to augment the authoritarian side of the state" (Rasmussen, 2022, p. 58; see also Lazzaroto, 2021). If neoliberalism provides the carrot, neoconservatism wields the stick.

Signs of neoconservatism in England's schools are not hard to find. Traditional uniforms, complete with obligatory blazers and ties, are the norm in most schools, while many operate

---

[1] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/bullying-teachers-alcohol-drugs-self-harm-nasuwt-union-mental-health-managers-education-a8874766.html

'zero tolerance', 'no excuses' behavioural policies. These policies are enforced with elaborate systems of demerits and detentions, which come into effect for even the most minor of transgressions. Neoconservatism is not limited to the conduct of education, however, but also shapes its content. England's state-imposed national curriculum is not only highly prescriptive but resistant to any accommodation with radical or progressive ideas, as was evident in former Schools Minister, Nick Gibb's rejection of calls to decolonise the English school curriculum[2]. Meanwhile, the combination of high stakes assessments, league tables and a punitive inspection regime triangulate to ensure a maximum degree of compliance on the part of schools, educators, parents and pupils.

Such attention to the micro-details of institutional life clearly impacts the experiences and subjectivities of students attending these schools. But critically for this paper, it also has significant implications for the teachers who work within such institutional cultures and who are required to promote, monitor and enforce their codes as part of their professional practice. Within such cultures, for both students and teachers, what counts as legitimate knowledge and understanding, what is required in terms of appearance, behaviour and comportment, as well as what is expected to comprise the content of each person's thoughts and beliefs are all detailed and displayed, with unwavering compliance inviolably demanded. Such cultures thus have profound implications at multiple levels of professional practice including knowledge, interpersonal relations and intrapersonal identities.

These observations go beyond debates and discussions about policy. The patterns and trends identified above have shaped the experiences and the subjectivities of teachers and teacher educators, undermining agency and voice (Aydarova, Rigney & Dana, 2021). In order to illustrate how this can occur, I draw on interview data from early career teachers working in academies – the new, quasi-privatised school model that England's Conservative government has rolled out in the past decade. Drawing inspiration from international models, including Swedish Free Schools and the US Charter School movement, and inflected with a powerful dose of neo-colonial nostalgia (Clarke & Mills, 2022; Shahjahan, 2011), this program of academisation has served to install a quasi-privatised and highly 'unpublic' form of public education in England (Thomson, 2019). These schools are touted as being free from the bureaucratic control of local education authorities, which Ministers claim impeded innovation and creativity; critics point out that the new models of school organisation are just as bureaucratic as those they replaced (A.

---

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jul/21/schools-minister-rebuffs-calls-to-decolonise-english-curriculum

Wilkins, 2016, 2017) and have sacrificed any semblance of local democratic accountability into the bargain. The democratic deficit characterising some of these schools is not limited to the severing of external ties to local democratic representative bodies, however, but is also reflected in internal school cultures, which are often characterised by hierarchical management structures and authoritarian leadership practices (Courtney & Gunter, 2015; Skerritt, 2020; C. Wilkins, Gobby, & Keddie, 2021).

(Post)Methodology

Conceptually, the paper seeks to embrace a post qualitative approach (St. Pierre, 2011, 2013, 2016), which asks "what 'new' might become intelligible by refusing to force our work into the existing categories of conventional empirical social science research methodologies — e.g., methodology, method, process, data, research design, measurement, interview, findings, data analysis, fieldwork, validity, and so on?" (St Pierre, 2016, p.8). In this spirit, what follows involves two analyses, which I have labelled diagnostic and reconstructive critique respectively. In the first diagnostic critique, I share a brief thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) that remains close to the data while seeking to distil key issues emerging from it. The second reconstructive critique then builds on the first to engage in more speculative conceptual exploration, informed by an abductive sensibility and involving an iterative process of movement back and forth between data and theories (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Haig & Evers, 2016), in order to consider "what 'new' might become intelligible" in relation to teacher professionalism.

Practically, following ethical approval from the author's institution, the teachers were interviewed via semi-structured telephone conversations[3] of around an hour in order to explore their perspectives on issues of policy, professionalism, and professional relationships[4]. The teachers were in the first five years of their careers, and hence had only worked in schools in the era of neoliberalisation, and all taught in secondary schools serving students aged between eleven to sixteen from socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. In line with the English government's academisation agenda, the majority of these schools had been forced to become academies and to sever their links to their local government's education authority following poor inspection outcomes. Reflecting a pattern found in England (Graham, 2018), but also in other international contexts, such as the USA (Ayers, Dohen & Ayers, 2001; Fuentes, 2013), many

---

[3] Telephone interviews were mutually agreed to for practical purposes, given issues of distance, time and travel. More interviews with additional teachers were planned but the pandemic and successive lockdowns intervened.
[4] See also Phelan, Clarke & Vincent (forthcoming), which draws on the interview study to explore Foucauldian notions of friendship in relation to teachers and teaching.

schools serving such communities frequently employ an educational model that is grounded in demands for strict adherence to detailed curricular and pedagogical requirements and compliance with highly prescriptive and punitive disciplinary codes, as will become evident in the first iteration of the analysis which follows.

Diagnostic critique: (De)Professionalisation in the neoliberal-neoconservative academies

In an initial thematic analysis of the interview data, a number of themes were generated. These themes were: i) the authoritarian discourses and cultures of leadership in the academies; ii) the monitoring and surveillance practices these cultures fomented; iii) the strained social relationships that resulted from these practices among teachers and between teachers and students; iv) the anxiety and uncertainty that characterised the identities of the teachers; and v) the corrupting effect these developments had on the professionalism of the teachers with negative consequences for the learning of students – something always highlighted as one of the benefits of the academisation agenda. I discuss each of these in turn below, after which I will present a further, more theoretically driven analysis.

Authoritarian leadership and management

Perhaps in a search for stability, certainty and control, as a response to the ever-shifting and intrusive policy context, one of the most powerful and pervasive themes in the interviews was the authoritarian style of leadership found in many schools the teachers worked in. Such leadership typically required complete adherence to its values and vision, as well as to the detailed policies and protocols it articulated to realise this vision. Aileen's observations on this front are symptomatic of this pattern of leadership style at her school: "I often felt it was low autonomy, high accountability. There were a lot of non-negotiables, that you had to make sure were implemented in your lessons." She went on to characterise the non-negotiable nature of the expectations placed upon her, using the same 'bus' metaphor as Courtney & Gunter (2015). "I think the phrase was 'you either get on the bus, or you get off'. And it was used quite a few times actually. There were quite a few members of staff who, it was like rats on a ship, really, who just decided, that was it, they were going to go."

The desire for control on the part of school leaders is reflected in a hostility to teacher unions – entities that academies are not legally required to recognise. As Alan commented, "You know, union's a dirty word. If you mention the union, it's just not a thing.... it's just not there. So, you just have to understand that you have chosen to work here, and therefore you just have to deal

with that." The desire for control was also expressed in the detailed prescriptions on staff dress, which mirrored the detailed codes around student appearance, reflecting Foucault's (1977) insights into how disciplinary codes are enacted through micro practices inscribed on the body. Linda described the culture at her school thus:

> They're just very detailed again, much like the kids' uniform policy. Staff uniform is you've got to either wear a… for females anyway, a skirt obviously, on the knee. No elbows can be on show at any time. So, all your tops have to be longer than elbows, or you wear your jacket all day, basically. They say jackets can be a pinstripe, or any professional check, but I couldn't wear a floral jacket, for example, or I couldn't wear a jazzy jacket. And yeah, just in terms of jackets, I have to wear a jacket walking from my classroom to the printer, anywhere outside of a classroom. And now, if you were to arrive in the building after 7.30am, you have to have your jacket on walking in – I can't wear a coat.

Surveillance and monitoring practices

Such authoritarian leadership has to be continually re-enforced and so unsurprisingly, the schools were characterised by ongoing surveillance and monitoring practices, from making unexpected 'drop-ins' to teachers' classrooms to regular checks on teachers' lesson plans and student workbooks to make sure teachers were adhering to the required pedagogic, marking and assessment conventions. Geoffrey described the quality assurance processes operating at his school: "Quality Assurance of planning happens weekly for all staff and it is reduced to fortnightly for those with a good enough 'score.' There are specific foci each time such as differentiating objectives, and things like that. Then there's been a big focus this year on underachievers, and high-end achievers, so, we've had to mention on our plans what we are doing for them." Monitoring and surveillance activities were often combined with escorting visitors around the school, adding the potential for humiliation in front of others to the anxieties around correctness and performance. Laura described the stress of such experiences:

> There's a constant like, 'they're coming round', not necessarily just for drop-ins…but also with visitors like head teachers or the governors, parents that are changing schools, or Year 6 parents… And just picking up a book ….and if they're out of cycle – which is about a three-week cycle – that's not good enough. And obviously, if the Head comes in with a visitor, and then shows them a book, and it's out of cycle, you're just like, 'oh no'.

Strained social relationships

The combination of control, monitoring and surveillance had the additional consequence of undermining professional solidarity. Ruth noted how not toeing the party line was frowned upon by colleagues and management alike and led to her being marginalised. "I offer opinions and a different opposing view and see things and I don't think they like that. I think they are not expecting that because I am just a teacher, I am not a leader in terms of management". She was subsequently made to feel she did not 'fit' and that others did not want to associate with her as a 'weaker' member of staff.

> It made me feel isolated, really isolated and I think for the whole year that I worked there I never stopped feeling isolated, at all. And everybody had their place, but there was no actual place for me at all when I started there, it was all sort of, you know there was no space. So I'd end up pulling my chair… sitting slightly outside the circle. So you just feel out of place and nobody made room for me, and that went on for months. It was like, 'you don't belong'.

However, the damaging effects of the authoritarian leadership culture was not limited to relations between teachers but also undermined their relationships with students. Aileen remarked,

> I think for me the drawbacks, were maybe the level of detail it [the behaviour policy] went into, where it almost felt like staff were having to be really pedantic, and the kids felt that they were being patronised, or resented, in a way. I think for some pupils, they just felt ready to burst. They had no way of letting off any sort of energy at all… And I think for the kids, they didn't feel like they were trusted. And so, it became quite adversarial at times, it became like them and us.

Helen picked up on this theme and noted how the authoritarian policies were alienating students and undermining any sense of belonging. In her words, "they're policed and controlled. They're not allowed to sit in groups bigger than, I think it's five, and we're not supposed to let them up to go to the classrooms in the morning. There isn't an overwhelming sense that they feel comfortable here. I think sometimes not all of the kids feel like the school is a place for them."

Anxious and uncertain individuals

The policies and resulting culture in the schools created an environment in which teachers felt anxious and uncertain. Laura picked up on the rather strange social professional environment that arose. "Really, you know that something's not quite right, but you can't… It's so strange. Nobody says no, even though you think, in real life, you would say no, and people should say no. But nobody says no, because essentially, that shows that you're not aligned to the vision which they're obsessed with, and therefore, you won't get a promotion – that's how it works."

Alan felt that the creation of an environment in which individuals felt anxious and uncertain through monitoring and surveillance was a deliberate ploy: "The school is set up to keep you as a professional on edge a little bit. There's a lot of scrutiny." Despite this awareness of how he and his colleagues were being manipulated, he accepted an extremely heavy workload without challenge despite the obvious physical and mental strain it placed upon him.

> What I'm reluctant to share, and what I'm reluctant to talk about is the work-life balance aspect. Because I think it's been normalised within the Academy that you work hard. So everyone works hard; people will turn up to work at 6, and not leave till 7, and then work all their weekends, and then work all their holidays. And I've really found it difficult, the work-life balance. This is just the expectation. Like, you just have to do it.

Corrupted professionalism

Another damaging consequence of the authoritarian culture was the undermining and corruption of professional integrity and the promotion of gamesmanship. Indeed, staff were complicit in this process, resorting to a 'tick box' approach to their practice. In Helen's words, "if the Deputy Head comes in, he'll want to see a lot of group work, but other members of staff come in, like the Head of Teaching and Learning, she'll want to see very much in the way of direct instruction. If I know someone's coming in, or if they pop in randomly, I will just try and figure out what they want, and make sure I tick that box."

Greg similarly reported, "I'm not focusing on being a good teacher, I'm focusing on meeting the policy. I mark because it will be checked up on. I am doing it to satisfy criteria rather than meet their needs." Indeed, he fully admitted to following policy he doesn't believe in and even recognised the damage this was doing not only to his own integrity but to the learning of the

students in his classes. "I know I've got to do it, so I just do it… it does make me detest the task… which then makes me cut corners, which makes it less effective, because I might not be marking it as precisely, or as accurately, as I would do otherwise."

Overall, the interviews present a bleak picture of life for teachers (and also for students!) working in certain academies and multi-academy trusts in England. Part of my purpose in presenting the preceding narratives was to counter the negative experiences of the teachers through a process of narrative that is also a project of "opposing the work of destruction that has devoured life itself… a making against destroying, a creating against demolishing, a doing against undoing" (Cavarero, 2015, p. 14). The following discussion attempts to salvage some further seeds for optimism by setting these narratives alongside the insights gleaned from readings of the work of three contemporary philosophers, Simona Forti and Adriana Cavarero, and critical theorist, Mari Ruti, in order to explore how teachers' relationships to their professional work, to their colleagues and to themselves might be conceived and enacted otherwise. First, however, I want to outline three key ethical risks for teachers such as the ones whose experiences and testimonies comprise the preceding discussion.

Reconstructive critique: Three risks to teacher identity… and three potential sources of resistance

The identities of the teachers in the interview study are being co-shaped and co-produced through their participation in particular discourses and practice. In stating this, I am aligning myself with a post-structuralist perspective that sees identities as produced through the operation of discursively embodied power relations rather than being some pre-existing psychological entity (Mansfield, 2000; see also Clarke, 2016, 2018). Underpinning this perspective is the social constructionist notion that there is a radical discontinuity between reality and all ontological schemas that seek to order it, reflecting the structuralist (and poststructuralist) insight that meaning arises from differences within the signifying system, rather than from correspondence between signs and reality, embodied in Foucault's oft-cited (1972, p. 52) definition of discourses "as practices that form" – rather than merely describe, reflect or correspond to – "the objects of which they speak". This suggests that ontology, particularly when it is taken for granted, is a form of politics that has forgotten itself (Oksala, 2010).

However, ontology is not just a form of politics; it also takes us into the realm of ethics, insofar as it is concerned with our individual and interactive formation of ourselves and our communities – a process of formation that could always be otherwise and that therefore entails

ethical issues of freedom and responsibility (Foucault, 1997; Clarke, 2009). Addressing the issue of ethics in relation to teachers and teaching, Carusi (2017) highlights how contemporary education policy's instrumentalization of teachers, as tools for producing ever-improving levels of achievement and ever-rising test scores, poses ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas raise critical questions about hope and despair as appropriate ethical responses in an instrumentalised education system, whilst also posing ethical risks for teachers. Of course, the notion of risk is always part and parcel of any meaningful ethics that goes beyond merely following rules or orders (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes, 2007); but risk is also key to the ethical dilemmas raised by the instrumentalization of education and teaching in various specific ways. Firstly, because teachers and students are subjects of action, choice and responsibility, which inevitably entail risk; secondly, because despite their purported attempts to eradicate failure, education systems are premised on competition, which require losers as well as winners, even if policy rhetoric determinedly disavows this constitutive risk (Clarke, 2020); and thirdly, because by treating teachers and students in the dehumanizing instrumental manner characteristic of contemporary education policy – as 'just literally an automaton' as one of the teachers in the study put it –we risk losing sight altogether of any meaningful notion of education (Biesta, 2013). The following analysis of the subject formation of the interviewed teachers, therefore, builds on and extends the preceding analysis by highlighting three overlapping and interrelated ethical risks that seem particularly prominent in authoritarian institutional cultures characterising many schools in the neoliberal-neoconservative nexus.

Complicity… and friction

We live in a socially, economically and politically interconnected – and hence ethically complicated – world. Within this world, the choices we make and the actions we undertake are made more complex by the choices and actions of other people. In addition, all of us are affected by the negative effects that frequently flow from the morally compromised policies and practices of our social, economic and political institutions. As individuals, our relationship to these compromised policies and practices constitutes the domain of complicity (Kulz, 2000).

One of the key insights we can draw from the work of Michel Foucault (1980) is the recognition that we are always in the midst of a matrix of power relations. Power's possibilities, good and bad, including the temptations and potential corruption power brings, are not confined to Presidents, Prime Ministers and school Principals, but are things we all need to be mindful of. There is no neutral when it comes to power relations and to remain silent or passive in the face of oppression and injustice is to enable and implicitly condone these practices. It is to become

complicit. Simona Forti draws on the writing of Primo Levi to make a similar point, rejecting a "manicheistic understanding of power that thrusts an abyssal distance between the feverish will to power of the leaders and the indistinct passivity of the mass" (2021, p. 146). Instead, we need to recognise the critical role of what, following Levi, she refers to as the 'gray zone'. Present in all human societies and institutions, and comprising a common sample of humanity, rather than heroes or villains, this gray zone "is the backbone upon which all power stands" (2021, pp. 147-148).

Alongside the narrowing of focus and gamesmanship that have been reported in the literature (e.g. Jones et al., 2017), and were also evident in the interviews, one of the regrettable consequences of the accountability and performance pressures that have been placed on schools is the translation of these pressures into cultures of compliance and conformity and their transfer onto individual teachers. Within such contexts, and for the teachers in the interview study, complicity becomes a very real risk. As Laura remarked, even in the face of practices that made her and some of her colleagues clearly uncomfortable, "nobody says no, because essentially, that shows that you're not aligned to the vision which they're obsessed with, and therefore, you won't get a promotion – that's how it works." When schools as organisations demand unwavering loyalty and total commitment, teachers come under immense pressure to align their identities with the values and vision, policies and practices, of the institution.

The purpose of drawing attention to this complicity is not to blame individuals or label them as flawed but to highlight the risks attendant upon our institutional lives. This is made more complex and challenging because, for politicians and education policy makers today, and indeed for the media and a large proportion of the public, education is seen as an unquestionable good, in both the moral and economic-commodity senses of the term. This makes it easy to justify oppressive practices in the name of the greater good of educational achievement and economic prosperity.

In the public conversation, education may be seen as an unquestionable good; yet for many, such as the teachers interviewed in this study or children excluded from schools to enhance the latter's profiles, education and its institutions are sources of harm – of evil rather than good. Simona Forti helps us to see how evil can result not only from a desire for destruction. It can also be a consequence of its opposite: an unconditional and unrelenting pursuit of the good – of life and health, for instance, or educational achievement – as supreme and unconditional values.

An obvious instance of this tendency is the Nazi era, when the single-minded pursuit to maximise the health of the social body legitimated unspeakable atrocities. As Hannah Arendt alerted us when she coined the term 'the banality of evil' in the context of the trial of Nazi functionary, Adolf Eichmann, to capture the way great harm and everyday mundanity may coexist, such evil may be all the more insidious when it goes hand in hand with "the bureaucratic legality of the system claiming to be neutral and anonymous" (Forti, 2015, p. 271; see also Minnich, 2017). For teachers, their institution's and the wider education system's unconditional and unrelenting pursuit of 'educational excellence everywhere', as England's Department for Education's (2016) policy agenda puts it, runs the risk of overlooking the human cost of oppressive practices that are legitimated and normalised as part of a single-minded pursuit of educational achievement (Clarke et al, 2021).

There are understandable reasons why people slide into complicity with the practices and norms of harmful regimes. One of these is the desire for a quiet life, free from tension and conflict. Yet as Forti notes,

> the desire to be free once and for all of all conflict in order to continue to live in tranquility actually makes us slaves of a utilitarian logic, which leads us to accept the identity that someone else imposes on us. It leads us to 'choose' to become what those who save want us to become. This is how we consent to making ourselves into a stable, fixed identity: making ourselves into something objectivizable, employable, useable, and replaceable (2015, p. 233).

Choosing complicity can arise from other desires beside the quest for a quiet life. It can also come from a yearning to find meaning in our lives and to feel valued. Such relationships go beyond the dynamics of command and obedience, authority and subservience, leaders and led. To quote Forti again, "at play is a complex process of subjectification that requires adaptation and identification to the game of rules thanks to which we feel 'saved' or kept alive" (p. 233).

This raises the question of how we might resist falling into complicity. For Forti, what is required is not a particular set of ideas or beliefs – for instance a command of anti-neoliberal rhetoric. What is required, however, is to maintain the self as a site of multiplicity, of tension or friction. As Forti puts it, "no particular culture is necessary, therefore, for the judgement that arises as a condition of the possibility for abstaining from evil; what is required instead is the

ability to create friction within the present, to distance oneself from the context. And whenever this capacity is lacking, there is always the potential for the banality of evil" (p. 203). In other words, resisting complicity requires an active embrace of our constitutive division. This requires recognizing that our being includes conscious and unconscious, cognitive, affective and material dimensions, as well as acknowledging the competing concerns of our multiple identities as educators, parents, colleagues and friends. It also requires the "capacity to dis-identify oneself: to be divided, 'to detach oneself,' to put oneself in perspective with regard to all one's surroundings. It means to always be *also* somewhere else." (p. 235).

Containment… and inclination

A second ethical risk lies in what I refer to as containment. If complicity pertains most obviously to teachers' relations with the institutions and cultures they work in, containment pertains more to teachers' relationships with their colleagues and their students. In this scenario, we close in on ourselves, pulling up the metaphorical drawbridge and resisting the urge to reach out to, or to be reached out to by, others. We seek to cultivate self-sufficiency and expect those around us to do the same.

One of the teachers in the interview study, Aileen, described how, after being reprimanded for voicing her own opinion, she closed in on herself. "I did make a decision that summer of, I'm just going to do what I'm told, which is not like me, at all. And if it says Week 1 do this, on the sheet – I'm doing that…. I'm literally just coming in and doing what I'm told. I'm not engaging with this. I'm not allowing myself to emotionally invest in this, or mentally give off my cognitive energy to this anymore. I'm just literally an automaton, and that, I think, sums it up." Such emotional and cognitive containment is a deeply depressing, if understandable, response to the highly prescriptive and punitive cultures increasingly found in schools as they struggle to respond to the performative pressures placed upon them.

If Forti's work highlights how our individuation within common practices, norms and assumptions serves to absolve us of any sense of ethical responsibility, her fellow Italian philosopher, Adriana Cavarero, asks us to open ourselves to other, more embodied and relational forms of being. For example, in her (2005) book, *For more than one voice*, she emphasised "the unrepeatable uniqueness of every human being" (p. 205), a uniqueness that makes itself heard as a voice in resonance with others through "the musicality of a reciprocal communication that, from the very first cry, tastes the pleasure that lies in the vocal sphere of relation" (p. 200).

In her short (2016) book, *Inclinations: A critique of rectitude*, she explicitly compares and contrasts what she refers to as the vertical axis of self-sufficiency with a more inclined axis of relationality, seeking to do so in a way that acknowledges but goes beyond the links between these axes and gender politics:

> Next to the paradigm of the vertical axis, appropriated by man because of his inborn rationality, appears the paradigm of the oblique line, reserved to woman because of a constitutive disposition to maternity, which causes inclination. It is of course indisputable that we are talking about outdated stereotypes: the schema works, precisely, by emphatically and repeatedly proposing conventional characteristics for the two sexes. But looking closer, through a philosophical frame, we see two postural paradigms referring to two different models of subjectivity, two theaters for questioning the human condition in terms of autonomy or independence, two styles of thought, two languages: the first relates to individualistic ontology, the second to a relational ontology (p. 10).

As she writes elsewhere, "there is obviously a stereotype, a sexist and misogynistic prejudice to all this. But it enables us to see clearly the two models of subjectivity, related to two geometries, two postural ethics" (Cavarero, 2021b, p. 41).

In terms of these two geometries, the vertical axis, connoting rectitude, rigour and responsibility, reflects the dominant historical model of the sovereign, rational and autonomous individual. In this schema, society is merely the aggregation of such sovereign, rational and autonomous individuals. Neoliberalism has clearly capitalised on the dominance of this model, encouraging us see ourselves as separate, self-sufficient individuals and to view others as rivals in a reified arena of competition. Neoliberalism exhorts us to believe that each of us succeeds or fails on the basis of our own individual abilities and efforts. In pursuit of this ideal of self-made success, those fully engaged by the neoliberal worldview are likely to view others, not only as rivals, but as resources to be exploited for our own instrumental ends.

By contrast, when looked at in terms of the inclined axis, or inclination, our lives are defined from the start by their interdependency, reflecting the reality that our singularity "is in fact sustained by various social relations and infrastructural conditions" (Butler, 2021, p. 59). In addition, and as with her work on voice, Cavarero's postural ethics also focuses attention on the embodied nature of existence, with inclination foregrounding psychological vulnerabilities,

physical frailties and affective fragilities that are likely to be overlooked or dismissed by the heroic individualism of rectitude.

For teachers, an ethics of rectitude seems to give license to an unforgiving form of competitive individualism and to go hand in hand with, and are exploited by, the sort of hierarchical management structures and authoritarian leadership practices experienced by the teachers in the interviews. By contrast, a postural ethics of inclination foregrounds our co-dependency and suggests "that what gives life to politics, intended in terms of an embodied democracy, is an interacting plurality that displays its ontological and relational status through the material uniqueness of resonating singular voices" (Cavarero, 2021a, p. 178). In place of the priority given to strict adherence to systems, policies and protocols, recognition is given to interdependent and embodied subjectivities, value is placed on engagement in mutual and open-ended interaction and aspirations are directed towards realising a pluri-phonic democracy. Put differently, Cavarero's notion of inclination offers ethical and political resources for resisting containment, for thinking seriously about interdependence, relationality and care and for seeking to create ways, individually and collectively, for realising these notions within our practices and our institutions.

Conventionality… and singularity

If complicity pertains to teachers' relations with the institutions and cultures they work in, and containment pertains to teachers' relationships with their colleagues and their students, conventionality mainly concerns teachers' relationships with their pedagogical practices. Conventionality arises when teachers follow formulaic prescriptions in relation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, rather than grounding their practice in what Cavarero above described as their 'unrepeatable uniqueness'. Aileen described the deadening effect that such overly prescriptive and formulaic approaches had on less experienced and less confident colleagues in her school:

> We had schemes of work, and that was the bane of my life for the time I was there. And the schemes of work, in my view, were getting in the way of quality teaching and learning. They were overly long, they were verbose, they were wasting a lot of time and energy within the team, but also they were overly didactic. And then, I was noticing really poor teaching… it just does not fly at all, because they've got no idea why the activity's there, or what they are trying to get the pupils to achieve…. they were just trying to parrot what was

on the system, without actually learning how to plan effectively, because on the face of it, it looked like it had all been done for them, but it just doesn't work like that.

Such teachers are literally being 'ventriloquised' by the 'verbose' documentation they are required to adhere to and implement. As such, they have fallen into what Finnish-Canadian critical theorist, Mari Ruti, refers to as "the swamp of 'a-subjectivity'" (2012, p. 53), while their pedagogical practice has been seized by the form of professional inertia that I am referring to as conventionality. In order to see how Ruti's thinking on the notion of singularity offers a way of breaking out of this inertia, we need to make a brief detour into Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.

Psychoanalysis is distinct from other approaches to the study of human being in its attendance to what Eric Santner (2001, p. 8) refers to as the constitutive 'too muchness' that characterises our psychic life. As human beings, we are condemned to perpetually cope with the excess energy that comprises the relentless – and meaningless – force of the drives. One way of reading the 'verbose' scripts that Aileen describes is as symptomatic of the way social structures seek to contain and constrain the unruly energy of the drives. In this Lacanian reading, drive conveys the relentless pulse of the bodily real, while also being "always already quasi social in the sense that it has been moulded in response to the signifier of the Other" (p. 18). In other words, even this "most entrenched kernel of the subject's being… is always somewhat sociohistorical" (p. 19). In the terms I used earlier, our being is simultaneously material, cognitive and affective, yet these elements only ever take on meaning within socially and historically structured discourses and practices.

Yet the social shaping of our lives and our being does not mean we lack any possibilities for a meaningful existence as distinct individuals. Critically, for my argument, our singularity – what Cavarero characterised as the unrepeatable uniqueness of our being – is tied up with the undead energy of the drives. In Ruti's words, "singularity thus relates to those parts of the drive that manage to ooze through the sieve of the various systems of organization that are designed to stabilize human life" (2012, p. 21). Singularity in this Lacanian sense is not necessarily a reassuring or comforting concept but is more ambivalent, distancing us from any fully intelligible or socially assimilated existence. Put differently, singularity means we always to some extent strangers, not only to others but to ourselves (Santner, 2001).

On a more positive note – and this is the other side of the ambivalence I mentioned – singularity allows us to "touch the living tissue of the world rather than merely perceiving its socially mediated significations" (2012, p. 28). In this view, singularity signifies a certain vitality of spirit, the 'too muchness' of our psychic life, that is also a source of revolt against socio-symbolic overdetermination. The challenge we face, both as social subjects and as educators working within institutional contexts, is to "weave strands of singularity into our socially mediated experience" (2012, p. 34). One way to think about this is to recognise that singularity, while not necessarily part of any social whole, needs to be understood relationally through its difference from this whole. Following a similar logic, human meaning making requires *both* the bodily energies of the real that fuel singularity *and* the significatory capacities that structure the symbolic order (2012, p. 123). In this sense, singularity becomes a matter of finding idiosyncratic and creative ways of infusing the energies of the drive into the symbolic order of language so as to resist and undermine the latter's more standardised and 'verbose' registers. This entails a commitment to resisting narrative closure, discursive colonisation or institutional totalisation, a willingness to question dominant assumptions and assertions and to accept the contribution of dissent and disruption and an openness to "experimental narratives… [that] provide a capacious, provocative and affectively resonant space" (2012, p. 125) for thought and action.

Conclusion

This paper is written against the backdrop of the increasing grip of the neoliberal-neoconservative nexus on education policy and practice in England. As such, it serves as something of a portent for other international settings which may have not – yet – have travelled quite so far down this road as England has. In particular, the paper seeks to alert readers to the extraordinary degrees of performatively-oriented pressure that are placed upon institutions and individuals, and the valorisation of 'traditional' models of schooling that legitimate hierarchical forms of authority so as to keep those same institutions and individuals focused on responding to this pressure. As reflected in the interviews with teachers that formed the first part of this paper, the results of the growing dominance of the neoliberal-neoconservative nexus include the rise of authoritarian school leadership and management cultures, the growth in practices of monitoring and surveillance in schools, the narrowing of curriculum and pedagogy and the conversion of schools to exam factories, the undermining of trusting relationships between teachers and between them and students, the continuing rise of levels of anxiety and stress among teachers, students and parents, and the undermining and corruption of teacher

professionalism. What we are witnessing among these teachers is nothing short of deep and wide-ranging alienation.

The second part of the paper identified three specifically ethical risks to the professional practice of teachers in any setting, but particularly in the current policy context, which I have characterised as complicity, containment and conventionality. In response to these risks, I have suggested how the notions of friction, inclination and singularity may offer some hope for amelioration and resistance. In saying this, as Jessica Riddell has noted[5], it is important to distinguish critical hope that recognises complexity and discomfort as essential element in growth and transformation from a toxic positivity that insists all will be well or a cruel optimism that offers only disingenuous, damaging and fantasmatic forms of hope (Berlant, 2011; Moore & Clarke, 2016). These notions of friction, inclination and singularity are not recipes, formulas or techniques and they come with no guarantees; but they do offer the possibility of opening up new conceptual spaces for thought and action and for imagining, as Terry Wrigley (2006) reminded us, that 'another school is possible'. I suggest engaging with friction, inclination and singularity are risks we should take, not because they can or will fix education in the technocratic sense of neoliberal-neoconservative educational discourse, but because each of them, like any genuine risk, remains open to its own failure, and in this way is meaningfully and precisely educational.

---

[5] https://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/adventures-in-academe/combatting-toxic-positivity-with-critical-hope/

References

Arar, K., Orucu, D., & Wilkinson, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Neoliberalism and education systems in conflict: Exploring challenges across the globe*. New York: Routledge.

Aydarova, E., Rigney, J., & Dana, N. (2021). 'Small but mighty': A case study of teacher educators disrupting neoliberal reforms of teacher education and reclaiming a voice in policy conversations. *Journal of Education for Teaching, 47*(5), 732-744.

Ayers, W., Dohen, B., & Ayers, R. (Eds.). (2001). *Zero tolerance: Resisting the drive for punishment in our schools*. New York: New Press.

Ball, S. J. (2016). Neoliberal education? Confronting the slouching beast. *Policy Futures in Education, 14*(8), 1046-1059.

Benhabib, S. (1986). *Critique, norm and utopia: A study of the foundations of critical theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Biesta, G. (2013). *The beautiful risk of education*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019) Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 11*(4), 589-597.

Butler, J. (2021). Leaning out, caught in the fall: Interdependency and ethics in Cavarero. In T. J. Huzar & C. Woodford (Eds.), *Toward a feminist ethics of nonviolence* (pp. 46-62). New York: Fordham University Press.

Carusi, F. T. (2017). Why bother teaching? Despairing the ethical through teaching that does not follow. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 36*(6), 633-645.

Carusi, F. T. (2021). The ontological rhetorics of education policy: A non-instrumental theory. *Journal of Education Policy, 36*(2), 232-252.

Cavarero, A. (2005). *For more than one voice: Towards a philosophy of vocal expression* (P. A. Kottman, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Cavarero, A. (2015). Narrative against destruction. *New Literary History, 46*(1), 1-16.

Cavarero, A. (2016). *Inclinations: A critique of rectitude*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Cavarero, A. (2021a). Coda. In T. J. Huzar & C. Woodford (Eds.), *Toward a feminist ethics of nonviolence* (pp. 177-186). New York: Fordham University Press.

Cavarero, A. (2021b). Scenes of inclination. In T. J. Huzar & C. Woodford (Eds.), *Toward a feminist ethics of nonviolence* (pp. 33-45). New York: Fordham University Press.

Clarke, M. (2009). The ethico-politics of teacher identity. *Educational Philosophy & Theory, 41*(2), 185-200.

Clarke, M. (2016). The intimate alterity of identity. In G. Barkhuizen (Ed.), *Reflections on language teacher identity research* (pp. 272-277). New York: Routledge.

Clarke, M. (2018). The indispensability and impossibility of teacher identity. In P. Schutz, J. Hong, & D. Cross Francis (Eds.), *Research on teacher identity* (pp. 217-227): Springer.

Clarke, M. (2020). Eyes wide shut: The fantasies and disavowals of education policy. *Journal of Education Policy, 35*(2), 151-167.

Clarke, M., Haines Lyon, C., Walker, E., Walz, L., Collet-Sabé, J., & Pritchard, K. (2021). The banality of education policy: Discipline as extensive evil in the neoliberal era. *Power and Education*, 17577438211041468.

Clarke, M., & Mills, M. (2022). 'We have never been public': Continuity and change in the policy production of 'the public' in education in England. *European Educational Research Journal, 21*(1), 13-28.

Clegg, S., Kornberger, M., & Rhodes, C. (2007). Organizational ethics, decision making, undecidability. *The Sociological Review, 55*(2), 393-409.

Cooper, M. (2017). *Family values: Between neoliberalism and the new social conservatism*. New York: Zone Books.

Courtney, S. J., & Gunter, H. M. (2015). Get off my bus! School leaders, vision work and the elimination of teachers. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 18*(4), 395-417.

Department for Education (DfE). (2016). *Educational excellence everywhere.* UK: HMSO

Evetts, J. (2009). The management of professionalism: A contemporary paradox. In S. Gerwirtz, P. Mahony, I. Hextall, & A. Cribb (Eds.), *Changing teacher professionalism: International trends, challenges and ways forward* (pp. 19-30). Abingdon: Routledge.

Forti, S. (2015). *New demons: Rethinking power and evil today.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Forti, S. (2021). From Horrorism to the Gray Zone. In T. J. Huzar & C. Woodford (Eds.), *Toward a feminist ethics of non-violence* (pp. 141-150). New York: Fordham University Press.

Foucault, M. (1972). *Archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language.* (trans. Sheridan Smith, A. M.). London: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). London: Penguin.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977.* Brighton: Harvester.

Foucault, M. (1997). The ethics of the concern for self as a practice of freedom. In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *Ethics, subjectivity and truth: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984* (Vol. 1, pp. 281-301). New York: The New Press.

Fuentes, A. (2013). *Lockdown high: When the schoolhouse becomes a jailhouse.* New York: Verso.

Glynos, J., & Howarth, D. (2007). *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory.* London: Routledge.

Graham, L. J. (2018). Student compliance will not mean 'all teachers can teach': A critical analysis of the rationale for 'no excuses' discipline. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 22*(11), 1242-1256.

Haig, B., & Evers, C. (2016). *Realist inquiry in social science.* London: Sage.

Jones, K. L., Tymms, P., Kemethofer, D., O'Hara, J., McNamara, G., Huber, S., . . . Greger, D. (2017). The unintended consequences of school inspection: The prevalence of inspection side-effects in Austria, the Czech Republic, England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland. *Oxford Review of Education, 43*(6), 805-822.

Koopman, C. (2013). *Genealogy as critique: Foucault and the problems of modernity.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Kulz, C. (2000). *Complicity: Ethics and law for a collective age.* Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

Lazzarato, M. (2021). *Capital hates everyone: Fascism or revoluion* (R. Hurley, Trans.). South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext.

Levin, B. (1998). An epidemic of education policy: (What) can we learn from each other? *Comparative Education, 34*(2), 131-141.

Mansfield, N. (2000). *Subjectivity: Theories of the self from Freud to Haraway.* St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Meyer, H.-D., & Benavot, A. (2013). *PISA, power, and policy: The emergence of global educational governance.* Oxford: Symposium Books.

Minnich, E. (2017). *The evil of banality: On the life and death importance of thinking.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Moore, A., & Clarke, M. (2016). 'Cruel optimism': Teacher attachment to professionalism in an era of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy, 31*(5), 666-677.

Oksala, J. (2010). Foucault's politicization of ontology. *Continental Philosophy Review, 43*(4), 445-466.

Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2019). Still neoliberalism? *South Atlantic Quarterly 118*(2), 245–265.

Phelan, A. M., Clarke, M., & Vincent, L. (Forthcoming). Defiant imaginaries: From a politics of identity to an ethics of friendship in teaching. In D. Mayer (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Education* (4th ed.). Oxford: Elsevier Publications.

Porfilio, B., & Malott, C. (Eds.) (2008). *The destructive path of neoliberalism: An international*

Examination of Education. Boston: Brill.

Rasmussen, M. B. (2022). *Late capitalist fascism*. Bristol: Polity.

Ruti, M. (2012). *The singularity of being: Lacan and the immortal within*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Santner, E. (2001). *On the psychotheology of everyday life*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Sellar, S., Thompson, G., & Rutkowski, D. (2017). *The global education race: Taking the measure of PISA and international testing*. Edmonton, Canada: Brush Education.

Shahjahan, R. A. (2011). Decolonizing the evidence-based education and policy movement: Revealing the colonial vestiges in educational policy, research, and neoliberal reform. *Journal of Education Policy, 26*(2), 181-206.

Skerritt, C. (2020). Pressure, bureaucracy, accountability, and all for show: Irish perspectives on life inside england's schools. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 1-21.

St. Pierre, E. A. (2011). Post qualitative research: The critique and the coming after. In: Denzin, N. K. and Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds). *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Inquiry, 4th Ed*, pp. 611–635. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

St. Pierre, E. A. (2013). The posts continue: Becoming. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 26*, 646–657.

St. Pierre, E. A. (2013). Untraining educational researchers. *Research in Education, 96*(1), 6–11.

Šumonja, M. (2021). Neoliberalism is not dead – On political implications of Covid-19. *Capital & Class, 45*(2), 215–227.

Thomson, P. (2019). Oh to be in England? The production of an un-public state system. In J. Wilkinson, R. Niesche, & S. Eacott (Eds.), *Challenges for public education: Reconceptualising educational leadership, policy and social justice as resources for hope* (pp. 101-115). Abingdon: Rouytledge.

Vidovich, L. (2009). 'You don't fatten the pig by weighing it': Contradictory tensions in the 'policy pandemic' of accountability infecting education. In M. Simons, M. Olssen, & M. Peters (Eds.), *Re-reading education policies: A handbook studying the policy agenda of the 21st century* (pp. 549-567). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Wilkins, A. (2016). *Modernising school governance: Corporate planning and expert handling in state education*. London: Routledge.

Wilkins, A. (2017). Rescaling the local: Multi-academy trusts, private monopoly and statecraft in England. *Journal of Educational Administration and History, 49*(2), 171-185.

Wilkins, C., Gobby, B., & Keddie, A. (2021). The neo-performative teacher: School reform, entrepreneurialism and the pursuit of educational equity. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 69*(1), 27-45.

Wrigley, T. (2006). *Another school is possible*. London: Trentham Books.