

**RECLAIMING AGENCY AND APPRECIATING LIMITS IN  
TEACHER EDUCATION: EXISTENTIAL, ETHICAL, AND  
PSYCHOANALYTICAL READINGS**

**LA RÉCUPÉRATION DE L'AGENTIVITÉ ET LA RECONNAISSANCE  
DES LIMITES DE LA FORMATION DES ENSEIGNANTS :  
INTERPRÉTATIONS EXISTENTIELLES, ÉTHIQUES ET  
PSYCHANALYTIQUES**

Anne M. Phelan and Dion Rüsselbaek Hansen

Volume 53, Number 1, Winter 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1056286ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1056286ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Phelan, A. M. & Hansen, D. R. (2018). RECLAIMING AGENCY AND APPRECIATING LIMITS IN TEACHER EDUCATION: EXISTENTIAL, ETHICAL, AND PSYCHOANALYTICAL READINGS. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 53(1), 128–145.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1056286ar>

Article abstract

A basic premise of teacher education is the value of teacher agency, that is, the teacher's capacity to take responsibility for one's knowledge, beliefs, judgements, and relationships. How can teacher educators sustain a commitment to agency in light of critiques of western modernity, specifically in relation to the existence of a rational autonomous subject, the erasure of history, and the opacity of language? Drawing on existentialism, ethics, and psychoanalysis, we discuss three practicum vignettes to illustrate what we are calling "the chiasmic complexity" of agency within the field of teacher education. We argue that admission of the limits of teacher agency may be the source of ethical insight, educational opportunity, and political resistance for student teachers and teacher educators.

# RECLAIMING AGENCY AND APPRECIATING LIMITS IN TEACHER EDUCATION: EXISTENTIAL, ETHICAL, AND PSYCHOANALYTICAL READINGS

ANNE M. PHELAN *University of British Columbia*

DION RÜSSELBÆK HANSEN *Institut for Kulturvidenskaber Syddansk Universitet*

**ABSTRACT.** A basic premise of teacher education is the value of teacher agency, that is, the teacher's capacity to take responsibility for one's knowledge, beliefs, judgements, and relationships. How can teacher educators sustain a commitment to agency in light of critiques of western modernity, specifically in relation to the existence of a rational autonomous subject, the erasure of history, and the opacity of language? Drawing on existentialism, ethics, and psychoanalysis, we discuss three practicum vignettes to illustrate what we are calling "the chiasitic complexity" of agency within the field of teacher education. We argue that admission of the limits of teacher agency may be the source of ethical insight, educational opportunity, and political resistance for student teachers and teacher educators.

## LA RÉCUPÉRATION DE L'AGENTIVITÉ ET LA RECONNAISSANCE DES LIMITES DE LA FORMATION DES ENSEIGNANTS: INTERPRÉTATIONS EXISTENTIELLES, ÉTHIQUES ET PSYCHANALYTIQUES

**RÉSUMÉ.** Un principe fondamental de la formation des enseignants est la valeur de l'agentivité de l'enseignant, c'est-à-dire, la capacité de l'enseignant d'assumer la responsabilité de sa connaissance, ses croyances et ses jugements, ainsi que de ses rapports éducatifs. Cependant, comment les formateurs d'enseignants peuvent-ils affirmer et soutenir un engagement aussi fondamental à l'égard de l'agentivité, compte tenu des critiques de la modernité occidentale, particulièrement par rapport à l'existence du sujet rationnel et autonome, l'effacement de l'histoire, et l'opacité de la langue? En s'appuyant sur les domaines de l'existentialisme, l'éthique, et la psychanalyse, nous analysons trois vignettes fondées sur les expériences d'un stage (practicum) pour illustrer ce que nous appelons « la complexité chiasitique » de l'agentivité dans le domaine de la formation des enseignants. Pour cette raison, nous soutenons que la reconnaissance des limites de l'agentivité de l'enseignant peut être la source d'une perspicacité éthique, des possibilités d'éducation, et de la résistance politique non seulement des futurs enseignants, mais des formateurs des enseignants.

## TAKING AGENCY FOR GRANTED IN TEACHER EDUCATION

The idea of teacher agency is a powerful but frequently unnoticed assumption underlying teacher education. Teacher educators assume that agency – the teacher’s capacity to take responsibility for what she knows and believes, for the educational relations she must form, the educational judgements she will make, and for her own intra-subjective identity (Edwards, 2015) – can be cultivated and taken up in a relatively unproblematic manner by the beginning teacher. As such, teacher education programmes tend to reflect an understanding of “agency” in terms of either: 1) a “*blank subjectivity*” – where there is no recognition of the complicated interaction between inner psychic life and outer institutional and societal discourse-practices (Parker, 1997, p. 2); or, 2) an “*uncomplicated subjectivity*” – reinforcing a humanist vision of the self as autonomous and encountering language as a free agent (p. 2). What emerges under both sets of conditions are teachers who assume themselves “to be in an immediate (and incontestable) visual relation to reality” (Butler, 2009, p. 73). The role of language and historical a priori conditions in framing “reality,” as well as the role of one’s own and others’ interests, desires, and expectations in undoing that reality, are often left largely unexamined. The upshot is a teaching subject who is led to believe herself agentic and who may not understand or be aware of the forces – inner as well as outer – that inevitably bear upon her thought and action.

A subject who generates distance from her own background – herself as an embodiment of tradition and historical circumstances – and her own foreground – her relation to an external world and other subjects – in the name of mastery of them is indicative of the modern West (White, 2000). The idea of an assertive subject has reached its zenith, perhaps, in neoliberal democracies wherein, as Agamben (2011) wrote,

man [sic] believes himself capable of everything, and so he presents his jovial “no problem,” and his irresponsible “I can do it,” precisely when he should instead realize that he has been consigned in unheard of measures to forces and processes over which he has lost all “control.” (p. 44)

The irony in a neoliberal era of performativity (Ball, 2008) is that teachers are fed a fantasy of their own centrality to student learning while being held accountable for a prescribed set of outcomes and results (Hopmann, 2008; Hudson, 2004). Positioned as Teflon subjects (White, 2000) with no history or circumstance to limit them, teachers are forced to sustain this fantasy via classroom management, evidence-based methods, standardized tests, achievement scores, rewards charts, and table points (Bibby, 2011). Entrapped intellectually and politically, the “good” teacher becomes the one who instrumentalizes educational relations in terms of neoliberal rules and rationalities. The result is a blurring of the teacher’s moral purpose, a masking of the social antagonisms and messiness of life and classrooms (Scalia & Scalia, 2011), and a “numbed

fatigue” (Clarke & Phelan, 2017) experienced by teachers in the face of a deluge of reforms comprising neoliberalism’s “policy pandemic” (Vidovich, 2009).

Within the neoliberal state, teacher agency matters but only as long as teachers use it to make decisions in the “right,” controlled, and expected way (Courtney & Gunther, 2015; Masschelein & Simons, 2013; Taubman, 2009). This paradox reflects what might be called governance from a distance (Rüsselbæk Hansen & Frederiksen, 2017). It also reflects an eclipse of those complex inter- and intrasubjective “realities” within which education comes into being. It is within the field of tension, between “inner matters” (emotions, intentions, and desires) and “outer matters” (others, discourses, and ideologies) that we can understand teacher agency (Foucault, 1997; Parker, 1997; Zizek, 2008b). It is important to emphasize that we can only distinguish between inner and outer analytically. In other words, there is always some inner in the outer and vice versa. Using a chiasmic structure, we can formulate it like this: the inner outerness as well as the outer innerness. This means that if we are to understand teacher agency, we need to focus on its “chiasmic complexity.” Without such a focus, we cannot begin to avoid the “agency traps” set in the form of, for example, ideological fantasies and symbolic discourses in teacher education. Put differently, if we are to affirm and sustain a commitment to the idea of teacher agency, we need a conception of the subject that reflects an understanding of chiasmic complexity and acknowledges the historical, contestable character of our agency, and associated commitments and judgements.

In what follows, we first explore conceptual and empirical efforts to understand teacher agency in the research literature. We then examine the limits of teacher agency by providing three readings – existential, ethical, and psychoanalytical – of a practicum experience involving a student teacher named Cari (pseudonym). We choose these particular vocabularies because they enable us to confront the roles played and downplayed by *knowledge*, *the Other*, and *desire* in promoting particular assumptions about teacher agency. In conclusion, we turn to the importance of the awareness of limits in learning to teach.

## UNDERSTANDING AGENCY

In their recent review of the literature about teacher agency, Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) assert that educational researchers have explored teacher agency conceptually – how are we to understand the concept of agency and what might it mean for teachers to be active agents – and empirically – what are the factors that promote or hinder teacher agency. Some scholars, they write, view agency as involving will, reason, and responsibility (Taylor, 1977); often it is conceived as purposeful, involving intentional action, decisions, and conscious reflection on the impact of one’s actions (Toom, Pyshalto, & O’Connor Rust, 2015). In teaching, a sense of agency is reflected in the teacher’s internal locus of control, taking responsibility of the situation at hand, as well

as making suggestions, pedagogical choices, and conscious judgments on the basis of their own professional goals and values (Buchanan, 2015). As such, teacher agency is more closely aligned with occupational professionalism – informed by “the knowledge, values and relationships that the profession deems important” rather than organizational professionalism – invoked “as a way of monitoring and controlling the work of a profession” such as teaching (Edwards, 2015, p. 783). In Edwards’ account, the significance of the relationship between teachers’ professional identity and agency is key; moreover, there is a strong emphasis on pedagogical action as a core characteristic of teachers’ professional agency. Professional agency as “the capacity to make strong evaluations, interpret complex problems and bring to bear the best resources available to work on them is accomplished through working relationally” and it “involve[s] being explicit about what matters to you as a professional, revealing your professional motives i.e. commitments, and being able to align your motives with those of others” (Edwards, 2015, p. 783).

Drawing on sociological theory, some educational researchers recognize the relation between institutional and societal structures and agency and use concepts such as *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977), “structuration” (Giddens, 1984), and ANT (actor-network-theory, Latour, 2005) to guide thinking about teacher agency (Biesta et al. 2015). As such, teacher agency does not refer to a fixed disposition but is constructed situationally in relation to past experience and current circumstances, the assumption being that agency emerges or is achieved in concrete settings and through particular ecological conditions (Biesta & Tedder, 2006); the fundamental importance of contextual factors such as cultures of practice in influencing teachers’ professional agency is thus underscored (Toom et al., 2015).

While a more thorough examination of each of the aforementioned studies is beyond the remit of this paper, we would argue that many of the foregoing authors present a figure of the teacher (indeed the human subject more broadly) in terms of particular existential realities: as “entangled with language” and history (i.e. some background or “source”), with a consciousness of its mortality (i.e. human has limits), and “a capacity for radical novelty” (White, 2000, p. 9). A framing of teacher agency as an interplay between person and practice (mediating cultural and institutional discourses) and as an achievement in concrete situations wherein a teacher is influenced and regulated by inner as well as outer conditions, implies the possibility of action (radical novelty) in the face of discursive limits (possibilities and limitations set by language), historical background and circumstances (sources). That means that agency is premised on an understanding of those limits that influence the conditions of the subject’s freedom and provide the basis of its being and doings (Jaspers, 1986). Limits represent a site of tension – a conceptual and practical threshold – that cannot and should not be denied and suppressed (Clarke & Phelan, 2017). Foucault (1997) captured something of this sense when he endorsed 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). Such a critical subject understands herself as a historical being – shaped by external forces [and we would add, internal ones] – and yet, acting on her freedom, “trying each day to be” (Greene, 1973, p. 7).

The inescapability of limits, and the enduring paradoxical challenge they pose for teachers, presents a significant antidote to the modern Teflon subject (White, 2000), referenced earlier. An appreciation of limits underscores the precariousness of life that is currently overshadowed by neoliberal dogmatism and orthodoxy while teachers are left carrying an inordinate burden. The responsibility of teacher educators and researchers is considerable: we must engage what Derrida (2007) terms “a rigorous war against the *doxa*” by opening up subtlety, aporia, and paradox and by calling teachers back to an understanding of how agency is formed and limited.

#### RECLAIMING AGENCY AND ITS LIMITS: THE SITE OF PRACTICE

What might the limits of agency mean for teacher education? How might we understand and relate to limits in educational practice? We locate our exploration of these questions in that initial site of tension in teacher education – the field experience – where students are invited to assume the subjective position of teacher, under the supervision of more experienced others. In the following, and informed by the fields of existentialism (Greene 2004), ethics (Butler, 2004), and psychoanalysis (Zizek, 2008a, 2008b), we present different readings of an *event* that one of the authors witnessed while supervising a student teacher, Cari, during an elementary school practicum. Our readings enable us to identify and explore limits posed by knowledge, the other, and desire during field experience. Before proceeding with those readings, we pause briefly to give an account of how we constructed and theorized the vignettes based on the event.

##### *Compiling and theorizing a practicum event*

During the early stages of working on this article, in an attempt to ground our discussion of agency in teacher education, one of the co-authors told a story about how a student teacher had abandoned her lesson, walked out of the classroom, and left the supervisor (i.e. co-author) alone with the children. It was the kind of singular event that a supervisor doesn’t easily forget; questions lingered about the hidden logics of teacher education and the cultivation of teacher agency.

The retelling of the event enabled reflection, discussion, and re-interpretation in the present (Behabib, 2000). The initial interpretation of the experience represented a “truth” (Badiou, 2014) for the one witnessing the event – the

supervisor — a truth that not only contained the history of the self who experienced but also the history of what was experienced, aspects of which one may not be conscious of at the time (Conle, 1999). During the retelling, the listener (co-author) experienced a *resonance* with the event; it struck a chord. Both authors set about exploring together how we might work with the event to illustrate and complicate the chiasmic complexity of agency.

In the process of parsing the event into three vignettes, to provide context and to highlight key moments, and theorizing each vignette in turn, we *re-storied* the event. Re-storying can be problematic because stories can become “decontextualized, hardened stories,” set loose from their experiential moorings so as to serve agendas “outside their inherent telos which is to express, communicate and understand their own contents” (Conle, 1999, p. 17). Has our rendering of the event into a series of vignettes become an instrument for the authors’ theoretical ends? The answer to this question has something to do with whose story it is — the narrators’ (one of whom was the supervisor who witnessed the event), the character’s (student teacher, Cari) or the reader’s — and the degree of their authorship of the narrative. “The difference between imaginary characters and real ones is not in the narrative form of what they do” but “in the degree of their authorship of that form and of their own deeds” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 215 in Conle, 1999, p. 19). While Cari’s authorship is minimal — in MacIntyre’s terms we have “fictionalized” her — our theorizing of each vignette restores the possibility of her authorship because each reading undermines the assumption that we know in any definitive way what she means and what motivates her as she speaks.

Our intention is to engage theorizing as a form of storying “to expand a story into another spiral of telling, this time by incorporating theory as it is transformed by experience. Theory then becomes lived theory” (Conle, 1999, p. 22). Each reading bears witness to “life’s contingencies that make a person who she is” (Schiff, 2014, p. 189), but each reading *invites us* to reflect on our implication in each other’s lives and learning, and each offers us a different sense of responsibility as teacher educators and researchers. Theories are after all “stories that deploy implicit and explicit assumptions, logics, and arguments to weave an account of some aspect of life as it unfolds” (Schiff, 2014, p. 3). Our hope is to open up new ways to tell old stories of student teacher anxieties, experiences, and struggles by exploring limits encountered during field experience — a) knowledge; b) the other; and c) desire and “impossibility.” As we will argue, and as a consequence of the chiasmic complexity that plays a vital role in teacher agency, we witness the emergence and vanishing of a speaking teaching subject — an agent — at the limits of what she can (not) understand and become.

### *The field of existentialism: Knowledge*

Cari is a student teacher on teaching practicum in a Grade One classroom. She is mesmerized by the measured movement of lessons: the children seem to shift effortlessly from desks to the carpet, from group tables to individual learning centers, from the walled classroom out onto the grassy riverbank that is the playground. She stares in wonder as the classroom teacher, in response to a particular child's contribution, decides to alter what she had intended to do right in the middle of a lesson. When Cari does have an opportunity to teach, she tentatively imitates the classroom teacher's instructional and managerial strategies. Being stern with these seven-year-olds doesn't feel right and yet not to have a quiet and orderly classroom reflects badly on her as a student teacher. It is best, she thinks, not to make waves and to go with the flow. Wanting to blend in rather than cause disturbance, Cari is hesitant to take initiative and fearful that in not doing so she appears idle. She wishes that she could feel that she belonged but that's a feeling she has rarely experienced.

“Control.” “Belonging.” “Recognition.” These are significant existential themes that pervade educational relations and which often evoke some sort of anxiety for newcomers to the teaching profession (Loveless et al., 2016). Yet, too often students are unaware of the historical sources – personal, cultural, and structural – of these themes and their associated anxieties. What is it that Cari perceives in this classroom situation? What or who does it remind her of? Why not provide Cari the opportunity to explore the themes salient in her present situation but likely rooted in her past? Might such a form of attention in teacher education effect a new synthesis within experience for students such as Cari, resulting in a greater appreciation of the limits of knowledge in the classroom? If so, with what consequences?

*The limits of knowledge.* Karl Jaspers (1986), an existential philosopher, coined the term “limit situations” (p. 96) to describe moments, typically accompanied by experiences of dread, guilt, or anxiety, in which humans are brought face-to-face with ourselves and our human limitations – death, pain, suffering, or failure. Such confrontation with ourselves is disturbing but also productive in that it enables us to discard familiar illusions and to achieve greater self-awareness (Thornhill & Miron, 2017). Limit situations define our humanity: to experience limit situations and to be human are one and the same (Jaspers, 1986). They cannot be avoided but must be accepted and worked with. While we may strive for “the innocence of simple non-ambiguity” (Jaspers, 1986, p. 102), human existence is complicated, deeply entangled with the struggle and suffering of others. Moreover, why we act or feel as we do in any situation is often unclear to us given the myriad of desires and expectations at play, in fact, as Jaspers (1986) writes, “clarity of decision is possible only in rare moments” or “only seems to be possible through blind rational abstraction” (p. 102).

Living, therefore, requires reflection – pondering our purposes and questioning the meaning of our encounters with others – and placing ourselves within the interior space of our own mind as well as noting those external institutional influences.



This means remaining in contact with one's own perception, one's own experiences, and striving to constitute their meanings. It means achieving a state of what Schutz (1970) calls "wide-awakeness...a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements (p. 69)". (Greene, 2004, p. 139)

Remaining wide awake to experience also involves coming to terms with the changing viewpoints through which the world presents itself, demanding a continual *decentering* of "subjective reality."

Cari's habitual way of living in and making sense of the world may not be sufficient to help her clarify what she sees and feels in the classroom. If she is to learn to teach, it seems important that she is able to identify what is questionable, try to break through what is obscure. Some sort of action is required of her, "not mere gazing; praxis, not mere reverie" (Greene, 2004, p. 142). If she is to act, however, she must do it against the background of her perceptions, with a sense of being present to herself. She can do this by reflecting on her cultural background (e.g. experiences of uncertain belonging and ambiguous identity) and her prior (educational) experiences of "failure and success," which always influence her being and doings in the teaching world. Only with that sort of awareness will she be able to attend and commit to the world of education and make it meaningful. Greene (2004) would argue that only with the ability to be reflective about what she is doing will Cari be "courageous enough" to incorporate her past into the present, and to link the present to a future, to move from the margins of the classroom or remain there "knowingly." This will require an appropriation of new perspectives on her experience and "a continual reordering of that experience" (p. 142) as new challenges arise. The point for Greene is that in the midst of a strange new world, the teacher must be sufficiently aware of how she is always at risk of being "manipulated" by "forces without and within" (p. 142) – her mentor teacher, her university supervisor, the children, and those voices she may have internalized since childhood.

Of foremost importance, however, is that Cari respond to questions arising out of her particular situation, which remains only partly known to her. In an effort to clarify or relieve herself of some uncertainty, she needs opportunities to reach out to make meaning – to perceive, remember, judge, believe – because "in each mode of awareness, something new presents itself to be grasped" (Greene, 2004, p. 137). Cari might have some sense of the official codes of conduct in the school; she might have begun to recognize the unwritten rules of recognizable competence as well as the more explicit hierarchies that exist, but she might not have a way of reconstituting such meanings or appropriating them for her own ends. The question is whether her sense of authority is predicated on her seeing others in terms of apparently stable, comfortable identities as those with authorship rights. If she thinks she is required to take on that positioning, it could be an unlikely and unlikeable one for her and one

that requires exploration of both the inner and outer aspects of the “agency problem” that confronts her, making links within the field of her consciousness, interpreting her own past as it bears on the present, reflecting upon her own knowing (Greene, 2004). A further question that could be asked is whether Cari is “ready” to resolve the challenge of asserting her authority as a teacher. The latter requires movement into the inter-subjective world of the teacher education program where she can attend to and constitute meanings about what is happening to her and through her. Bracketing out her subjectivity for a while having “first synthesized the materials within inner time” (p. 144), allows her to think through the problem of authority in schools in all its socio-economic and political implications. No longer a spectator admiring or fearing from afar or a mimic who appears to act but who does not do so authentically, Cari can learn to teach if she is committed to act upon her world and not simply accept it as given.

The challenge therefore is that sometimes we live in our “subjective decisions” rather than in our reflections; we “plunge confidently into the absurd” and act beyond what our intelligence can grasp (Greene, 1973, p. 138). In such situations, we rely on our subjectivity (whatever it means) and find it difficult, if not impossible, to explain to others. This is, for the existentialists, the utmost boundary or limit, the point at which we risk everything we have. The point is not to simply succumb to the everyday uncertainties but to identify the obstacles and to thematize the problematic: to become conscious of that with which one is confronted. To remain indifferent to one’s life-world, to draw no inferences nor make judgments means that life has become little more than a collection of sensations.

### *The field of ethics: The other*

Cari sits on a chair in front of the children who are gathered on the rug in front of her awaiting instruction. The children become animated and noisy, chatting excitedly to one another. When addressed by Cari 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.” Stunned into silence and with eyes steadily fixed on the floor, Cari stands up from her chair and moves past the children towards the open door at the back of the classroom. She moves through the doorway and leaves the room. The children’s clamour continues and it is unclear whether they have yet noticed or felt the student teacher’s absence...until the university supervisor stands up and tries to refocus the children’s attention.

How does Cari explain her flight from the classroom? What is it about the child’s address that startles her? Why would she run the risk of rendering herself unrecognizable as a competent student teacher to her supervisor? One might call her choice in that situation absurd; it seems to make little sense to give her power of agency away in that moment. Why do it?

*The other as limit.* Education is a relational endeavour involving connections between people and ideas; inevitably, therefore, teachers and students both affect and are affected by one another (Thayer-Bacon, 2017). In the encounter with the child, Cari is interpellated – the child-other makes a demand on her, accuses her of a failing, and insists that she “be a real teacher!” In moments such as this, “language arrives as an address we do not will, and by which we are, in an original sense, captured, if not, in Levinas’s terms, held hostage” (Butler, 2004, p. 139).

There is no escaping the call of the other because the structure of the address carries with it a moral authority. What binds Cari morally in the moment is that she is addressed in such a way that she cannot avoid the student’s call; “this impingement by the other’s address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or...prior to the formation of our will” (Butler, 2004, p. 130). This is quite contrary to the idea that “moral authority is about finding one’s will and standing by it” (p. 130). The demand comes from elsewhere; our obligations are pressed upon us from “a nameless elsewhere...unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned” (p. 130), in fact, often ruining our (lesson) plans. In a Levinasian turn, Butler (2004) gives up autonomy for heteronomy – we give sway to the other – and in this inversion of modernist subjectivity, she helps us to reconceptualise moral agency. “I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible,” wrote Levinas (1985, p. 101, cited in Chinnery, 2001, p. 70). In this, we are presented with a conception of subjectivity wherein moral agency is seen as a radical kind of passivity (Chinnery, 2001).

Radical passivity emerges as a peaceful place between two impulses that are “at war with each another in order not to be at war” (Butler, 2004, p. 137): “the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the ‘you shall not kill’” (Levinas, 1996, p. 167). As Cari looks at the face of the child – physically defenseless and institutionally vulnerable – she may recognize how easily she could diminish the child’s power in that moment – by calling her to task for her insubordinate behaviour, shaming her in front of her peers, and silencing her once and for all. She may also recognize, however, her responsibility as the adult in the encounter, institutionally endowed with the responsibility to “do no harm.” In Cari’s case, the fear of appearing incompetent to others (i.e. unable to control the children’s behaviour) might be juxtaposed with the fear of being “too competent” within the terms of the institution (i.e. able to control children’s behaviour). While one could argue that removing herself from the classroom is not in her self-interest (i.e. she abandons her responsibility), one could equally assert that Cari implicitly appreciates that the other’s wellbeing always has the priority and that “[i]n ethics, the other’s right to exist has primacy over my own” (Levinas & Kearney, 1986, pp. 23-24 ). That which makes ethics possible may make an appearance of competence impossible.

Cari's action, as it were, is reminiscent of Sara Ruddick's (1995) thesis that maternal thinking develops strategies for preserving the life of the child as when some mothers, suffering from postnatal depression, prevent themselves accessing and potentially harming their infant children. In a Levinasian sense, such action constitutes an "unremarkable aspect of one's prior condition of responsibility to and for the other" (Chinnery, 2001, p. 72).

Our reading of Cari's classroom encounter suggests the precariousness of life among others, but it also demonstrates that "suffering can yield an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of impressionability and dependence, and these can become resources, if we do not 'resolve' them too quickly" (Butler, 2004, p. 150). Instead of appearing monstrous, within the already symbolic representation of adult control and power, the children appear otherwise – as powerful and vulnerable as the teacher herself. One might argue, for example, that in leaving the room, Cari portrays an image of pedagogy, its original difficulty and the reality of her own very human suffering (i.e. fear of failure; an overwhelming sense of guilt in not meeting what she has been led to understand as her responsibility). The emphasis on teacher competence and smooth functioning (i.e. management) of classrooms has the effect of *masking* the challenge of relations caught within institutional mandates and circumscribes what Butler (2004) called "the sphere of appearance, what we can see and what we can know" (p. 146).

The classroom event points us toward something beyond itself, to a precariousness student teachers and teacher educators may find too burdensome, too difficult to tolerate; it conveys an experience of something that remains un-nameable and un-grievable (except within the parameters of the dominant discourse of competence); its complicatedness and potential destructiveness require our attention.

### *The field of psychoanalysis: Desire and "impossibility"*

The classroom teacher returns to her classroom to witness the university supervisor's attempts to quieten her students and focus them on the task at hand. They exchange concerned looks – both wondering what has happened to Cari. The supervisor happily hands over the classroom to the teacher and goes in search. She finds Cari sitting on the wall surrounding the school grounds. Cari announces that she is leaving the teacher education program; teaching is obviously not for her. The supervisor begins to identify a range of options – stepping out for now and returning next year to resume; being reassigned to a different school and mentoring teacher. Cari insists tearfully that there are no options. She intends to look for a job; she will never teach. She gets up and walks away, leaving the supervisor behind her.

Why not talk about what just has happened in class? Why continue with the class as if nothing has happened? Is it due to the fact that it might disrupt the ideological fantasy that has a powerful grip on us; that "real" teachers must be in control although the Real<sup>1</sup> occasionally shows its "ugly face" and confronts

us with the unforeseen and uncontrollable ontology of classroom life? Might it be such an ideological fantasy that constructs a number of difficulties for Cari because “real teachers” are those who are able to repress the interference of the Real and act *as if* they are in control? And if Cari experienced the “Real-of-teaching,” did she also glimpse the cynical attitude that is perpetuated within teacher education and captured by Žizek’s (2008b) formula: “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it” (pp. 25-26)? In other words, nobody believes that the teacher will be able to avoid the interference of the Real-of-teaching but all persist as if it is possible. Is this why Cari declares that “teaching is obviously not for her”? Could the supervisor have handled the situation differently by addressing the interference of the Real as an inevitable part of (educational) life?

Using psychoanalytical thoughts and concepts, we want to address and discuss these questions and to articulate how (teacher) agency is always played out in between “inner” fantasies and “outer” discourses.

*Lack and desire as a consequence of the Real.* Within contemporary teacher education discourses, we find numerous efforts to reduce the so-called ‘practice shock’ or the lack experienced by the student teacher when she is confronted with students whose agendas conflict with hers.<sup>2</sup> So no matter how well she is prepared, she will always ‘fail’ and experience *a lack*, that is, that something is missing. That means she is “driven to look for substitutes, that might compensate for [her] sense of lack; [she] is motivated to invent figures of meaning that can, momentarily at least, ease and contain the discomfort of alienation” (Ruti, 2010, p. 358).

Ideological fantasies can provide her with some sort of meaning and order in a disorderly, imperfect world (Žizek, 2008b, p 123). The point is “what precedes fantasy is not reality but a hole in reality, its point of impossibility filled in with fantasy. Lacan’s name for this point is the *objet petit a*” (Žizek, 2008a, p. xiv). The *objet petit a* (or just object *a*) stands for the unattainable object of desire that she may strive for but never will be able to reach. There are no objects that once and for all can close the gap in the reality for her and allow her to be “master in her own classroom.” So no matter what she is offered in teacher education, she will never be protected against the interference of the Real, that is, unintended events. Still, many teacher educators seem to suppress that point.

Yet, this does not mean that she cannot experience herself in a state of fullness or positivity. But the experience always ends and “dissolve[s] back into negativity; any endeavor to erase lack only gives rise to new instances of lack. This implies that the process of filling lack must by necessity be continually renewed” (Ruti, 2010, p. 359).

Following this line of thought, we might wonder why teacher educators are not witnessing greater efforts to address the Real-of-teaching within the teacher

education field today. Why is it that many (neoliberal inspired) teacher education programs avoid difficult questions that have no clear answers? Why is it so difficult to acknowledge that much of what happens in the formal classroom is out of the teacher's control (Bibby, 2011, p. 2)?

If we look at our vignette(s), we could ask if Cari has been met with a lot of promises, final answers, and ideal identifications, which may have simplified things for her and let her ignore the complicated, messiness of life in classrooms that is always a part of being a teacher. What Cari might have felt, but has not been told, is that to be(come) a teacher is hard and unpredictable work. By simplifying things for Cari, if this were the case, it may have prevented her from living with and within complexity and associated feelings of fear, vulnerability, and discomfort (Loveless et al., 2016, p. 5-6).

*Appreciating "impossibility."* Contemporary teacher education programs are often, as previously mentioned, regulated by neoliberal philosophies and logics, which means they operate with naïve and (sometimes) absurd and instrumental understandings of what makes good teaching possible (Brown, Atkinson, & England, 2006; Rüsselbæk Hansen, Phelan & Qvortrup, 2015). Has Cari been provided with such a narrow vocabulary, which falls short when confronted with the Real-of-teaching? Is her reaction — leaving the teacher education program — a sign that she has not been prepared for the uncertainty in teaching? This uncertainty is compounded by the fact that many student teachers hold a nostalgic image or fantasy of what teaching is about. As Britzman (2007) has argued, we must not forget that student teachers are strongly affected by the social fact of having to be educated. She puts it like this:

Growing up in education permeates our meanings of education and learning; it lends commotion to our anticipations for and judgements toward the self and our relations with others. It makes us suspicious of what we have not experienced and lends nostalgia to what has been missed. (p. 2)

As a student teacher, Cari is both "new" and "old" in education because "the present is always influenced by the past, and insofar as the future is always a fantasized component of the present, existence inevitably takes place on multiple levels at once" (Ruti, 2010, p. 367). The mix between the new and the old is rarely problematized. Has Cari had the opportunity to confront her old / new fantasies about what teaching is and could be about? If not, those fantasies continue to diminish her power to explore, examine, and open up new forms of unknown teaching territories and experiences (Britzman, 2007).

So how is it possible to traverse such fantasies in teacher education? One way to do it is to fully identify with this or that fantasy. Then it becomes clear how absurd and how unproductive a given fantasy may be. Another way is to bring the fantasy out in the open. Following Žižek (2014), "a fantasy is like a dirty intimate secret which cannot survive public exposure" (p. 30). The question remains as to how we might allow such intimate secrets to be articulated in

teacher education. If we succeed in doing so, we will have constructed a different starting point for understanding teacher agency and its limits.

## LANGUAGE(S) AND THE LIMITS OF SUPERVISION

At the outset of this paper, we identified the problems associated with presumptive understandings of agency underlying teacher education practices, namely, that we can be “in an immediate (and incontestable) visual relation to reality” (Butler, 2009, p. 73). This assumption is most evident, perhaps, in the context of field supervision. One of the challenges facing teacher educators is that the practice of supervision remains confined to the immediacy of experience whereby both supervisor (as observer) and student (as participant) are both witnesses to “the same lesson” taught by the student. Typically, the task of the “post-observation supervisory conference” involves a review of the lesson with a view to identifying strengths (e.g., behaviour management, best teaching methods, capacity to motivate children to attend as a first step toward learning outcomes) and weaknesses (e.g., practices that might be used in the future). Britzman (2009) provokes us to consider an alternative form of supervision whereby the supervisor, having never been present in the classroom and interrupting the assumption of reality as visible, attends to the student teacher’s written notes and spoken thoughts about her teaching experience. In this manner, she argues, the supervisor would occupy “an ironic position within ignorance so as to teach this very stance of working from the unknown” (p. 387). The event is in the past and all the supervisor has is remnants, requiring “a suspension of any certainty seemingly made from classroom observation” (p. 388) about what occurred. Britzman (2009) asks, what if our reflection about teaching

takes us not to the undoing of classroom reality, itself the ambiguous, fleeting context of the teacher’s work, but rather takes its force from the limits and pleasures of representing the teacher’s learning? What if we think of supervision as a transitional space made from opening new dimensions of experience unavailable at the time of its unfolding? (p. 388)

Following Britzman (2009), we ask: What if teaching and our reflection on it acknowledge that reality cannot be planned and that our not anticipating its arrival is insufficient evidence of our incompetence; that there is far more to reality – confusion, accidents – than agentic reason can anticipate or respond to; that putting our experience into words, with all the ambiguity that language entails, requires courage? The supervisor as an embodiment of uncertainty invites the student to tolerate her own hesitation and doubt. Viewing oneself as subject to uncertainty “having nothing less than the ambiguities of language to signify the afterward of meaning” (Britzman (2009, p. 386) and beginning to appreciate “what is unknowable about our work as teachers” (p. 387), questioning and critique become possible.

In the foregoing analysis of Cari's being and doings, we have attempted to embrace Britzman's advice that we might work from the vantage of the unknown rather than the known by drawing on theoretical perspectives that embrace limits and offer a precarious space of complication. That said, one may wonder what conversations might take place between Cari and a supervisor who had not been present in the classroom that "fatal day." How might that supervisor have encouraged Cari to represent her experience and to embrace the ambiguity of language and the uncertainty of practice read through a range of vocabularies? Would such a conversation have opened up such possibility that Cari might have returned to the classroom humble, yet emboldened to take up the challenge of teaching?

## CONCLUSION

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 vignettes have shown. With our existential reading (knowledge), the role of reflection cannot be conflated with the ability to know (Greene, 1973). The teacher responds to questions arising out of her situation, which remains only partly known to her. As such, her knowledge is always "limited." Her experiences are always more than can be captured in language. Turning to our ethical reading, it becomes clear that the teacher is always addressed by the other in ways she cannot avoid or control (Butler, 2004). Obligations are pressed upon her from "a nameless elsewhere...unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned" (p. 130). Finally, and with our psychoanalytical reading, we 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), teacher educators might have constructed a different starting point for a more complicated understanding of teacher agency that is influenced and regulated by inner as well as outer conditions and limits. Such awareness may enable new forms of teacher agency to be played out both within and beyond the contemporary (neoliberal) educational order.



## NOTES

1. According to Lacan (2007), our reality is constituted by three intertwined levels or orders; the symbolic, the imaginary, and the Real. Žizek (2006) illustrated how these orders work like the game of chess. The rules we have to follow in order to play are related to the symbolic level. The Knight (as an example) is within this order defined by the moves this figure can take. The imaginary order, however, has to do with the ways the different pieces are shaped / formed and characterized by their names (king, runner, queen, knight, and so on). Finally, the Real is, as Žizek explained it, “the entire complex set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one player or directly cut the game short” (Žizek, 2006, p. 8-9).
2. When all their planning and expectations break down...the student fails to live up to the Symbolic mandate of being a teacher.... We might see such disruptive experiences as an interruption of the Symbolic order of teaching by the Real-of-teaching (Brown et al., 2006, p. 74-75).

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (2011). *Nudities*. (Trans. D. Kishik, & S. Pedatella). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Badiou, A. (2014). *Infinite thought: Truth and the return to philosophy*. London, United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Ball, S. J. (2008). *The education debate*. Bristol, United Kingdom: Bristol University Press.
- Bibby, T. (2011). *Education – An ‘impossible’ profession? Psychoanalytical explorations of learning and classrooms*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), 624-640.
- Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2006). *How is agency possible? Towards an ecological understanding of agency-as achievement. Learning lives: Learning, identity, and agency in the life course. Working Paper Five*. Exeter, United Kingdom: Teaching and Learning Research Programme.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Britzman, D. (2007). Teacher education as uneven development: Toward a psychology of uncertainty. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 10(1), 1-12.
- Britzman, D. (2009). The poetics of supervision: A psychoanalytic thought experiment for teacher education. *Changing English*, 16(4), 385-396.
- Brown, T., Atkinson, D., & England, J. (2006). *Regulatory discourses in education. A Lacanian perspective*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Buchanan, R. (2015). Teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), 700-719.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London, United Kingdom: Verso.
- Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London, United Kingdom: Verso.
- Chinnery, A. (2001). Levinas and ethical agency: Toward a reconsideration of moral education. In L. Stone (Ed.), *Philosophy of education 2000* (pp. 67-74). Urbana-Champaign, IL: Philosophy of Education Society.
- Clarke, M., & Phelan, A. (2017). *Teacher education and the political: The power of negative thinking*. London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Conle, C. (1999). Why narrative? Which narrative? Struggling with time and place in life and research. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 29(1), 7-32.
- Courtney, S. J., & H. M. Gunter (2015). Get off my bus! School leaders, vision work and the elimination of teachers. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 18(4), 395-417.

- Derrida, J. D. (2007). *Learning to live finally: The last interview* (P.-A. Brault & M. Naas, Trans.). Hoboken, NJ: Melville House.
- Edwards, A. (2015). Recognising and realising teachers' professional agency. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), 779-784.
- 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). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- Greene, M. (2004). Curriculum and consciousness. In D. Flinders & S. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (pp. 135-148). New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Greene, M. (1973). *Teacher as stranger: Educational philosophy for the modern age* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). New York, NY: Wadsworth.
- Hopmann, S. T. (2008). No child, no school, no state left behind: Schooling in the age of accountability. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40(4), 417-456.
- Hudson, A. (2004). Educating the people. In D. Hays (Eds.), *The Routledge guide to key debates in education* (pp.18-22). London, United Kingdom: Routledge.
- Jaspers, K. (1986). *Basic philosophical writings: Selections* (E. Ehrlich, L. H. Ehrlich, & G. B. Petter, Eds. & Trans.). Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Lacan, J. (2007). *Écrits. A selection* (B. Fink, Trans.). New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Levinas, E. (1996). Peace and proximity. In A. T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, & R. Bernasconi (Eds.), *Emmanuel Levinas basic philosophical writings* (pp. 161-169). Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press.
- Levinas, E., & Kearney, R. (1986). Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas. In R. A. Cohen (Ed.), *Face to face with Levinas* (pp. 13 -33). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Loveless, D. J., Beverly, C. L., Bodle, A., Dredger K. S., Foucar-Szocki, D., Harris, T., ... Wishon, P. (2016). *The vulnerability of teaching and learning in a selfie society*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.
- Masschelein, J., & Simons, M. (2013). *In defence of the school: A public issue*. Leuven, The Netherlands: Education, Culture & Society Publishers.
- McMillan, C. (2015). Pedagogy of the impossible: Zizek in the classroom. *Educational Theory*, (65)5, 545-562.
- Parker, I. (1997). Discourse analysis and psycho-analysis. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 36(4), 479-495.
- Ruddick, S. (1995). *Maternal thinking: Toward a politics of peace*. New York, NY: Beacon Press
- Ruti, M. (2010). Winnicott with Lacan: Living creatively in a postmodern world. *American Imago*, 67(3), 353-374.
- Rüsselbæk Hansen, D., Phelan, A., & Qvortrup, A. (2015). Teacher education in Canada and Denmark in an era of neutrality. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry*, 12(1), 40-55.
- Rüsselbæk Hansen, D., & Frederiksen, L. F. (2017). The 'crucified' leader: Cynicism, fantasies and paradoxes in education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 36(4), 425-441.
- Scalia, J., & Scalia, L. (2011). Ideological critique and ethical leadership. *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 42, 55-64.
- Schiff, J. L. (2014). *Burdens of political responsibility: Narrative and cultivation of responsiveness*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Taubman, P. M. (2009). *Teaching by numbers: Deconstructing the discourse of standards and accountability in education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Taylor, C. (1977). What is human agency? In T. Mischel (Ed.), *The self: Psychological and philosophical issues* (pp. 103-135). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Thayer-Bacon, B. (2017). *Relational ontologies*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Thornhill, C., & Miron, R. (2017). "Karl Jaspers." In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Winter 2017 ed.). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/jaspers/>

Toom, A., Pyshalto, K., & O'Connor Rust, F. (2015). Teachers' professional agency in contradictory times. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), 625-624.

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 21<sup>st</sup> century* (pp. 549-567). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.

White, S. (2000). *Sustaining affirmation: The strengths of weak ontology in political theory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zizek, S. (2006). *How to read Lacan*. London, United Kingdom: Granta Books.

Zizek, S. (2008a). *The plague of fantasies*. New York, NY: Verso.

Zizek, S. (2008b). *The sublime object of ideology*. New York, NY: Verso

Zizek, S. (2014). *Event: Philosophy in transit*. London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books.

ANNE M. PHELAN is Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia. Her research interests lie in teacher education, curriculum theory, and philosophy of education. [anne.phelan@ubc.ca](mailto:anne.phelan@ubc.ca)

DION RÜSSELBÆK HANSEN is Associate Professor in the Department for the Study of Culture at the University of Southern Denmark. His research interests lie in teacher education, educational policy, and philosophy of education. [dion@ifpr.sdu.dk](mailto:dion@ifpr.sdu.dk)

ANNE M. PHELAN est professeure agrégée au Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy à University of British Columbia. Ses intérêts de recherche portent sur la formation des enseignants, les études du curriculum et la philosophie de l'éducation. [anne.phelan@ubc.ca](mailto:anne.phelan@ubc.ca)

DION RÜSSELBÆK HANSEN est professeur associé au Department for the Study of Culture à University of Southern Denmark. Ses intérêts de recherche portent sur la formation des enseignants, la politique éducative et la philosophie de l'éducation. [dion@ifpr.sdu.dk](mailto:dion@ifpr.sdu.dk)