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Biographical Sketch

Matthew Clarke is currently Professor of Education at York St John University in England, Prior to taking up his current position, he has researched and taught in teacher education in Australia, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates. His research interests focus on education policy and politics, particularly their implications for the work of teachers.

Chapter 18 (word court 5123)

The indispensability and impossibility of teacher identity

Matthew Clarke

Abstract

For many, the term 'teacher identity' carries purely positive associations, as something that provides a reassuring source of professional solidarity and support. Yet identity is something of a paradoxical and problematic notion. In thinking through the problematic of identity, and its relation to teachers' lives and work, I draw on psychoanalytic theory, where identity, far from being characterized by harmony, completeness or self-sufficiency, is a site of conflict, fragmentation, and alienation. For psychoanalysis, this alienation derives from the external location of our primary sources of identification, including imaginary identifications with the specular image of the other and symbolic identifications with the demands and desires of the Other embodied in law, language and discourse. In other words, we are never quite 'at one' with ourselves because the source of ourselves – our identities – lies outside us. I explore the implications for teachers of the paradoxical nature of identity as at once indispensable and impossible.

Teacher identity has emerged as a key focus of education research, with a considerable body of work on the personal and professional lives of teachers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington, & Gu, 2007), and with identity increasingly recognised as an essential and invaluable resource in navigating the myriad challenges – policy, pedagogical, personal – confronting teachers on a daily basis (Hong, Greene, & Lowery, 2017). Teacher identity is often conceived as a positive or substantive entity,

structured around core beliefs and perceptions and developed through reflection and discussion. Seen from this perspective, our identities embody who and what we are as teachers (Maclean & White, 2007; Settlage, Southerland, Smith, & Ceglie, 2009; Walkington, 2005). Meanwhile, other perspectives emphasise the constructedness of teachers' identities, highlighting the role played by narrative (e.g. Søreide, 2006; Watson, 2006) or discursive (e.g. Clarke, 2006; Devos, 2010) processes in the ongoing construction, formation, and development of teacher identity. What each perspective shares is the view that teacher identity is an indispensable resource that enables teachers to make sense of who they are and what they do and that can be leveraged in the face of struggles (Danielewicz, 2001; MacLure, 1993). As Day, Sammons, Stobart, Kington and Gu note, "teachers' sense of professional and personal identity is a key variable in their motivation, job fulfilment, commitment and self-efficacy" (2007, p. 102).

Whatever we understand by teacher identity, there can be little doubt that, like those of the wider population, teachers' identities are located within the wider temporal, spatial, and political contexts of history, geography, and policy. In particular, teacher identity is intimately linked to notions of professionalism and the process of professionalization, which in itself is closely tied to politics and policy. In recent times, teachers' identities have undergone a transformation since the 1980s as a consequence of what Connell (2013) refers to as the 'neoliberal cascade'[1] that has swept across education and schooling in many international contexts. Elements of this cascade have included an increase in the level of policy prescriptivism in relation to core aspects of teachers' work, such as curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, along with heightened levels of audit and accountability (Taubman, 2009). These changes have been described in terms of the 'intensification' of

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[1] Neoliberalism is understood here as the reconfiguration of all aspects of experience in economic terms and the application of market-like rationalities of measurement, comparison and evaluation within ever-more sectors and institutions (Brown, 2015; Davies, 2014).

teaching and teachers' work (Burchielli, 2006; Williamson & Myhill, 2008). Intensification has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, referencing both the increased volume of teachers' workloads and the heightened emotional strains to which they are subjected as a consequence of burgeoning cultures of audit and performativity (Ball, 2003; Clarke, 2013).

We might describe these changes in terms of a move away from an earlier 'inside out' form of professionalism, where the contours of professional identity were largely determined from within the profession by individuals and groups, to forms of 'outside in' professionalism, where the profession is largely reacting and responding to pressures and agendas emanating from policy makers and politicians (Clarke, Michell, & Ellis, 2016; Dawson, 1994). These changes can be linked to a wider shift that has impacted on professionals in a range of professions and occupations from 'occupational' identities, originating within the profession and characterised by relatively high levels of autonomy and trust, as well as by more collegial relationships, to 'organisational' identities that derive from the organisation or institution, are distinguished by lower levels of professional autonomy and trust, and involve hierarchical rather than egalitarian relationships (Evetts, 2009).

Drawing on the work of Castells (2010), we can also think about the above shift in terms of a move from 'legitimizing' identities, aimed at establishing the status and standing of teachers as professionals, to 'resistance' identities, struggling to maintain and protect their professional recognition in the face of media denigration and policy moves, such as school-based teacher education, intended to restore earlier 'craft' notions of teacher professionalism.

Underlying the discussion so far is a question that has been touched on, in relation to the different ways in which teacher identity has been conceptualized, but has not been explicitly addressed. This is the question of what we understand by the term 'identity'. Is identity a thing, a process, both of these at once or something else entirely? This question is taken up below, after which I revisit *teacher* identity in light of this discussion.

The power and the paradoxes of identity

Identity is a widely-used term, the pervasiveness of which belies its conceptual complexity. In everyday readings, identity is seen as something substantive, coherent, consistent and irreducible. Thus, for instance, the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary defines identity as "the quality or condition of being the same in substance, composition, nature, properties, or in particular qualities under consideration; absolute or essential sameness; oneness"[2]. Identity in this sense collocates with words like 'core', 'true' and 'authentic'. Such notions of 'absolute or essential sameness' and continuity over time are often evident in popular- and social-media discussions, in which identity is linked to location and to history, often in exclusive and essentialist ways. From this perspective, identity is a sort of zero-sum game, where some identities are seen to encroach on and threaten others, particularly during times of social change, demographic movement, technological development, or economic upheaval – in other words during normal human existence. Politics thus becomes a process of managing the competing claims of different identities – an assumption reflected in much media commentary on identity issues and not just in right-wing outlets. For instance, the UK's *New Statesman*, typically a publication with a left of centre orientation, declared in 2016 that identities matter and that many of them, including majoritarian identities such as those of white residents of England, are under current threat[3]. Indeed, looking back at the identity-driven political revolutions of 2016 in the USA and the UK it seems clear that, whatever we understand by it, identity is a powerful concept that does significant discursive work with tangible material effects.

Eric Santner describes this popular view as the global consciousness perspective on identity, in which "every stranger is ultimately just like me, ultimately familiar; his or her strangeness is a function of a different vocabulary, a different set of names that can always be

[2] www.oed.com/view/Entry/91004?redirectForm=identity#eid
[3] http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/12/lesson-2016-identity-matters-even-white-people

translated" (Santner, 2001, p. 5). In other words, encountering the other is a matter of my fully self-transparent identity engaging with another, similarly self-transparent identity, albeit one comprising different 'content'. However, what this view overlooks is the structuralist insight that meaning – including the meaning of any given identity – is always relational insofar as any entity derives its meaning by way of contrast with what it is not in order to make sense – so 'night' requires the contrast with 'day', just as 'right' relies on 'left'. In this sense identity, far from being solely about sameness, is revealed as reliant on difference, with all positive identities haunted and 'contaminated' by the negative presence of their constitutive outside. Thus, the possibility of a full, self-sufficient identity becomes an impossibility. Poststructuralism pushes this insight further by insisting that the overall system of signification is inherently unstable and that any claims made in the name of truth or knowledge are always partial (in both senses of the word) and situated (temporally and spatially). Such a view highlights the historical contingency and hence the fragility of all identities.

Psychoanalytic theory and identity

Psychoanalytic theory incorporates these structuralist and poststructuralist insights into the relational, contingent, and fragile nature of identity, but adds the distinctive 'twist' of positing an enigmatic emptiness or void at the core of our being that confounds any aspirations for full self-transparency or disclosure. For psychoanalysis, "the possibility of 'We', of community, is granted on the basis that every familiar is ultimately strange and that, indeed, I am even in a crucial sense a stranger to myself" (Santner, 2001, p. 6). In other words, "what makes the other Other is not his or her spatial exteriority with respect to my being but the fact that he or she is strange, is a stranger, and not only to me but also to him or herself, is the bearer of an internal alterity, an enigmatic density of desire calling for response beyond any rule governed reciprocity" (2001, p. 9). This reading renders identity less a

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source of agentive power than a fantasmatic structure erected to mask the enigmatic incompleteness and self-division of the human subject. Indeed, one way to read the twin shocks delivered to the political establishment of the UK and the USA by Brexit and the election of Donald Trump respectively, is as the unleashing of deep reservoirs of non-rational, affective intensity directed against the unwelcome spectre of encroaching racial and ethnic diversity among populations whose identities are aligned with, and shaped by, the fantasmatic wholeness and self-sufficiency offered by colonial legacies of whiteness (Binkley, 2017). Understanding this more fully requires a brief foray into Lacanian theory and in particular his notion of the mirror stage.

Lacan's mirror stage offers fruitful material for any consideration of the divided nature of the human subject and, as we shall see below, it has significant potential insights to offer in relation to the struggles and conflicts that seem to comprise teacher identity. Initially conceived as a specific stage in the development of the human infant, the mirror stage is fundamental to Lacan's overall conception of human subjectivity (Evans, 1996). Critically, the mirror stage is both an explanatory narrative and an enduring structure in relation to the human psyche: "the mirror stage (stade du miroir) is not a mere epoch in the history of the individual but a stadium (stade) in which the battle of the human subject is permanently being waged" (Bowie, 1991, p. 21).

The mirror stage involves self-recognition on the part of the human infant when it confronts the specular image perceived in the (literal or figurative) mirror and realises that it is in some way a distinct entity separate from the rest of existence. Prior to this moment of realisation there is only undifferentiated existence with no distinction between self and other. For the infant, the experience of self-recognition is paradoxical, at once exhilarating and perturbing, insofar as its "jubilant" assumption" of the mirror image as its own self is also "the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity" (Lacan, 1977, p. 2 & 5). For on the

one hand, identification with the image offers the (illusory) promise of (potential) self-reliance and mastery. Yet on the other hand, this process of external identification entails an alienating separation and distinction between self and other, whereby the external other is also the paradoxical source of the self.

The initial alienation of the mirror stage is compounded on accession to subject-hood through entry into the symbolic. This is the register of law and language, a social system of regulation and signification, prohibition, and recognition. Preceding and exceeding the subject's existence, the symbolic realm of language and discourse henceforth mediates the individual's relations with others and with the world. Critically, for the purposes of our discussion of teacher identity, by barring direct access to the objects of the world and to the other, the symbolic register entails another experience of alienating loss, since entry into the symbolic not only entails prohibitions but also engenders an awareness of objects and experiences the subject does not have access to. To take a simple example, a child listening to stories is exposed to worlds beyond her own, which may engender new yearnings, as may seeing her older siblings taking part in activities and experiences that remain inaccessible to her. This experience of alienating loss is further underscored by the incapacity of language to ever fully or adequately convey the individual's intentions and desires, since, owing to the play of difference, the signifier is never fully present and consequently, no signifier can adequately represent the individual's identity; yet at the same time, paradoxically and frustratingly, the symbolic register often conveys more than the individual intended (Chiesa, 2007).

One consequence of the alienation engendered through the mirror stage and entry into the symbolic register is a pervasive sense of lack whereby something is continually sensed as missing and where our lives and the world are felt to be strangely out of joint. My daughter exemplified this when, as a seven-year old, she asked why she was herself rather than

someone else; why had she been born when and where she had rather than at some other time in some other place? These questions ultimately unanswerable – as Lacan noted there is no Other of the Other, providing an ultimate ground; no final cause behind what we refer to as causality (Lacan, 1977). This experience explains the ongoing lure of fantasy, which seduces us into a series of futile attempts to attain an imagined full and harmonious state and to seek the enjoyment that we presume will accompany this state. Such fantasies, which are ubiquitous in political, professional and personal life, typically take one of two opposite but related forms. Specifically, fantasies may be of the 'beatific' variety – "if we leave the European Union we will take back democratic control of our country and regain our greatness as a nation; if we implement this curriculum reform our students' outcomes will significantly improve" – in which the achievement of a specific concrete object is positioned as the key to accessing a more generalized state of well-being. Yet fantasies may also adopt a contrasting 'horrific' form, whereby the non-achievement of an object is regarded as a prelude to disaster – "unless we tackle immigration our social infrastructure will collapse; if we don't raise our country's position in the PISA tables we will never achieve global economic competitiveness". Both type of fantasies, the beatific and the horrific versions, typically pivot around an object – an individual or a group – blamed for hindering our full flourishing or representing an obstacle to the realization of our goals. In political debates, the unemployed, refugees, and asylum seekers are frequently positioned as such objects in the national psyche of many wealthy nations, while insufficiently aspirational students, under-committed teachers or 'coasting' schools are among those occupying such a position in education debates. The key point here, however, is that these scapegoats are unfortunate but necessary figures insofar as the notion of a fully realised state of wellbeing beyond the conflicts, compromises and contradictions of present social reality is a chimera – something that is constitutively impossible and unattainable for us as fragmented and divided human

subjects. The resulting dilemma between the indispensability of fantasy and fantasmatic thinking that Žižek (1997) refers to as the 'plague of fantasies', involving the pursuit of an imagined state of harmonious wholeness on the one hand, and the impossibility of achieving a full identity on the other hand, is one that has implications at any scale, from the individual, to the group to the societal.

Another consequence of our constitutive alienation is an ongoing tension between the ways in which we would like to see ourselves – our preferred self-image or ideal ego – and the meanings and practices we assume the Other of the symbolic order of society expects us to accept and adopt – our ego ideal (Lacan, 1991). This ongoing struggle between ideal ego and ego ideal reflects the larger tension in the constitution of the human psyche between the imaginary and symbolic orders and, like the dilemma posed by the lure of fantasy, offers insights into the challenges faced by novice teachers struggling to establish their teacher identities. The following discussion illustrates these points with examples from two recently published studies, both focused on the difficulties and dilemmas involved in constructing teacher identity.

The seductions of the imaginary: Heroes and villains[4]

The position of the student teacher[5] is nothing if not challenging, requiring its occupants to combine two incompatible roles – the term is in many ways oxymoronic (Britzman, 2003) – and to navigate a boundary that can seem disconcertingly fluid and porous but can also prove rigid and impermeable. Critically, passage through this rite is typically mediated by the classroom mentor teacher who is tasked with the responsibility for guiding but also assessing the progress of the novice teacher. In a sense, the mentor teacher holds the novice teacher's future in their hands. It is not surprising, therefore, that many

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[4] The discussion in this section draws on Clarke & Sheridan, 2017.
[5] I use the terms 'novice teacher' and 'student teacher' interchangeably in this chapter.

student teachers elevate their mentor teacher to the status of a hero, while others demote them to the level of a villain. Psychoanalytic theory can help explain this tendency.

This discussion in the earlier sections of this chapter highlighted the complexity of identity, explaining how this arises from the conflicted nature of the human psyche. In particular, I noted the tension between the imaginary register, with its tendency to seek out and hold on to perceptual unities, and the symbolic register, characterized by multiplicity and fluidity. The fixity or stasis associated with the imaginary, Lacan's reworking of the Freudian ego, reflects its origins in identification with the external specular image in the mirror stage. The imaginary is thus oriented towards the perception and retention of stable and enduring gestalts, unlike the symbolic, which is a fluid configuration comprising ever-shifting and *un*stable signifiers. The imaginary is, in this sense, a conservative force, resistant to growth and change.

The same qualities that characterize the imaginary are also characteristics of one of its main forms of defense: the projection of fantasies (Evans, 1996, p. 60) whereby simplified and reductive readings of reality are maintained at the expense of more complex, but also more demanding and potentially threatening, versions of the world. The division of the world into categories such as 'saints' and 'sinners', good and bad, deserving and undeserving, are just some examples of the fantasmatic structuring of reality. Critically, as Britzman (Britzman, 2009; see also Phelan, 2013) notes, in relation to teacher identity, this tendency towards idealization, frequently returns in novice teachers as a powerful "need to believe". Critically for the purposes of this chapter, the fantasies arising from the need to believe and the accompanying tendency towards idealization seduce us with an appealing yet reductive coherence – 'if I adopt the same language and gestures as my mentor I will achieve her levels of control over the students in class'. Fantasy can thus appear as a source of inspiration through the projection of a graspable vision of the professional teacher identity the novice

teacher aspires to adopt and inhabit. Yet unfortunately, the operation of such reductive and simplified visions is likely to serve as a potential source of illusion, inhibiting the growth that would result from engagement with more complex, challenging, and adequate accounts of teaching.

So what might be done to resist the operations of such fantasies? How might mentors and others involved in initial teacher education assist novice teachers in recognizing the complexity of teaching and the dangers and limitations of simplified rather than complex teacher identities? One way in which the operation of fantasies can be challenged is through the operation of the signifier, (i.e., through "a symbolically mediated process of exchange [which] submits the imaginary organization of the ego to a continuous pressure toward re-formation") (Boothby, 1991, p. 159). Such symbolic mediation essentially requires ongoing critical dialogue and discussion as part of mentoring in the context of the practicum component of teacher education and beyond into the early stages of professional practice – the pedagogic equivalent of the psychoanalytic 'talking cure'. As part of this critical dialogue, interpretations and conclusions of events and interactions in professional practice, including the implications of various policies and practices, need to be continually held up for further probing, reflection, and analysis. As a result, searching and questioning, rather than compliant or complacent, teacher identities are repeatedly modelled. But the seductions of imaginary fantasies are not the only challenge confronting the teacher identities of novice teachers. Another challenge arises from tensions between external, institutional or professional demands, and those arising from the novice teachers' aspirations for their professional teacher identity.

Competing demands: Ego ideal and ideal ego

Many teachers embark on initial teacher education with passionately held views of why they want to teach and the sort of teacher they want to be. Yet teacher identity is never

asocial – it is not the manifestation of some inner 'essence' but entails a complex and paradoxical entanglement of the social and individual (Zembylas, 2003). In other words, "to learn to teach, student-teachers need to develop their capacity to balance and understand the competing demands of their desires, consciences, other people and reality" (Boote, 2003, p. 258). This entails recognition that developing a teacher identity requires a capacity to balance, if not reconcile, the desires and demands of self and other. In the terms referred to earlier in this chapter, it requires integrating the 'inside out' view of teaching that may be the source of passionate personal investment in the profession and the 'outside in' approaches that currently dominate initial teacher education, as manifested in the dominant 'standards' and 'competencies' discourses that emphasize the acquisition of discrete skills as the key to 'effective' teaching. This integration work can involve difficult and often painful negotiations between diverse demands including, for instance, official conceptions of what teaching is or should be, the identities of more established and experienced others, and the aspirations and desires of the novice teacher's own emergent professional identity.

A recent article (Clarke, Michell & Ellis, 2016) utilized the Lacanian notions of the ideal ego and the ego ideal – two related concepts introduced in the section on identity above – in considering the tensions between outside-in and inside-out perspectives and pressures in learning to teach and how these tensions are managed by individual novice teachers. Exploring interview data from a single case of a novice teacher during a practicum placement, my co-authors and I asked to what extent teacher identity is shaped by symbolic prototypes imposed by the social, to what extent was it shaped by imaginary identifications shaped by internal ideals, aspirations and desires, and to what extent these 'forces' function in a space of productive tension.

For this teacher, Christian, as for many novice teachers on placement, school-based professional experience was the key site where fundamental issues of teacher identity and

identification were negotiated, if not resolved. In particular, Christian's professional experience was marked by a struggle between becoming the kind of teacher he thought he wanted to be (his ideal-ego) and the kind of teacher he thought he ought to be (his ego-ideal) in the eyes of his mentor as representative of the school and the wider education system. This professional identity struggle was played out in two common challenges of professional experience – classroom management and professional commitment. In the course of negotiating these areas, Christian sought an answer to a fundamental identity question; 'what kind of teacher am I?' His identity struggle was a dialectic process marked by tensions between opposing images and readings of teaching that might seem to call for some form of resolution. Against this, my co-authors and I argued for the value of sustaining the state of tension as productive of growth and insight – so long as Christian was supported by understanding and encouraging mentors.

In one sense, our analysis of Christian's developing teacher identity and suggestion of maintaining the tension between the conflicting demands of ideal-ego and the ego-ideal may seem counter-intuitive. Indeed, it seems to literally split and de-centre Christian's teacher identity. This may seem counter to popular ways of thinking about identity, which is commonly conceived as a process by which one discovers one's true self (Woodward, 2002). Yet in common with postmodern and poststructuralist approaches, psychoanalysis rejects a vision of a unified subject and suggests that it may be more helpful to talk in terms of identifications, since this suggests that, rather than being an object or 'thing', teacher identity is more helpfully and productively conceived of as a process. As such, teacher identity remains an ongoing and unfinalizable project, as well as being, as we have seen in the examples above, a site of struggle and striving.

Conclusion

Overall then, my argument is that pre-service teachers – and indeed all teachers – are

almost inevitably going to experience tensions in their personal and professional identities –

whether we frame these as occurring between the aspirations of their ideal-ego and the

demands of the ego-ideal, as with Christian, or between the imaginary and symbolic

identifications, as with the student teachers in the 'heroes and villains' article discussed

above. In both cases the tension reflects that between inside-out and outside-in views of

teaching and teachers discussed above. In either instance, merely prioritising one side of the

division at the expense of the other is hardly likely to yield a satisfactory long term solution.

Specifically, the consequence is likely to be alienation from, and rejection by, the

professional community when inside-out perspectives prevail on the one hand; and, on the

other hand, depression, inauthenticity and resentment when the compliance with the social

demands of outside-in views achieve complete dominance. Instead of either of these equally

unattractive options, I suggest the need to recognize that teacher identity remains at once

indispensable and impossible. This in turn suggests that teachers and teacher educators need

to recognize and engage with the challenge of maintaining a productive tension between the

inside-out and outside-in teaching and teacher identity though ongoing critique, dialogue and

reflection.

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