**The power of negative thinking in and for teacher education**

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The most beautiful day

lacks something;

its dark side.

Only to a near-sighted god

could light by itself

appear beautiful.

Beside any *Let there be light!*,

*Let there be darkness!*

should also be said.

We don’t arrive

at necessary night by omission only.

Roberto Juarozz, *Vertical Poetry: Last Poems*

**Introduction: Education and the Retreat to Modernity**

As we were working on this paper, an article was published on the front page of the Australian newspaper ([Ferrari, 2014](#_ENREF_32)), entitled *Toughen up on teacher training, university heads warned*. The article opened with an announcement that ‘Universities will have to prove their teaching graduates improve student learning under tougher accreditation standards for education degrees envisaged by the new chairman of the national teachers institute’ and went on to identify the latter’s research priorities as ‘assessing the capabilities of graduates, measuring the outcomes of initial teacher education, and how to roll out the most effective models of teacher education’. In a similar vein, the article noted that teacher education degrees would be evaluated against three criteria: ‘the impact of the teacher on the student, the magnitude of that impact, and how pervasive it was across students’.

From the perspective of the current paper, this news article is symptomatic of the contemporary moment in teacher education in many global contexts, including North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Specifically, the article reflects neoliberal emphases on economics and productivity, which encourage us to see education as a form of input, providing human capital to meet the needs of the economy. As such, teacher education, and indeed education more broadly, has become subject to the same managerial norms as those that dominate in the business sector, involving susceptibility to evaluation through the specification and measurement of quantifiable data in the form of impact, output, standards and targets.

The news article, and the policy shift in relation to the preparation of teachers it announces, is also symptomatic of contemporary discourses circulating around teacher education, insofar as it is premised on the identification of a deficit (or “lack” to foreshadow our subsequent discussion) – hence the need for a “tougher stance” – that threatens to become a crisis unless addressed. For just as capitalism is characterized by recurring crises ([Harvey, 2010](#_ENREF_41); [Mirowski, 2013](#_ENREF_54); [Valodas, 2012](#_ENREF_72)), teaching and teacher education have been subjected to an ongoing series of manufactured crises involving persistent questioning on the part of policy makers and the media, often driven by political timetables, about whether teachers are meeting (or undermining) the nation’s expectations in relation to such criteria as the adequate preparation of a globally competitive workforce, the achievement of sufficiently-high academic standards, the transmission of appropriate curricular content and the instillation of sufficient moral fibre in students ([Adey & Dillon, 2012](#_ENREF_1); [Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting, & Whitty, 2000](#_ENREF_34); [Smyth, 2006](#_ENREF_66); [Whitty, 2002](#_ENREF_75))

One response to education’s induced sense of crisis has been an increasing degree of policy hyper-activism ([Levin, 1998](#_ENREF_47); [Vidovich, 2009](#_ENREF_73)), reflecting a belief that the creation of policy in and of itself suggests order, authority and expertise ([Colebatch, 2009](#_ENREF_18)). A further response on the part of governments, seeking to alleviate social anxieties and enhance political legitimacy, has been to depoliticize particular policy domains, reframing them as matters of merely technical concern ([J. Clarke & Newman, 1997](#_ENREF_14)). Such depoliticisation, by ‘removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its *historical* emergence and from recognition of the *powers* that produce and contour it’ ([Brown, 2006, p. 15, emphasis in original](#_ENREF_11)), places practices and events in a timeless present in order to project them as merely the natural order of things, thus removing them from ideological and political contestation. By contrast, our position is ‘that teaching and teacher education are inherently and unavoidably political’ ([Cochran-Smith, 2005, p. 3](#_ENREF_17)).

In the case of education, depoliticisation has been achieved through the deployment of a ‘discursive duopoly’ of instrumentalism and consensualism ([M. Clarke, 2012](#_ENREF_15)). Instrumentalism involves the pervasive view that the main purpose of education is to serve the needs of the economy, while consensualism, which works hand in hand with instrumentalism, involves the demonization of disagreement and dissensus and the valorization of agreement and consensus in relation to the instrumentalist view regarding the economic purposes of education. Disagreement thus becomes limited to varying views as to the best means by which instrumental goals can be achieved; dissent regarding the *purposes* of education becomes off-limits. Instrumentalism is reflected in the infusing of teacher education with the language of competition and the market. Specifically, notions of best returns on ‘investment’ ([Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2006, p. 9](#_ENREF_13)) position teacher education as the source of increased productivity in the form of improved standardised national (e.g. SATS in England; NAPLAN in Australia; Formative Skills Assessment (FSA) in British Columbia, Canada) and international (e.g. TIMMS, PISA) test results. Evidence of consensualism includes the unchallengeable orthodoxy that “quality” teaching assures “quality” education for all students (Alberta Education, 1995; OECD 2005), the dominance of “evidence-based” understandings of teaching and the push to identify effective and efficient interventions that might be generalized across a range of program contexts, in order to bring about pre-determined outcomes. A key consequence of this instrumental-consensual duopoly is that improving practice (teaching) in order to enhance productivity (learning) becomes the dominant goal that all stakeholders must unquestioningly endorse or forfeit recognition as legitimate voices.

Meanwhile, determined to argue that teaching is a profession with a complete, impartial and defensible knowledge base, researchers have been drawn into arguments about justification and legitimation, providing compilations of research to make the case for professional relevance of knowledge and skills to be provided in teacher education ([Crocker & Dibbon, 2008](#_ENREF_22); [Darling-Hammond, 2006](#_ENREF_23); [Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005](#_ENREF_24)). Yet ironically, such work only fuels the anxieties of teacher educators and teacher candidates, with the need to meet certification requirements outlined in the teaching standards supplanting concern with the political situatedness and ethical thought processes of teaching. In these and other ways, an impoverishing instrumentalism and a comforting consensualism haunt teacher education and teaching, representing an unwitting retreat into the unequivocal, systematic, yet amnestic world of modernity ([Hartley, 2000](#_ENREF_40)).

**The Haunting of Teacher Education**

In the current policy climate, teacher education, as both field of study or programmatic structure, has been severely impacted, as ‘governments around the world [are] intent on systemic reform of education to improve their country’s global competitiveness… see the reform and progressive management of teacher education as a key component in that systemic reform process’ ([Furlong, 2013, p. 46](#_ENREF_33)). In this section, we identify four particular ‘phantoms’ that have haunted teacher education in recent decades, each linked to this systemic reform process. These phantoms include a) the continual conjuring of crises that serve to stoke social anxiety about the effectiveness and efficiency of teacher education; b) the imposition of a false consensus that deadens debate about the practice and purpose of teacher education; c) the increasing standardization of curriculum and teaching that undermines the cultivation of teachers’ intellectual autonomy and; d) the reduction of teaching to the application of policies and protocols tailored to producing predetermined ends thereby side-lining teachers’ moral judgement and disavowing the ethico-political dimension of teaching. Below, we examine each of these four phantoms in greater detail.

Teacher education has long been a site of social anxiety. In recent decades, wider economic anxieties about competitiveness ([Connell, 2009](#_ENREF_20)) combined with, particularly in the post 9/11 world, political anxieties about the fabric of the nation and the perceived threat to its integrity from alien forces or “strangers” lurking outside or within ([Apple, 2011](#_ENREF_3); [Kostogriz, 2006](#_ENREF_45)), ‘have induced educators to embrace the language and business practices associated with neoliberalism’ ([Taubman, 2009, p. 98](#_ENREF_70)), where the latter, while not a unified doctrine, is understood as ‘the pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics’ ([Davies, 2014, p. 4](#_ENREF_25)). As a consequence of the neoliberal embrace, it has be argued that ‘there has been a subordination of teacher education as intellectual, moral and ethical endeavor to the production of locally relevant job skills’ ([Mayer, Luke, & Luke, 2008, p. 80](#_ENREF_51)). Specifically, in the face of various forms of social anxiety and the resulting doubts as to whether teacher education is up to the challenges of the twenty first century ([e.g. Levine, 2006](#_ENREF_48)), policy makers and teacher educators alike have tended to reach out for what Deborah Britzman ([2011](#_ENREF_10)) refers to as ‘a manual’. Such a manual can be seen as ‘signifying a profession’s unconscious wish for absolute knowledge, and as a defense against crisis. Demands for a manual seem to be one solution to a profession’s anxiety’ ([2011, p. 81](#_ENREF_10)). *How are the conjuring of crisis and the pervasive presence of social anxiety related to the proliferation of policy that seeks to manage teacher education?*

Conveniently, crises demand efficient management. The quest for efficiency begets standardization, ‘curbing variety so as to facilitate the generation of objective measures of performance’ (Hartley, 2000: 119). In teacher education policy and practice, stabilizing the social and operational meaning of both ‘teacher’ and ‘professional’ thus becomes desirable. As a result, and with the active involvement of professional bodies, teachers have consented to what amount to impoverishments in practice, such as the elevation of the pseudo-scientificity of standards, at the expense of subsequently devalued factors such as affect and intuition, as the price for purportedly accruing greater regard from politicians, policy makers, the media and society in terms of perceived improvements in standing and status. In this sense, increased teacher professionalization has been something of a Faustian pact, with teacher professionalism harnessed to government education reform agendas ([Furlong, 2013](#_ENREF_33)) and with teachers being positioned ‘on the frontline of national economic defense and in the centre of educational reform, thus justifying the detailed mapping and scrutiny of their work’ (Clarke & Moore, 2013, p. 488). To this end, teaching standards are offered as *descriptions of* the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attributes of *any* competent teacher. Masking their underlying political commitments (education as epiphenomenal to the economy), officially sanctioned representations of the teacher and teaching appear natural and irrefutable. Teachers are thus deprived of debate where they can make their voices heard, while teacher educators are simply left to the management of policy implications at the programmatic level; witness, for example, the arrival of the standards-driven portfolio as a prominent feature of assessment in teacher education (Sanford & Strong-Wilson, 2013); and, the explicit linking of course syllabi to various teaching standards. Understandably, teacher candidates are keen to present themselves as ‘fitting’ with the standards, thereby adopting ‘a stable and positive identity obtained through identification with an existing socio-political order’ ([Biesta, 2011, p. 145](#_ENREF_6)). There is little room for any reality other than the one established by the standards policy ([Phelan & Vratulis, 2013](#_ENREF_60)). Consensus signifies the end of the political. *How might teacher educators confront the contemporary depoliticizing policy consensus and advocate for a properly political view of education based on genuine alternatives?*

Reimagining teacher education as a site of dissensus is immensely challenging in light of discourses of standardized teacher identities. Strewn across the teacher’s lifespan, otherwise known as ‘the teacher development continuum,’ professional learning is justified as a highly positive disposition for all teachers. Quality teachers want to achieve their ‘full potential through relentless and never-ending self-development, out of which [they] can self-regulate in the interests of students and colleagues’ ([McWilliam, 2008, p. 33](#_ENREF_53)). Potential takes the form of a stylized identity ever keen on developing itself as an excellent classroom manager, team builder, literacy instructor or emotionally intelligent leader. The proliferation of webinars, workshops, seminars and graduate programs attest to this preoccupation, as life-long learning becomes a life sentence for teachers ([Falk, 1999](#_ENREF_31)). Much of this talk of professional learning, however, is less about expanding the subjectivity of the teacher and more about delimiting it ([Falk, 1999](#_ENREF_31)); and even though there have been a growing interest in non-formal professional learning and sharing through social media outlets, much of this material remains tied to, rather than challenging, existing imaginaries of teaching as the implementation of “best practice”. As with more formal professional development, “teacher profiles” as statements of teacher competencies and performance standards lurk beneath the surface ([Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development, 2005, p. 10](#_ENREF_58)), including the usual array of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills but significantly, ‘the capacity to continue developing (p.7). *If* *the current understanding of teacher potential serves to restrict rather than enlarge the subjectivity of the teacher, then what might a rearticulation of potential as ‘(im)potential’ offer teacher education?*

The turn to teaching standards and the articulation of a knowledge base for teaching constitutes a retreat, in our view, into a firmly modernist worldview. This is a world in which knowledge is power, in which scientific research evidence is able to provide a basis for policy and practice, and in which experts hold out the promise, by submitting them to rational analysis, of rendering complex and semi-opaque processes like curriculum, teaching and learning visible and hence more controllable ([e.g. Hattie, 2009](#_ENREF_42)). It is a world in which the intolerable and uncontrollable are redeemed by being made palatable and predictable in order to provide ‘the specious clarity demanded and enforced by audit cultures’ ([MacLure, 2010, p. 278](#_ENREF_50)); the cost of such assimilation is that we enter ‘the regime of the cliché’ ([MacLure, 2010, p. 278](#_ENREF_50)). In such a world, it is all too easy for research to be positioned as an exact science, capable of making clear and unambivalent predictions about practice, ignoring the key notion ‘that in the design, enactment and justification of education we have to engage with normative questions’ ([Biesta, 2015, p. 80](#_ENREF_7)). Such instrumentalism sidelines the teacher, disembeds knowledge from the idiosyncrasy of particular teaching situations and from the experience and knowledge of teachers, and ignores the moral complexities of teaching ([Dunne & Pendlebury, 2002](#_ENREF_30)). *What does it mean to cultivate ethical decision-making in and through teacher education in a climate that is hostile to uncertainty in, and unpredictability of, practice?*

The issues and questions that we identify do not deny that important decisions about what teachers’ knowledge, skills or dispositions, must be made. To think solely in these terms, however, is to neglect teaching and teacher education as forms of praxis—where means and ends are always entangled ([Biesta, 2015](#_ENREF_7)), where ethical action is the central concern, and where human relationships are particular and fragile. It is to limit ourselves to ‘bloodless categories, narrow notions of the visible and the empirical, professional standards of indifference, institutional rules of distance and control, barely speakable fears of losing the footing that enables us to speak authoritatively and with greater value than anyone else who might’ ([Gordon, 2007, p. 21](#_ENREF_37)). Rather than accept such limitations, we seek ‘to represent the structure of feeling that is something akin to what it feels like to be the object of s social totality vexed by the phantoms of modernity’s violence’ ([Gordon, 2007, p. 19](#_ENREF_37)). In short we seek to engage in a complicated rather than a reductive conversation about teacher education; acknowledgement of such complication may require vocabularies heretofore disavowed in teacher education (Taubman 2012).

**Unsettling Phantoms: The Role of Contemporary Theorizing in Teacher Education**

In what follows, we illustrate how contemporary theory can provide a language for critiquing recent developments and imagining new trajectories for policy and practice. Importantly, we write from the position of educational researchers and teacher educators who actively and enthusiastically engage with theory in our own work, though we are aware of alternative perspectives that question the value of theory for education ([e.g. Kitching, 2008](#_ENREF_44)) or see it as an essentially conservative force ([e.g. Thomas, 2007](#_ENREF_71)). In this respect, our view is closer to that of Ball ([1995](#_ENREF_5)) and Dimitriadis & Kamberelis ([2006](#_ENREF_29)), for whom theory comprises concepts and tools for understanding and explaining experiences and processes in critical and creative ways, potentially providing an alternative language to that inscribed in the dominant discourses of current policy and practice. Specifically, in the following discussion, we draw on ideas of antagonism and dissensus from the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe ([2000](#_ENREF_55), [2005](#_ENREF_56), [2013](#_ENREF_57)) to argue against the hegemony of consensus in teacher education; on notions of lack, loss and fantasy from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory ([Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008](#_ENREF_36); [Lacan, 1977](#_ENREF_46); [McGowan, 2013](#_ENREF_52)) to gain insights into the politics of crises in teacher education; on the idea of impotentiality from philosopher Giorgio Agamben ([1999](#_ENREF_2)) to highlight the importance of maintaining a degree of openness in relation to what and who the figure of the teacher can be and; on the notion of undecidability from the work of Jacques Derrida ([Derrida, 1988](#_ENREF_27), [1992](#_ENREF_28)) in order to draw attention to the need to maintain space for genuine decision making as a critical dimension of the ethico-political work of teachers.

***Lack and fantasy: Beyond neoliberal anxiety***

Anxiety is viewed not just as one of the consequences of neoliberal economic policies but also as something more deep-seated and fundamental to human existence. In trying to understand anxiety, a useful contrast can be drawn with fear, insofar as whilst the latter has a specific object, which can be either avoided or confronted, anxiety is more akin to an ontological condition or existential state and is therefore at once both more nebulous and more pervasive. Heidegger linked such existential anxiety to an awareness or intimation of the absence of any secure foundation to our existence ([McGowan, 2013, p. 112](#_ENREF_52)). Similarly, drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and its uptake in critical political theory ([Dean, 2009](#_ENREF_26); [Glynos & Howarth, 2007](#_ENREF_35); [Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008](#_ENREF_36); [Stavrakakis, 1999](#_ENREF_68), [2005](#_ENREF_69); [Vighi, 2010](#_ENREF_74); Žižek, 1989, 2002), we can read recognition of the fundamental role of “lack” and “loss” in human existence. Such loss is consequent upon our emergence as subjects of language and desire, insofar as ‘in order to gain the symbolic world we have to sacrifice the essence of what we are seeking in it, in order to gain the signifier we have to sacrifice the signified’ ([Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 39](#_ENREF_68)). A pervasive response to such loss is the deployment of fantasies of knowledge and control as strategies for obscuring our disempowerment in the face of lack and resisting the anxieties it provokes – ‘the constant seeking of an impossible absoluteness of knowledge to provide, or at least give the illusion of, certainty towards a safe tomorrow’ ([Gunder & Hillier, 2009, p. 59](#_ENREF_39)). Furthermore, our ‘loss’ is something of a paradox, since, not being subjects prior to our entry into the symbolic, we never really had what we subsequently perceive as lost, despite the fact that we build our projects around its recovery ([McGowan, 2013](#_ENREF_52); [Ruti, 2012](#_ENREF_63)). This reading enables us to see how repeated manufactured “crises” around teacher education serve to mobilise, manage, and yet keep at bay, pervasive social anxieties. Here we might think of Shulman’s ([2005](#_ENREF_64)) lament with regard to teacher education’s lack of a “signature pedagogy”, or the oft-cited comparisons between education and medicine, which highlight the former’s lack of a cumulative, foundational body of evidence-based knowledge. In this reading, awareness of teacher education’s lack of secure foundations contributes to a sense of anxiety in the profession. The remedy in the face of this anxiety is to develop and deploy codified and certified forms of professional knowledge as a protective buttress to ward off doubt, absence and lack.

However, another reading of anxiety is possible, emphasizing not so much its genesis in perceptions of lack in relation to professional knowledge or the absence of social authority, but the latter’s intrusive presence as one of the key sources of anxiety among teachers and teacher educators. According to this perspective, we experience anxiety not as a result of the absence of authority but when ‘social authority appears nonlacking and ubiquitous, never allowing the subject space to desire’ ([McGowan, 2013, p. 113](#_ENREF_52)). In this reading, the policy pandemic to which teacher education has been subjected can be seen as a cause, as well as a consequence, of anxiety. Regardless, however, of whether we focus on absence itself, or its consequence in the form of the overwhelming and intrusive presence of authority-as-policy, the critical issue is how we respond to absence or loss.

Here we would argue that, in contrast to the (non)politics of perpetual crisis management, recognition of loss offers the starting point for a politics that acknowledges, and even enjoys, what we do not have ([McGowan, 2013](#_ENREF_52)), in the sense that it resists the call to embrace utopian reform. Recognition of loss also provides the basis for an ethics of singularity that sees the infusion of desire and passion as offering potential openings to the sublime and singular, as opposed to the standard and routine, in teaching ([M. Clarke & Moore, 2013](#_ENREF_16)). Such an ethics is inherently and necessarily open-ended; it is ‘an ethics that is not dictated by the instrumentalist imperatives of utility, but rather assesses the value of things… on the basis of their proximity (or loyalty) to the Thing’ ([Ruti, 2012, p. 152](#_ENREF_63)), where the latter is understood as a sovereign but always inaccessible good, a locus of indeterminacy associated with ‘the power of language to articulate a pure potentiality-for-meaning’ ([Boothby, 1991, p. 241](#_ENREF_8)).

Teacher education that embraces an open-ended ethics makes more productive use of anxiety by nurturing resistance to consensually driven reforms and a willingness to entertain ‘real’ educational options.

***Antagonism and consensus: Legitimizing dissent***

In order to confront the contemporary depoliticising policy consensus and advocate for a properly political view of education based on genuine alternatives, teacher education might turn to Chantal Mouffe’s ([2000](#_ENREF_55), [2005](#_ENREF_56), [2013](#_ENREF_57)) reconsideration of the political as agonistic pluralism. Mouffe (2013) argues for the recognition of the ‘hegemonic’ nature of every kind of social order—neo-liberal or otherwise—and for envisioning society as the product of ‘hegemonic practices’ directed at the articulation of social institutions and the establishment of order ‘in a context of contingency’ (p. 2). As such, every order (and every attempt at consensus) is the expression of a particular configuration of power relations; things could be otherwise and ‘every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities’ (p. 2). The possibility of challenge by counter-hegemonic forces is ever present. This suggests that antagonism is inherent to all societies. The political, according to Mouffe, refers to this aspect of antagonism that can take various forms and cannot be eliminated or overcome. ‘Proper political questions,’ she writes, ‘always involve decisions that require making a choice between conflicting alternatives’ (p. 3).

While the political reveals a society’s difference to itself ([Rancière, 2010](#_ENREF_61)), politics is that ‘ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seeks to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions which are always potentially conflicting, since they are affected by the dimension of the political’ (Mouffe, 2013, p. 2-3). The challenge is how to establish an us/them distinction, which for Mouffe is constitutive of politics, in a way that is compatible with the recognition of pluralism. The aim of democratic politics is to transform antagonism (struggle between enemies) into agonism (struggle among adversaries) (p. 7). Agonistic politics asserts that all ideas deserve to be heard and defended. So while adversaries may disagree vehemently about what constitutes a good education or the good of education, both agree in the importance of ‘the agonistic struggle’ as the very condition of a living democracy within and beyond the profession.

The education of teachers as political adversaries, in Mouffe’s (2013) terms, involves a recognition of teacher education as a form of critical educational practice that keeps agonism alive, fomenting dissensus and bringing to the fore alternatives repressed by the hegemony. The preparation of teachers as ‘teacher citizens,’ ([Grumet, 2010, p. 71](#_ENREF_38)), capable and legitimate participants in public discussion about education and policy involves revitalizing an understanding of the political—the difference between moral and political disputes, and power as constitutive of society, educational purpose and teacher identities; cultivating political emotions such as anger at injustice as well as an appreciation of the cultural politics of emotion; and finally, developing an awareness of the historical and contemporary political projects of the “left” and “right” as they have played out in the field of education and in a range of historical contexts ([Ruitenberg, 2009](#_ENREF_62)).

The intent here is not to dictate specific political identities for teachers: agonism does not take place between actors with already established identities but constitutes teachers’ identities. The hope is that teachers, as individuals and in a range of collectives, may learn to exchange ideas, opinions and arguments, form strategic alliances (e.g., with other professions), engage in the play of antagonism, and exercise dissent both within and beyond the profession, when they see fit. There are limits to agonism, however. It is not enough to merely unsettle things; there comes a moment when new institutions and forms of power need to be established— ‘the necessary moment of closure’ (Mouffe, 2013, p. 15). While ethical discourse (within the field of education) might be able to avoid this moment, political discourse cannot. Acknowledging the constitutive character of social division, Mouffe (2013) argues against the possibility of a final reconciliation between adversaries. The multiplicity that is the people, or indeed the profession, must remain divided rather than just simply multiple.

Teacher education characterized by antagonism and consensus increases opportunities for teachers to build and refine their own arts of existence in a climate of ‘open potentiality’ ([Colebrook, 2008, p. 111](#_ENREF_19)).

***(Im)potentiality: Reconsidering ‘teacher development’***

The imperative that teachers ‘reach their potential’ and yet maintain ‘the capacity to continue developing’ in the direction outlined by policy constitutes a condition of unfreedom for teachers. Teachers’ professional development becomes the realization of some predetermined object of policy—the teacher (profile)—that must be actualized. What is lost in this increasing normalization is ‘the open potentiality from which the speaking, self-constituting [subject] will emerge’ (Colebrook, 2008, p. 111). Teachers have little say in what teaching means in public discourse because that has already been decided: instrumentally cast, as we have noted above, as epiphenomenal to the economy and co-opted in the promotion of social discipline and national identity. Caught in both a politics and an ontology of substance—what (already) is—teachers and teaching are denied ‘a politics of potentiality: a future of open, unimpeded becoming’ (p. 112).

Georgio Agamben’s theorization of ‘existing potentiality’ allows us to understand what is at stake in the politics of contemporary policy (1999, p. 179). ‘Existing potentiality’ refers to the potential of someone who has knowledge or ability of some kind; as such, she or he does not have to undergo some change in order to fulfill her or his potential. The teacher already has knowledge and ability, ‘on the basis of which he can also not bring his knowledge into actuality’ by not instructing, for example (p. 179). The mode of existence of potentiality is therefore the potential to not-do, the potential not to pass into actuality which Agamben terms ‘impotentiality’ (1999, p. 183). He concludes that human faculty is ‘the presence of an absence’ and potentiality is the mode of existence of this privation (p. 179).

‘[T]o become potential,’ therefore, teachers must be in relation to their own incapacity; they must be capable of their own impotentiality (Agamben, 1999, p. 182). For teachers the experience of (im)potentiality might constitute a period of sustained study. Study is, for Agamben, interminable. Each book leads onto another, each new reference begins a trail to another, and as the student pursues meaning associated with other meanings, the end seems far in the distant. Those who study have to lose their stubborn attachment to particular lines of inquiry and to comforting ideas such as best practice. Paradoxically, it is through studying that the teacher is rendered stupid, melancholic, and yet free. Freedom as the rhythm of study is experienced as a shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery and loss, between agent and patient ([Lewis, 2011](#_ENREF_49)). In study the close relation between potential and (im)potential is maintained; the impotent is included alongside the potent; the law (of quality teaching or professional development) is not abolished nor is it left operative; nothing changes and yet everything changes. The result is what Agamben terms ‘a whatever being,’ a singularity that remains indistinct and unrepresentable, free from any imperative or determination to be set in advance. Potentiality, in this view, is a means without end, and without measure (Lewis, 2011).

Despite the rhetoric of potential, contemporary policy severs the relation between potentiality and impotentiality. It does so by its efforts to determine, define and represent the actuality of ‘teacher’ and ‘teaching’ via standardization. Teachers’ potential is, in this view, a means to a predetermined end; and it can be measured. Moreover, stylized neo-liberal subjects believe themselves to be capable of everything (‘I can!); they have been rendered blind not to their capacities but to his incapacities, not to what they can do but to what they cannot, or can not, do; there is no realization that they have been subjected to forces and processes over which they have lost control. Here we witness the dehumanizing tendencies of contemporary policy. While other living beings are capable of their specific potentiality, they can do this or that; only human beings are capable of their own impotentiality, that is, the capacity to not be (Agamben, 1999). The root of freedom, for Agamben, is found in ‘the abyss of potentiality’:

To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is…*to be capable of one’s own impotentiality*, to be in relation to one’s own privation. This is why freedom is freedom for both good and evil. (Agamben, 1999, p. 183; author’s emphasis)

Freedom is not so much found in the teacher’s realization of his or her capabilities but in the realization of (im)potentiality as ‘I can, I cannot;’ it is the choice that opens history to contingency, to the potential to act or to be otherwise.

Teacher education premised on choice and impotentiality cultivates an appreciation of the significant role of indecision in teachers’ educational judgment.

***Undecideability and ethics: Professing judgment***

In a world where the uncontrollable are redeemed by being rendered predictable, it is all too easy for research to be positioned as an exact science, capable of making clear and unambivalent predictions about practice. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear teachers, as well as researchers and policy-makers, making easy assertions along the lines of ‘research tells us…’ or ‘research clearly shows…’ in order to justify a particular decision or line of reasoning about practice. Such expressions betray a sense that a single unbroken line exists between research issues, questions, data, evidence and implications when the relationships among these entities are more akin to a tangled web of partial connections. Pre-service and novice teachers, prone to ‘this incredible need to believe’ ([Phelan, 2013](#_ENREF_59)), are particularly vulnerable in this regard as they seek secure and reliable knowledge which might provide the basis for predictable outcomes as a consequence of their pedagogical and professional decisions: hence, ‘it is important that students preparing for teaching learn about the research process and how easily it leads to error rather than truth. They need to respect research but be acutely aware of its limitations’ ([Snook, O'Neill, Clark, O'Neill, & Openshaw, 2009, p. 105](#_ENREF_67)). Like teaching, research is a much about art as it is about science.

This quest for certitude is further fomented by the combined forces of neoliberal policy proliferation and audit culture’s risk management strategies, which both serve to undermine and work against the critically informed yet creative judgment of teachers by ring-fencing decision-making within polices, protocols, rules and guidelines. To take just two examples, we will briefly discuss prescriptive curricula and professional teacher standards, both of which reflect neoliberalism’s deep-seated distrust of professionalism in general and of teachers in particular ([Connell, 2009, p. 217](#_ENREF_20)).

Increasingly the norm across a range of international jurisdictions, national and state curricula are intended to delineate and define a linear progression through various domains of knowledge that students will plot over the school years. They are also designed to be ‘teacher proof’ in a misguided belief that this will ensure that learning is uniform for all students and that central curriculum writers know better than teachers what it is that students should learn. Yet in so doing, they remove teachers’ professional autonomy and undermine their exercise of judgment through this act of prescription. Teaching is thus reduced to a technical rather than an ethical, critical or creative act.

Meanwhile, teachers’ professional autonomy and agency, including their scope for exercising ethical professional judgment has been further eroded by professional standards that seek to map and enumerate the work of teachers, define effective teaching, and articulate precisely what constitutes teacher quality. To quote from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) *National Professional Standards for Teachers* documentation:

The National Professional Standards for Teachers are a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality. They define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21st century schools that will improve educational outcomes for students. The Standards do this by providing a framework which makes clear the knowledge, practice and professional engagement required across teachers’ careers. They present a common understanding and language for discourse between teachers, teacher educators, teacher organisations, professional associations and the public ([Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011, p. 2](#_ENREF_4)).

Seen in a certain light, such standards can be seen as an attempt to make teaching and its evaluation more transparent, predictable and efficient – in a word, to bring greater certitude to the teaching profession. Yet, such certitude can also be read as another instance of the ‘specious clarity’ identified by MacLure (2010, p. 278) as part of neoliberalism and audit culture; that is, promoting certitude works as a strategy for bringing a sense of predictability to a fundamentally uncontrollable world and disavowing the inevitable contingency of human life.

In resisting the urge to certitude Derrida’s notion of the aporia offers a useful counterpoint. Derived from the Greek term referring to a situation without (*a-*) a ‘way out’ (*poros*), Derrida applies this notion of the aporia to the decision, specifically to the double-bind of a situation where one must make a decision yet do not *know* what to do ([Smith, 2005, p. 80](#_ENREF_65)). Indeed for a decision to truly be an ethical or just decision, as opposed to the mere application of an established protocol or procedure, it must meet three conditions ([Derrida, 1992](#_ENREF_28)). First, it must involve a moment of genuine undecidability. Second, and paradoxically, the decision must take some account of the rule or the law at the same time as it brackets, suspends or transgresses it, for without this reference it can make no claim to being just or ethical. Third, the ethical or just decision must be made in response to a particular urgent situation without recourse or opportunity to seek full information ([Smith, 2005, pp. 80-81](#_ENREF_65)). Translated into the work of teachers, the aporia captures something of ‘the undecideable moments in which the teaching subject is faced with an irreconcilable yet urgent decision’ ([Janzen, 2013, p. 382](#_ENREF_43)). It is these moments, requiring judgment without guidelines or guarantees, which call forth and constitute the ethical dimensions of teaching. This ethical dimension to teaching cannot be prescribed in terms of a checklist or instilled though correct training: ‘There is no one uniform or generic model of the ethical teacher who comes in many forms, reflective of the uniqueness of individuals’ ([Campbell, 2003, p. 140](#_ENREF_12)). Indeed, prescriptive, technicist approaches to teaching and teacher education are, if anything, likely to impede a sense of ethical agency by encouraging a reliance on the application of protocols and rules at the expense of the exercise, and hence development of, ethical judgment.

Theorizing with Lacan, Mouffe, Agamben or Derrida carries no guarantees. We believe, however, that by acknowledging the complexities, ambiguities, contradictions and aporias of social reality, such theorizing can fuel conversation, contemplation and critique thereby unsettling the phantoms of modernity in teacher education. Loosening the hegemonic grip of the instrumental-consensual discursive duopoly and preserving the possibility of newness in teacher education require the kind of negative thinking that such theorizing can offer.

**New Directions for Teacher Education: The Power of Negative Thinking**

We have argued that the depoliticisation of teacher education constitutes a retreat to modernity and its penchant for (epistemic) certainty, (ahistorical) predictability and (centralized) control. We have advocated for the reanimating of teaching and teacher education as political and ethical activities, and for an intellectually autonomous teaching subject, via the work of several contemporary theorists. Underlying our argument is the recognition that teacher education may have reached a point where symbols such as standards, indicators, and outcomes no longer represent the object—education—but have *become* the object. ‘When this occurs,’ writes Britzman ([2003, p. 114](#_ENREF_9)), ‘perceptions of the world become more and more literal and aggressive, and the capacity for thinkers to think is attacked’. In her theorization of this stasis, Diane Coole (2000) uses the notion of the positive to refer to ‘those institutions – language, subjectivity, metaphysics, positivist knowledge as well as a mode of producing state structures, social stratifications, modern culture – that have become reified, ossified, totalized. The positive is the given; what has presence’ ([Coole, 2000, p. 10](#_ENREF_21)). Such positive structures – we might think here of ‘best practice’, ‘evidence based policy’ or ‘professional teacher standards’ – tend not to question their own grounding but instead are typically taken as the natural order of things. The negative, on the other hand, is that which unsettles the comfortable stance of the given order of things. Lack is disturbed by fantasy; consensus is disrupted by dissensus; potential is recast as impotential; and decision is rendered ethical by the very moment of indecision.

Yet in talking about negativity we inevitably run the risk of reifying and positivizing it – that is of turning it into another form of the positive – rather than seeing it as essentially *generative*, ‘a creative-destructive force that engenders as well as ruins positive forms’ ([Coole, 2000, p. 6](#_ENREF_21)). In this sense, rather than seeing the negative as the mirror image of the positive, ‘negativity must be implicated in the positive: at that place where positive and negative, form and excess, reason and its other, are imbricated; where they meet and clash or incite one another’ ([Coole, 2000, p. 6](#_ENREF_21)). Such mutual imbrication is a key point in our overall argument: that neither the positive nor the negative is sufficient; new thinking and new directions in and for teacher education require their mutual interplay. Recognizing and tarrying with negativity is, in this sense, a political practice involving ‘a difficult and ongoing engagement along that porous and unstable line where positive and negative meet’ ([Coole, 2000, p. 234](#_ENREF_21)); far from formulaic, it is a mode of intervention that is inevitably shaped by, but by the same token capable of being responsive to, historical circumstance.

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