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**Dialectics and dilemmas: Psychosocial dimensions of ability grouping policy**

**Introduction**

This paper examines what I am calling the dialectics and dilemmas inhering in the complex and contradictory relationship between policy priorities of quality and equity, and practices of ability grouping, in Australian schooling. More specifically, I draw on Lacanian theory, as a ‘philosophy of psychoanalysis’ from which insights into society and culture may be derived ([Gunder & Hillier, 2009, p. 14](#_ENREF_41)), to explore the tensions between conscious and unconscious, and between symbolic and imaginary, dimensions of ability grouping policy. This is particularly important in the Australian education policy context where ability grouping remains a policy hiatus in contrast to the explicit policy goals of quality and equity. I explore the dialectics and dilemmas between these dimensions at both a macro, social level of policy and at the micro, psychological level of the teacher as a policy *worker* ([Ozga, 2000](#_ENREF_58)),or policy *actor* ([Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012](#_ENREF_5)), exploring the latter through a vignette of one pre-service teacher grappling with issues of ability grouping in schools and classrooms. I argue that the tensions between the policy goals of equity and quality, and the policy-as-practice phenomena of ability grouping, place teachers in an invidious position, insofar as expectations to advocate and operationalize ability grouping practices may well conflict with personal and professional beliefs about quality or commitments to equity. In other words, the symbolic requirements of fulfilling the mandate of being ‘the good teacher’ may well be at odds with the imaginary identifications of teachers as caring professionals who value collaboration over competition.

The terms ‘dialectics’ and ‘dilemmas’ intentionally highlight the irreducible complexity of social reality. They are intended to signal a view of the social as a realm characterized by tensions and contradictions, comprising elements that need to be understood relationally rather than in isolation. But my use of the term dialectics also makes reference to “its conceptual richness as a heuristic device” ([Hammer & McLaren, 1991, p. 23](#_ENREF_42)), that is, to dialectics as a method ([Sherman, 1976](#_ENREF_67)), involving the interrogation of dualistic or hierarchical relations. More specifically, the term dialectics signals a number of commitments, including:

* An emphasis on the interconnectedness of phenomena such that no object or event can be adequately understood in isolation from the totality of the social reality of which it forms a part
* A retroversive, rather than linear, orientation to time and causality that recognizes how understandings of the past are continuously shaped by, and in turn shape, the unfolding present ([Rothenberg, 2010](#_ENREF_60)), in a way that underlines the contingent, rather than the necessary, nature of history ([Dean, 1994](#_ENREF_25))
* An acknowledgement of the antagonistic, yet mutually interdependent, relationship of opposites that rely on each other for their self-definition ([Laclau & Mouffe, 2001](#_ENREF_48))
* A perspective on change that recognizes how discontinuities arise as quantitative changes metamorphose into qualitative transformations; that sees negation as the necessary condition for creation; and that acknowledges the power of the double negation[[1]](#footnote-1), or the negation of negation, to foment novel outcomes rather than to represent an affirmation of, or signal a return to, an original status quo ([Grant, 2011](#_ENREF_38); [Hammer & McLaren, 1991](#_ENREF_42); [Rothenberg, 2010](#_ENREF_60); [Sherman, 1976](#_ENREF_67); [Vighi, 2010](#_ENREF_76); Žižek, 2006, 2012).

A dialectical approach has at least the potential, then, to “capture the historically-mediated totality in its dynamic, web-like complexity”, whilst simultaneously recognizing “that theory cannot be the same as the real in its reified material form, otherwise there would be no scope for criticism” ([Coole, 2000, p. 72](#_ENREF_22)). Among policy theorists and analysts*,* approaches that recognize the complexities, ambiguities, contradictions and aporias of social reality, and hence of policy, have considerable currency (e.g. [Ball, 1994](#_ENREF_3); [Simons, Olssen, & Peters, 2009](#_ENREF_68)). By contrast, policy makers oftenseem wedded to a rationalist worldview that views policy as wholly amenable to the forces of human reason, that ignores or marginalizes inconvenient factors like complexity, desire and affect ([Stronach, 2010](#_ENREF_71)), and that often fails to take account of how strategies consciously intended to promote particular policy goals may unconsciously, or unintentionally, undermine these policy goals. The complex relationship between the policy goals of excellence, or quality, and equity and their complex co-imbrications with practices of ability grouping[[2]](#footnote-2) is one instance of this latter tendency.

**Quality, equity and ability grouping in Australia**

In the Australian context, the first goal of the *Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians*, issued on behalf of all state and federal ministers of education, states that “Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence” ([Ministerial Committee on Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 2008, p. 7](#_ENREF_52)). Similarly, the Australian labor federal government’s signature policy document, *Quality education: The case for an education revolution in our schools*, argues that “we must simultaneously deliver equity and excellence in our schools” ([Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p. 25](#_ENREF_19)). However, the latter document also recognizes that Australia’s achievements in relation to excellence are not matched by its achievements in terms of equity – “Australia has too long a ‘tail’ of underperformance linked to disadvantage” ([Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p. 11](#_ENREF_19)) – suggesting that the relationship between equity and quality is perhaps not as straightforward, and not as amenable to rational control, as the statements of policy makers might suggest.

This is where the perennially contentious practice of ability grouping – a practice reflecting “an abiding impulse in schools and school systems to separate one group from another” ([Thomas, 2013, p. 64](#_ENREF_73)) – comes into the picture. Critically, for the purposes of this paper, ability grouping is an issue that, in Australia, remains something of a policy hiatus. This contrasts with England, for example, where ability grouping in the form of setting in secondary schools, particularly in English, Mathematics and Languages, is expected unless a school puts forward a strong counter-rationale ([Department for Education and Employment, 1997](#_ENREF_26); [Gillard, 2009](#_ENREF_34)). In this sense, Australian education policy seems oblivious to the significant body of research on the issue of ability grouping and the implications of this research for the touchstone policy goals of quality and equity. For though its proponents claim that it enables more effective, efficient and targeted teaching ([e.g. Kulikand & Kulik, 1987](#_ENREF_47)), it has also been identified as inimical to the twin policy goals of equity and quality. In the words of the OECD, “the existence of lower level tracks and streams fuels a vicious cycle in the expectations of teachers and students” ([Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2012, p. 58](#_ENREF_57)). Research suggests that ability grouping brings no overall gains to the system ([Blatchford, Hallam, Ireson, Kutnick, & with Creech, 2008](#_ENREF_10); [Ireson & Hallam, 2001](#_ENREF_44)), and that students from already marginalized groups are disproportionately disadvantaged by ability grouping practices ([Boaler, 2005](#_ENREF_11); [Gillborn & Youdell, 2000](#_ENREF_35)). In this sense, ability grouping can be seen as a reflection of a wider set of social and cultural prejudices. As Rose puts it, “we live with a set of cultural assumptions that attribute low intelligence to entire categories of work and to the people who do the work, often poor people, people of color, and immigrants” ([Rose, 2008, p. 31](#_ENREF_59)). Viewed in this light, the debates surrounding ability grouping can be read as a distillation of tensions within the relationship between quality and equity in education, reflected in “the age-old view that equity automatically means a dilution of quality ([Kenway, 2013, p. 298](#_ENREF_45)), as well as a manifestation of debates about the extent to which education serves as technology of social reproduction as opposed to a vehicle of social opportunity.

The unintentional, ‘unsanctioned’ or ‘unconscious’ growth of ability grouping practices in Australian education also raises questions of the relationship between policy and practice. Specifically, we usually think of policy as something that leads to practice. But as Ball notes in the context of the resurgence of selective grammar schools in the UK from the 1980s onwards, a hiatus in explicit policy can allow practice to burgeon, thus in effect becoming policy by default ([Ball, 1990, p. 30](#_ENREF_2); [see also Benn, 2011](#_ENREF_7)). My argument is that something similar is happening in relation to ability grouping in schools in Australia. Specifically, in the absence of an informed, explicit and coherent policy approach to ability grouping, educational practices enacted in response to policies intended to promote quality – policies which position schools, teachers and students as direct competitors in an education marketplace ([Baltodano, 2012](#_ENREF_6); [Davies & Bansel, 2007](#_ENREF_24); [Doherty, 2007](#_ENREF_27)) – are creating *de facto* policy that is inimical to the goal of equity. The dialectic between quality and equity and between policy and practice is thus characterized by contradiction.

Ability grouping practices can thus be seen as embodying the ‘social’ ([Frosh & Baraitser, 2008](#_ENREF_32)), ‘trans-individual’ ([Hook, 2008](#_ENREF_43)), or ‘political’ unconscious of neoliberal education policy, in the sense of representing “a contingent effect of power relations and harms that have not been tended to” ([McAfee, 2008, p. 12](#_ENREF_51)). As a result, the consequences of ability grouping in relation to the policy goals of equity and quality, and the extent to which it may be undermining these policies, remain beyond scrutiny and debate – in this sense, they remain unconscious due to the federal and state government policy silence in relation to the issue. This places additional pressure and responsibility onto the teacher as policy worker, as we will see in the vignette in the latter part of the paper.

In Lacanian terms, we might describe this positioning as one where the requirements of fulfilling the symbolic mandate of being a competent teacher, as defined in neoliberal policy terms, are in direct conflict the professional image teachers may wish to present to themselves and others, i.e. as a manifestation of the tension between *symbolic* and *imaginary* identification ([Moore, 2004](#_ENREF_53); Žižek, 1989). But how do the therapeutic discourses of psychoanalysis relate to the discourses – whether conceived in more traditional humanistic terms as having intrinsic value *or* in neoliberal economic terms as having instrumental value ([Griffiths, 2012](#_ENREF_40)) – of education and education policy?

**Toward a psychoanalytic reading of education**

In a number of senses, education and psychoanalytic theory may seem strange bedfellows. After all, education is public, institutional and mandatory whereas psychoanalysis is private, personal and elective. Yet a considerable amount of recent work in political and social theory ([Daly, 1999](#_ENREF_23); [Glynos & Howarth, 2007](#_ENREF_36); [Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008](#_ENREF_37); [Lapping, 2011](#_ENREF_49); [Rothenberg, 2010](#_ENREF_60); [Stavrakakis, 1999](#_ENREF_69), [2007](#_ENREF_70); Žižek, 1997, 2002), much of it deploying the descriptor, psychosocial studies ([Frosh, 2010](#_ENREF_31); [Frosh & Baraitser, 2008](#_ENREF_32); [Moore, 2006](#_ENREF_54)), takes psychoanalytic theory beyond the analytic encounter and into the realm of cultural, social and political analysis. As Hook argues, such work addresses “the need to connect questions of a trans-individual unconscious – and indeed of libidinal economy – to theoretical, discursive and empirical analyses of how power and ideology function in the public realm today” ([Hook, 2008, p. 404](#_ENREF_43)). Further common ground between psychoanalysis and education is suggested by Freud’s ([1937](#_ENREF_30)) characterization of educating and psychoanalyzing (along with governing, surely the domain of policy) as ‘impossible professions’ ([Bibby, 2011](#_ENREF_8); [Britzman, 2009](#_ENREF_15), [2011](#_ENREF_16)). Moreover, despite the current policy emphasis on systemic aspects of education, such as national curricula, national and international testing regimes, and national professional teacher standards, the Latin root of education, *educere*, implies a bringing out or leading forth ([Thomas, 2013, p. 3](#_ENREF_73)). This suggests an emphasis on process and on interpersonal relations, as well as an ongoing dialectic, in the sense of an unceasing yet unresolved tension, between inner and outer. Education thus understood, as an ongoing and interpersonally mediated process of ‘bringing out’, does not seem so far from Freud’s characterization of psychoanalysis as an ongoing project of making the unconscious conscious ([Ruti, 2009, p. 78](#_ENREF_62)) or as a continual search for lost knowledge ([Verhaeghe, 1996, p. 23](#_ENREF_75)).

For psychoanalysis, human being can be understood as a straddling and moving between the conscious and unconscious realms of existence. One way of thinking about the contrast between unconscious and conscious being is in temporal terms. That is, we can see the unconscious as a mode that has a profound tendency to resist change, in contrast to linear stream of unfolding and becoming that characterizes consciousness. The unconscious thus compels return and repetition in terms dictated by sedimented deposits or residues of experience, even when these run counter to our wishes or our interests. In other words, “to the extent that the unconscious is committed to preserving the past – even when this past is not what we would have chosen – in unchanging form, it can prevent our inner lives from catching up with the modifications of our external conditions” ([Ruti, 2009, p. 72](#_ENREF_62)). Of course, the present can never entirely escape the past; what is critical is *how* that influence is exercised – whether rigidly, mechanically and unknowingly or flexibly, actively and knowingly. For the unconscious constantly exerts pressure on the conscious; recognizing and ‘listening’ to this pressure helps resist repeated submission to stultifying impulses and may enable us to identify hitherto unrecognized possibilities for making ourselves and the world richer and more complex. Implicit in this reading, the unconscious is not so much “a remote region where archaic memory traces are lodged, or where repressed elements of the past are safely tucked away, but… an amorphous wellspring of elemental potentialities” ([Ruti, 2009, pp. 75-76](#_ENREF_62)). That is to say, the unconscious, which is better conceived as a process rather than as a receptacle ([Boothby, 1991, p. 84](#_ENREF_12)), offers a potential ongoing source for the development of increasingly more complex and nuanced reading of ourselves, of others and of the world.

The unceasing and open-ended nature of the ongoing dialectic between the conscious and unconscious realms of existence means that we can never know ourselves or govern our lives completely – that is, we can never achieve complete, but only constrained and partial, agency. Any achievements we make in terms of knowing, let alone controlling, the world and ourselves are necessarily provisional and tentative. Recognition of our ‘lacking’ status with regard to knowledge, control and agency is anxiety provoking. One of the key insights of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is to identify a central strategy we employ to ward off the anxiety provoked by provisionality and uncertainty. This strategy involves the deployment of fantasies ([Nusselder, 2012](#_ENREF_56); Žižek, 1997). Such fantasies have a protective function, both in relation to the anxiety provoked by the uncertainty and contingency of our existence, and in relation to the fundamental, or ontological, ‘lack’ that accompanies our transition to language and the symbolic – a transition which entails eternal debarment from primeval jouissance and which consequently reveals a void at the heart of human being that we spend the rest of our lives trying to fill through the unstaunchable workings of desire ([Eagleton, 2001](#_ENREF_28)). Fantasies fulfill this protective role – this defensive function – by offering up illusory harmonious and wholesome readings of the world, and of ourselves, that airbrush out the complex and contradictory aspects of reality and that delete, or at least defang, the disturbing details of our existence. One of the goals of psychosocial theory is to engage and come to terms with the void papered over by such fantasies in order to ‘traverse’ them and develop more complex and reflexive understandings of ourselves and the world at both the individual and the societal level – again, something which also seems an appropriate aim for education.

It might be objected that the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy as something that structures reality (Žižek, 1989, 1997) suggests the possibility of a non-fantasmatic ‘true’ version of reality. However, in Lacanian theory we are debarred from direct, unmediated access to ‘truth’[[3]](#footnote-3), in the sense of a one-to-one correspondence between the word and the world. So given the impossibility of unmediated access to reality, the most useful distinction is not that between ‘true’ and ‘false’ fantasmatic versions of reality but between narcissistic fantasies that narrow and restrict possibilities and creative fantasies that enlarge and enhance them – between those conducive to stasis and those conducive to growth and development ([Ruti, 2009, p. 100](#_ENREF_62)).

A key route to enriching, growth-oriented fantasy is opened up by the creative possibilities of the signifier with its links to what was described above as the rich wellspring of potentialities inhering in the unconscious. This claim on behalf of the signifier may seem perverse, given that no signifier can offer self-sufficient meaning, since each is reliant on differences within and across the signifying chain. For this means that the subject is ultimately determined by the differences constituting the system of signifiers into which it is subsumed, a system in which “there is always one signifier too few to definitively determine the signified” (Van Haute, 2002, p. 109), despite our belief that our existence takes shape from the signifiers to which we are attached and through which we project an imaginary and identificatory positivity. Yet although the symbolic characterized by absence, difference and deferral, and despite it being the hegemonic realm of the dominant Other and of the Law, embodying normative rules and restrictive conventions, its powers of subjectification are never complete while its lack of full presence is at the same time a source of potential creativity. How is this so, given that the Lacanian subject mired in imaginary fantasies whilst at the same time subject to the relentless demands of the symbolic other?

On the one hand, the ‘sovereignty of the symbolic’ ([Eagleton, 2008](#_ENREF_29)) is challenged by the way that “what the subject receives from the symbolic is always interrupted and broken up under the influence of the imaginary” ([Boothby, 1991, p. 83](#_ENREF_12)). Moreover, this subject of the unconscious continually tries to recapture an (illusory) sense of wholeness through imaginary fantasies that block access to the unconscious ([Van Haute, 2002](#_ENREF_74)). Yet on the other hand, the symbolic system’s own inherently infinite, porous and ambiguous nature means that it can be pitted – “always tentatively and provisionally” ([Ruti, 2009, p. 111](#_ENREF_62)) – against itself, in the name of openness to contingency, complexity, criticality and creativity.

To summarise the argument so far, I have noted how psychic life involves the interplay of conscious and unconscious, as well as symbolic and imaginary, dimensions. Following Ruti and others, I noted how the unconscious can be both the cause of psychic blockage and stasis, as well as a source of creative energy, with the latter becoming increasingly likely the more attuned we become to the workings and messages of the unconscious. I also outlined how the lack of knowledge, control and agency entailed by our unconscious minds, combined with the fundamental lack accruing as a result of our passage into the realm of the symbolic register of language – a register whose underlying logic is the absence of its referents, whose social and unconscious dimensions escape our control and whose regulatory mechanisms precede and exceed our individual existence – encourages the formulation of fantasies in the form of comforting and reassuring narcissistic narratives that airbrush reality and occlude the void at the core of our being. Such protective fantasies are easily recognized within individual lives; but at the social level of policy too “one might identify the defensive procedures of a discourse, questioning how it operates a particular modality of negation” (Hook, 2008, p. 400). For instance, the policy maker’s fantasy of every Australian school being a great school ([Garrett & Bird, 2011](#_ENREF_33)), serves to disavow the mutually constitutive relationship of advantage and disadvantage ([Kenway, 2013](#_ENREF_45)) and to deny the way existing inequalities in Australia’s education system are exacerbated by the market reforms masquerading as their solution ([Connell, 2013](#_ENREF_21)).

On a more positive note, I have argued, again following Ruti and others, that as well as offering illusory, simplified and reductive versions of the present, the imaginary can be the source of creative envisioning of alternative futures, particularly when, rather than denying and seeking to paper it over, lack is embraced as the source and condition of creativity ([Ruti, 2009, pp. 101-102](#_ENREF_62)). Likewise, I have pointed out how the symbolic, in addition to representing the hegemonic forces of law, convention and tradition, can be a source of criticality and resistance through the creative appropriation and reinterpretation of the signifier.

**Psychoanalytic philosophy and neoliberal education policy**

We have traveled quite some distance from the introductory discussion of education policy issues of equity, quality and practices of ability grouping; and though readers may have been making links between the outline of issues in psychoanalysis – such as the prevalence of fantasy – and education policy and practice issues it is now time to make the connections explicit.

I began by highlighting the rationalist nature of education policy, remarking on the way it tends to adopt a linear approach to policy, involving the articulation of policy goals – which is at the same time the identification of policy problems – leading to the promulgation of policy solutions and the deployment of policy tools. I noted how a manifestation of this approach in relation to the ‘touchstone’ policy aims of recent education policy, equity and quality, has been to focus on choice – in concert with high stakes testing and public accountability mechanisms – as a key policy tool to address these concerns. We also saw how the promotion of choice in education, in Australia as elsewhere, has fed the growth of ability grouping practices in schools and classrooms, with potentially negative consequences for the equity agenda.

In psychoanalytic terms, we can read neoliberalism’s rationalist policy predilection for technically conceived and universally applied, one-size-fits-all solutions, such as choice, high stakes testing and public accountability technologies, as manifestations of the symbolic in its hegemonic, regulatory mode. These solutions are often rationally legitimated though statistical reasoning, as part of an ‘evidence based’ policy by numbers approach ([Grek, 2009](#_ENREF_39); [Lingard, 2010](#_ENREF_50)). This regulatory orientation is also evident in the “spurious absolutism” ([Alexander, 2008, p. 31](#_ENREF_1)) of the terms, such as ‘success’, ‘failure’, ‘effective’, ‘quality’, and ‘standards’, that neoliberal discourse deploys and relies upon to manage and order the world of education schools. Yet what the rationalist, solution-oriented approach to policy, characteristic of neoliberalism, misses is the sterility of rationality without at least a dose of irrationality ([Ruti, 2009, p. 138](#_ENREF_62)). That is, it fails to see that without some way of talking about passion, purpose and meaning in education, it is all too easy to mistake ‘mindless technique’ for ‘considered educational act’ ([Alexander, 2008, p. 30](#_ENREF_1); [Biesta, 2010](#_ENREF_9)). It is also blind to its own reliance on simplistic and illusory fantasies of reconciling equity and quality, not recognizing that the very tools it employs to achieve these policy goals are inimical to achieving equity ([Savage, 2011](#_ENREF_65); [Savage, Sellar, & Gorur, 2013](#_ENREF_66)) and can only be deemed to promote quality if the latter is conceived in narrow, test-performance terms. Caught between this hyper-rational symbolic straightjacketing and its imaginary fantasmatic illusions, we might frame neoliberalism’s approach to policy as captive to a sort of “‘torsion’ or spin that colors/distorts the shape of our universe” and that leads to a world of “validity without meaning” ([Santner, 2001, p. 39](#_ENREF_64)). This is a world in which the conscious aims and unconscious consequences of policy remain at odds, incapable of engaging in dialogue with each other. It is a world *legitimated* by an ethics of public accountability, *governed* by reified forms of symbolic regulation, in which elements – schools, teachers, students – have no positive value in themselves but only by virtue of their differences in terms of quantifiable test scores ([Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011](#_ENREF_46)) and *inspired* by an illusory fantasy of social harmony and political consensus ([Clarke, 2012a](#_ENREF_17), [2012b](#_ENREF_18)). Within this world, teachers are expected to conform and comply with neoliberalism’s performativity requirements ([Ball, 2003](#_ENREF_4)) – or to depart the profession, as many do. This places them in an often invidious position where the symbolic identity requirements of being a teacher in alignment with the ethics of public accountability for test results may well be at odds with teachers’ imaginary identities as caring or collaborative professionals. In order to explore these tensions and consider possibilities in terms of managing subjectivity and conduct, the following section provides a vignette of a novice teacher grappling with issues of ability grouping in schools.

**Brenda’s journey: Dialectics and dilemmas of ability grouping policy**

Against this policy and theoretical background, this section draws on data from an ongoing study at the University of New South Wales, exploring pre-service teachers’ views on and responses to ability grouping practices in Australian schools. The study, *The shaping of subjects: Discourse and habitus perspectives on ability grouping structures and subjects in Australian schools*, commenced in 2012 and involves a team of three researchers conducting in-depth, semi-structured individual and group interviews with pre-service teachers, alongside analyses of national, state and school policy documents and media discussion in relation to the issue of ability grouping in Australian schools. The study seeks to understand the ways in which novice teachers, many of who have experienced and been shaped by the instrumentalist and competitive world of neoliberal education policy and practice, respond to and make sense of ability grouping practices in Australian schools. This section explores the dilemmas facing novice teachers through a vignette of one pre-service teacher.

Brenda is a novice teacher, at the start of her career, and consequently her reflections focus on the practices she experienced during her own schooling and those she experienced during her practicum placements, as part of her Education degree. It is important to note that the Education degree contained little, if anything, that would predispose students like Brenda to view ability grouping critically or negatively and much that would assert its value. On a less significant note, Brenda deploys the term ‘streaming’, which I am treating as synonymous with the term ability grouping in the following discussion.

Brenda’s own schooling had been in an academically selective high school in Sydney, something she was ambivalent about. Reflecting on the sense of competition that characterized her school, and that was reflected in official and unofficial ability grouping practices, she acknowledged, in an almost confessional register, that “I kind of benefited from them quite a lot”. Her hedging device, ‘kind of’ can be seen as a strategy to distance herself from the advantage that she enjoyed. But she also noted the drawbacks of such practices. As she put it, contrasting the social and pedagogical *costs* of ability grouping practices with the individual *benefits* she felt she enjoyed, “It would have been better for the student body, and also for learning, because I don’t think a really competitive environment is the healthiest”. By recasting ability grouping in terms of ‘a really competitive environment’, Brenda makes the connection here between ability grouping and the competitive ethos that a number of scholars have associated with neoliberal education policy environments, whereby “education becomes a zone of manufactured insecurity, with achievement through competition as the only remedy” ([Connell, 2012, p. 681](#_ENREF_20)). What we also see here is recognition of the potential conflict arising from ability grouping practices between the interests of the *individual* and the wider *social* group, between individual *achievement* and *learning*, and between those like Brenda *who benefitted* from ability grouping and, by implication, those *who* *did not*. The deployment of biological (‘student body’, ‘healthiest’) and ecological (‘environment’) metaphors illustrates how discourse is populated with meanings that may (or may not) be unconscious but that are linked by dialectical interconnections, interdependencies and potential conflicts. This initial sense of ambivalence with regard to ability grouping practices became more evident as the interview continued and she reported her conversations with other education professionals.

As noted in the introduction, recent years have witnessed a resurgence of ability grouping practices in education in response to neoliberalism’s intensification of pressure on schools to achieve superior results in high-stakes tests, such as Australia’s *National Assessment: Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) tests, in relation to other schools, which are positioned by policy, and hence perceived by many practitioners, as competitors in the education marketplace. Not surprisingly then, ability grouping was a significant topic of discussion in the schools where Brenda undertook her practicum placements during her Education degree. Referring to one of these schools, she described how “there was actually quite a hefty debate going on” around ability grouping “because they were actually talking about creating an alternative stream and basically singling kids out in Year 9 and putting them into this alternative stream because they really weren’t going to go anywhere”. While her supervisor at the school “thought it was really unsound”, in a classic instance of Britzman’s ([2003, p. 31](#_ENREF_14)) “cacophony of past and present voices” surrounding novice teachers, Brenda was also exposed to the influence of other voices at the school that emphasized “the benefits of getting kids on the same level to be able to work with each other and also the pragmatic elements of that”. The basis of this ‘pragmatic’ solution – an example of what we might describe, following Moore ([2012](#_ENREF_55)), as ‘virtuous pragmatism’, whereby pragmatism is recast as a virtue – was that “a lot of the time you don’t have time to differentiate every lesson, and there’s only so much you can do, so streaming sort of makes a middle ground”. What is interesting to note here is how, in addition to the recasting of pragmatism as a virtue in and of itself, ability grouping is similarly recast as a compromisory practice occupying “a middle ground” in contrast to its usual positioning as what we might call an ‘antagonistic’ practice, eliciting either support or opposition. Perhaps this relocation to the middle ground represented Brenda’s own ambivalence on this issue, for she was clearly influenced by each of these views, both those advocating and those critical of ability grouping, and noted that she was still struggling with ability grouping as an issue in education: “it’s still a debate which I’m sitting on the fence with”. Indeed, Brenda took the interview as an opportunity to rehearse and work through the various voices to which she had been exposed and to explore a number of possible positions on the topic of ability grouping. In terms of our earlier discussion, we might frame this part of the interview as an instance of the subject being spoken by the symbolic. We can also see it as a blending of therapeutic and educational discourses.

On the one hand, from a pro-streaming perspective, she argued, “if you pretend that people all have the same amount of ability, or the same experience, or are at the same level, you kind of do them a disservice by not recognizing or meeting the needs that you can recognize. So I think, in that way, streaming is beneficial”. Her reasoning, embodied in the syllogistic and consequential style of argument within which she frames her points, draws on the same resources of, rationality and logic, with its reliance on “spurious absolutes” (‘amount of ability’), that I noted above as characteristic of neoliberal education policy. Indeed, we might view her utterance as a discursive manifestation of the latter’s hegemonic symbolic system, characterized by its instrumentalist values and consequentialist reasoning, speaking through her as the subject.

On the other hand, from an anti-streaming perspective, she recognized the negative impact of streaming on students’ self-esteem and consequent engagement with schooling. Here Brenda bases her position in affect – something that is typically marginalised and delegitimized within the predominant rationalism of neoliberal education policy discourse. Commenting on her experience of working with students in the lower streams during her teaching placement, she engaged in an act of symbolic identification[[4]](#footnote-4), as she observed, “I think it was really humiliating for them to turn up to school every day because there was such a sense of being the stupid class”. As she put it later in the same interview, “the only problem is that it’s humiliating to realize that you have extra needs… I think that streaming practices alienate half the population from schooling”. The terms she employs – humiliation and alienation – suggest powerful forces, indicating the extent to which she has been *affect*ed by her relationship to the other (other, that is, to her own experience as a student in school) represented by the students in ‘lower’ ability groups.

Towards the end of the interview, Brenda made passing reference to an experience outside education.

Well, I, um, ok, um, outside, outside of my studies, I work a lot in cooperatives, and I have seen cooperative systems where people can work together and learn things, create things, people learn and share abilities and are able to um... I think they’re able to get engaged with things that they aren’t necessarily intrinsically interested in because they’re cooperating together to create something. Whereas if you’re competing, um, people, um, close off.

The relating of this episode came unprompted and towards the end of the interview conversation, thus appearing as something of an unplanned, ‘unconscious’ afterthought – an impression given further weight by her hesitations and false starts. Indeed, we might see this recasting move (an earlier instance of which we encountered above), whereby ability grouping and the tensions between quality and equity are expressed in terms of a tension between competition and creation on the one hand and cooperation and closing off on the other, as further evidence of the unconscious, semi-formed nature of the ideas[[5]](#footnote-5). Indeed, the hesitations and false starts might suggest the intrusion of the unconscious and to the extent that “the unconscious (Real) register is our concern” ([Rothenberg, 2010, p. 152](#_ENREF_60)), it is important to note that

[such] moments when the real penetrates the symbolic are not necessarily indicative of the failure of signification, but rather its irrepressible agility. Such moments may well be productive irregularities that serve to disband the congealed structures of meaning, thereby ensuring the symbolic order is never static ([Ruti, 2012, p. 122](#_ENREF_63)).

Clearly, the ‘cooperative’ experience clearly had powerful impact on Brenda. In this sense, it was similar to the experience of working with the students relegated to ‘lower’ ability groups, which provoked a sense of outrage at the differential treatment to which such students were subject. But in this instance, by providing a counter-example, in which differences are an asset and a source of strength, rather than something to be overcome by dividing and arranging people into supposedly homogenous ability groups, the experience and the feelings it evoked offered a potential wellspring of inspiration. But perhaps most significantly, in relation to the paper’s arguments about the potentially creative role of dialectic and of the signifier, and the way ‘productive irregularities’ may ‘serve to disband congealed structures of meaning’, this counter example offers an instance of the productive potential of dialectic. This potential is literally embodied in the juxtapositioning of the mutually negating and antagonistic concepts, ‘competition’ and ‘cooperation’, as part of an ongoing engagement with the policy and practice dilemma of ability grouping. In contrast to the rationalist debate we witnessed above as Brenda worked through the various voices to which she had been exposed in the staffroom, we might describe such occurrences as expressions of the

hidden components of the self [that] do not necessarily reveal themselves according to the logic of commonsense, but rather express themselves in the tension of our conflictual longings, in the violence of our affects and urges, as well as in the inexplicable compulsions that propel us in directions that we do not foresee or understand ([Ruti, 2006, p. 20](#_ENREF_61)).

Indeed, this seems an instance of the possibility mentioned above in which the imaginary serves not only as a space of illusion but also as a potential avenue for the creative envisioning of alternative futures. By giving voice to her ‘affects and urges’ and translating them into the language of the signifier and the symbolic, Brenda has made them available as resources for meaning making as part of the ongoing process of engaging with the dialectics and dilemmas that characterize professional identity formation. Such openness to creative (as opposed to narcissistic) fantasies, and the capacity to listen to the urgings and messages emanating from the unconscious, helps us imagine the world from novel and currently unrealized angles. In her continually evolving position on ability grouping over the course of the interview, from initial ambivalence, to instrumentalist-consequentialist rationalization, to empathetic identification, Brenda embodies the dialectical notion of the negation of negation. That is to say, although each move she makes involves an implicit critique of her previous position, she never arrives at quite the same place she inhabited before, but is always transfigured by the journey. Such openness to renewal is central to the dialectic as an ‘anti-tradition’ that views existence as an unfinished process characterized by critique and transformation ([Grant, 2011](#_ENREF_38)). Such creative dialectic is vital if teachers are to refuse the seductions of closure and consensus proffered by neoliberal education policy ([Clarke, 2012a](#_ENREF_17)). It is also invaluable as a resource for articulating and debating, and hence making visible, various policy options and their consequences in the context of the ideological disavowal constituted by Australia’s state and federal policy silence in relation to the dilemma of ability grouping.

**Conclusion**

This paper has explored the dilemmas posed by the policy hiatus in relation to ability grouping in Australian education. It has argued that in the absence of an explicit policy approach to ability grouping, and as a consequence of pressures generated by neoliberal emphases on accountability and competition, the dialectics between the policy priorities of equity and quality, and between policy and practice, comprise something of a contradictory nexus. The paper framed this set of tensions as emblematic of the psychosocial dialectic between the symbolic, as the order of the Law, and the imaginary, as the realm of fantasy. The discussion emphasized how both the symbolic and the imaginary can be obstacles or openings to creativity. Similarly, while the unconscious can be the source of compulsive repetition and regimentation, it also offers a potential wellspring or renewal and, to the extent that we are able to listen to it with openness and discernment, may offer insights into aspects of life that are ignored, repressed or under-developed ([Ruti, 2009](#_ENREF_62)), into “desires unarticulated, voices kept silent, repressions reenacted without acknowledgement of their origins” ([McAfee, 2008, p. 12](#_ENREF_51)).

Brenda has not made up her mind on the issue of ability grouping because she has not had to yet – as a result, she is still ‘sitting on the fence’, as she put it earlier. Moreover, she may not have given much thought to these issues for some time yet, were it not for the interview and the encouragement it gave to her dialectical reflections. Nonetheless, her responsiveness suggests a significant degree of prior engagement with the issue. In this regard, her linking of cooperation and creativity, as against competition and closing-off, in the concluding moments of her interview may offer fertile and evocative material for creative transformation, if she is able and willing to listen to these voices. In a sense, as a pre-service teacher, she has the luxury of time and is able to enjoy a space of repose and reflection. But this is a luxury of limited duration and, assuming she takes up full, part time or, more likely, casual teaching work, her capacity for detached deliberation will be curtailed by the pressures and realities of life in schools in an educational era characterized by the pressures of performativity and governed by the ethics of public accountability. Like so many other teachers, her professional identity will be squeezed between what I have described as neoliberal education policy’s hyper-rational symbolic straightjacketing, represented by its penchant for statistics, standards and standardization, and its imaginary fantasmatic illusions of reconciling this competitive and individuated world with visions of social harmony and unity. Within this world, given the limited capacity for dialogue between the conscious aims and unconscious consequences of policy at a systemic level, it is all the more critical that teachers see themselves as ‘policy workers’ ([Ozga, 2000](#_ENREF_58)) rather than as implementers of a ‘teaching by numbers’ version of education ([Taubman, 2009](#_ENREF_72)), and that they thus retain the capacity of engaging in intra-psychical and inter-personal dialectic around the dilemmas of education. Such work is not about reaching conclusions and solving problems but about keeping issues and questions in education policy and practice open – open to new significations and symbolizations, new imaginings and envisionings, and new dialogues between imaginary and symbolic, conscious and unconscious, dimensions. Engaging in and opening up possibilities for such work is more critical than ever on the part of teachers in the twenty first century. Sadly, and worryingly, these are possibilities that neoliberal education policy seems more than ever intent on closing down.

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1. Rothenberg gives the example of the Wordsworthian expression of understatement, “I am not unwilling”, which is subtly different from its formally logical equivalent, “I am willing”, as an illustration of the ‘paralogical’ qualities of double negation, which leaves an indeterminate remainder of excess (2010, p. 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ability grouping is being used here as a superordinate term covering a range of practices such as ‘setting’ and ‘streaming’. As ability grouping is being used here as part of a larger discussion about policy and its relationship to practice and to teachers, I do not provide an extended discussion of the forms ability grouping takes and the debate surrounding these. For such a discussion, see, for example the work of Ireson & Hallam ([2001](#_ENREF_44)). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Malcolm Bowie ([1991, p. 112](#_ENREF_13)) notes that “the would-be truth-seeker will find that the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real are an unholy trinity whose members could as easily be called Fraud, Absence and Impossibility”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In contrast to the totalizing and rivalrous nature of imaginary identification, symbolic identification involves identifying with a particular trait or aspect an-other and is hence partial and limited rather than all-consuming (Rothenberg, 2010, pp. 137-138). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brenda is unlikely to have read – but could be said to be unconsciously echoing – Connell’s 2012 piece, *Just education*, where social justice education is defined in terms of “classrooms that emphasize mutual aid in learning and development” (p. 682). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)