Rethinking Agency in Teacher Education: A psychosocial perspective

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In the wake of the neoliberalisation of education, which has seen growing and relentless demands for performative data, along with detailed curricular and pedagogical prescriptions, concerns have been raised about the survival of teacher agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015; Ríos, 2018). Such concerns raise questions of what we understand by agency. Conceptions of agency have been critiqued for viewing it in dualistic terms, as for instance in notions of structure versus agency (Archer, 2000, 2003), and for reducing it to notions of resistance, as if this was the only possible modality of agentic behaviour (Mahmood, 2005). In this paper, drawing on recent work in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory (Bunn, Langer, & Fellows, 2021; Clarke, 2019), and on empirical data from interviews with teachers, we offer a ‘quaternary’ model of teacher agency in which four agentic modes are mapped onto Lacan’s four discourses. Through this model, we explore the discourses of teachers as they talk about their practices. We posit that teacher agency exists and is shaped within the relational and discursive positioning of teachers vis-a-vis the complex web of interrelated actants that surround their professional practices. From a Lacanian perspective of discourse as a social link, we explore the shifting position – and hence role – of the constitutive-generative lack that functions as the paradoxical object-cause of teachers’ desires around their practices (Bunn, Langer & Fellows, 2022). The model we explore opens up possibilities for teacher education to be understood as a site of ceaseless ‘becoming’, in that relational positioning within each discourse reveals *how* teacher agency is able to be exercised, highlighting potential limitations and affordances that come to constitute professional identities and practices. We thus offer a perspective of teacher agency which affords potential to teacher educators to interrupt dualistic or resistance-based understandings of agency and move forwards with a deeper understanding of how it is discursively enabled and/or constrained.

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