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EDUCATIONAL  
PHILOSOPHY  
AND THEORY**The ethico-politics of teacher identity**

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Review

## The ethico-politics of teacher identity

### Abstract

Identity is a contemporary buzzword in education, referencing the individual and the social, the personal and the political, self and other. Following Maggie MacLure, we can think of identity in terms of teachers 'arguing for themselves', or giving an account of themselves. Yet in the wake of poststructuralism's radical de-centering of the subject and its highlighting of a number of impediments to agency, we might well ask how teachers are to give an account of themselves? This paper offers reading of identity that recognizes its paradoxical aspects, yet also contains scope for ethical agency. The latter is explored via a 'diagram' that utilizes Foucault's four axes of ethics to elaborate a framework for thinking about teacher identity as ethical self-formation and for engaging in what I refer to here as 'identity work'. This approach to thinking about teacher identity recognizes our discursive determination, yet also offers scope for recognizing and building ethical agency.

Keywords: Identity ethics politics agency teacher education

### Introduction

Over a decade ago Stuart Hall commented on the 'discursive explosion' around the concept of identity (1997, p. 1). The field of education has proved no exception to this phenomenon, as evidenced by its growing use as an 'analytic lens' (Gee 2000; see also Sfard and Prusak 2005) in a growing body of educational research on teacher identity, including studies of teachers' personal and professional lives (MacLure 1993; Mitchell and Weber 1999; Goodson and Sikes 2001; Day, Kington et al. 2006; Reid and Santoro 2006; Søreide 2006), studies of the formation of teachers' emotions (Evans 2002; Zembylas 2003; Zembylas 2003), and studies of teachers' praxis (Britzman 1991; Britzman 1994; Santoro 1997; Danielewicz 2001; Phillips 2002; Miller Marsh 2003; Brown and McNamara 2005; Geijssel and Meijers 2005; Alsup 2006). Beijard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) provide a useful overview of much of this recent research on teacher identities. Meanwhile, the trend towards employing identity as a conceptual tool in teacher education has been paralleled by an increasing emphasis on identity in education generally:

Education in its deepest sense and at whatever age it takes place, concerns the opening up of identities – exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state...Education is not merely formative – it is transformative. ...issues of education should be addressed first and foremost in terms of identities and modes of belonging and only secondarily in terms of skills and information.

(Wenger 1998, p. 263)

Within teacher education, and building on developments in social and cultural theory, a number of theorists have framed learning to teach in terms of the development of a teacher identity, where identity references individuals' knowledge and naming of themselves, as well as others'

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3 recognition of them as a particular sort of person. This line of thinking is central in the work of  
4 Britzman, who argues that “Learning to teach – like teaching itself – is always the process of  
5 becoming: a time of formation and transformation, of scrutiny into what one is doing, and who one  
6 can become” (1991, p. 8). Similarly, Danielewicz (2001, p. 4) writes, “I regard ‘becoming a  
7 teacher’ as an identity forming process whereby individuals define themselves and are viewed by  
8 others as teachers”. Writing specifically in the context of language teacher education, Varghese,  
9 Morgan, Johnston & Johnson (2005, p. 22) argue that “In order to understand language teaching  
10 and learning we need to understand teachers: the professional, cultural, political and individual  
11 identities which they claim or which are assigned to them”. Overall, we can say that identity is  
12 increasingly being seen as a crucial component determining how teaching and learning are  
13 played out in schools and classrooms.  
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21 My argument in this article is that if the commitment to identity is not just a metaphysical  
22 proposition but a serious recognition that our work as teachers shapes and is shaped by the very  
23 mode of our being, then thinking about the formation of our identities is crucial for all of us in  
24 education. In particular, this article complements the work of writers such as Infinito, (2003;  
25 2003), Peters (2003), and Zembylas (2003; 2003; 2003; 2007; Zembylas and Fendler 2007), in  
26 considering the implications of Foucault’s later ‘ethical’ work for educational theory and practice,  
27 following May’s (2006, p. 120) observation that the ethical works “in addition to providing  
28 alternative views of how people have lived, offer positive elements to be appropriated”. In this  
29 paper I look specifically at how Foucault’s notion of ethics as self-formation suggests strategies  
30 that may be of potential value in thinking about and acting upon issues of identity in teacher  
31 education. First though, why should teacher educators and student teachers be concerned with  
32 issues of identity?  
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### 40 **Who needs identity?**

41 On one level, Stuart Hall’s (1997) question is meaningless: as if anyone can dispense with  
42 identity. Yet in another sense, it is as relevant today as it was over a decade ago, in that it  
43 suggests the underlying issue of why we should be concerned about identity. Isn’t the recent  
44 focus on identity merely an interesting theoretical twist on the one hand, or, on the assumption  
45 that there is not much we can do about them, an unnecessary distraction on the other? Do we  
46 really need to be concerned with issues of identity in a practical profession like teaching? In  
47 contrast to these views, I argue here that what I describe as engaging in ‘identity work’ is  
48 indispensable for teachers if they wish to and exercise professional agency, and thereby  
49 maximize their potential for development and growth.  
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56 A view of identity as central to teachers and teaching can be contrasted with an emphasis on  
57 methods, skills and techniques. Thus, arguing against a view of teaching as involving primarily  
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3 skill-focused competence, Britzman points out that “role speaks to function whereas identity  
4 voices investments and commitments” (1991, p. 29). Britzman’s notion of teaching as a process  
5 of formation and transformation points to the centrality of identity in teaching. Similarly, Mayer  
6 emphasizes ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being’ to challenge views of learning to teach as a mere  
7 matter of acquiring particular sets of skills, strategies and knowledge, when she argues that  
8 “Learning to teach can be learning the skills and knowledge to perform the functions of a teacher  
9 or it can be developing a sense of oneself as teacher. In the former, one is ‘being the teacher’,  
10 whereas in the latter, one is ‘becoming a teacher’ (Mayer 1999, p. 5). In a similar way, MacLure’s  
11 view that “Identity is always deferred and in the process of becoming – never really, never yet,  
12 never absolutely ‘there’” (MacLure 2003, p. 131), fosters the sort of openness with regard to our  
13 identities that is a key element in contemporary democratic citizenship (Nadesan and Elenes  
14 1998).

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22 The processes of identity formation are intimately related to the discourses and the communities  
23 that we work within. Miller Marsh (2003) describes this interweaving of the social and the  
24 individual in the ongoing process of teacher identity construction: “In other words, we are  
25 continually in the process of fashioning and refashioning our identities by patching together  
26 fragments of the discourses to which we are exposed” (p. 8). Yet although this fashioning is in  
27 some ways a matter of being ‘positioned’ within pre-existing discourses and ongoing social  
28 conversations (Davies and Harre 1990), at the same time we do have some ability to ‘author’ our  
29 identities: “individuals are agentive beings who are constantly in search of new social and  
30 linguistic resources which allow them to resist identities that position them in undesirable ways...”  
31 (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004, p. 27). In this sense, identities are the result of the inescapable  
32 and ongoing process of discussion, explanation, negotiation, argumentation and justification that  
33 partly comprises teachers’ lives and practices (MacLure 1993; Coldron and Smith 1999). Our  
34 identities are thus partly given yet they are also something that has to be achieved, offering a  
35 potential site of agency within the inevitably social process of becoming.

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45 The claim that identities are inevitable and indispensable for all teachers is also worth making as  
46 a deliberate contrast and challenge to the belief that they are something of relevance only to  
47 ‘minority’ teachers (Roman 1993; Evans 2002). Indeed, to ignore the fact that only particular  
48 identities are naturalized by dominant social discourses is to collude in the pathologizing of ‘other’  
49 identities. As socially oriented professionals whose work shapes the identities of our students, the  
50 case can be made that we all have an ethical obligation to reflect on our identities and engage to  
51 some degree in ‘identity work’. Having outlined the case for taking identities seriously in teaching,  
52 the following section explores some of the complexities surrounding identity further, through the  
53 lens of a series of paradoxes or tensions.  
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## A paradoxical reading of identity

One paradox is what might be called the agentive paradox, reflecting the fact that “When the “I” seeks to give an account of itself, it can start with itself, but it will find that this self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration” (Butler 2005, p. 7). Impediments to self-narration include: the episodes, experiences and thoughts that do not enter consciousness, yet still exert an influence; relational aspects of identity – the idea that we can’t know how we are for others; the material bases of identity, including bodies, gestures, practices, rituals and activities; and the socially determined nature of norms and discourses, which may have wider societal or global currency, even though they have to be locally interpreted and enacted<sup>1</sup>. Dreyfus and Rabinow describe the resulting complex and paradoxical relation with the self in the following (gendered) terms, whereby “His use of a language that he does not master, his inherence in a living organism that he does not fully penetrate with thought, and the desires that he cannot control must be taken to be the basis of his ability to think and act” for any individual.

A second paradox might be called the differential paradox, reflecting the way that discursive meanings are built on systems of equivalences and differences. In terms of identity, it involves recognizing how

Identity is always connected to a series of differences that help it to be what it is... there is a drive to diminish difference and to complete itself inside the pursuit of identity.... a pressure to make space for the fullness of self-identity for one constituency by marginalizing, demeaning, or excluding the differences on which it depends to specify itself.

(Connolly 2002, p. xiv-xv)

Connolly’s argument here draws on Derrida’s (1978; 1982) ideas of the ultimate undecidability of meaning and the contamination of any purported essence by a constitutive outside, as does the kindred work of Laclau and Mouffe<sup>2</sup> (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Thus, for example, whatever the positive content of a notion such as a ‘student-centered’ classroom, it will to some extent be defined in contrast to the features of its constitutive outside, the ‘teacher-centered’ classroom. This tendency for identity to marginalize the phenomenon that constitutes its ‘other’ is a major motive for doing the sort of ‘identity work’ explored in this paper.

A third paradox, we might call the paradox of excess. This is related to Lacanian notions of the ‘real’ or “that which exceeds and resists the subject’s powers of conceptualization or the reach of its criteria” (Critchley 2007, p. 63). We see this paradox operating when we attempt to subvert the

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3 inability of language to exhaustively capture the surplus of meaning in any phenomena in catch-  
4 all expressions like 'just everything' or when our frustration at describing all the shades and  
5 nuances of a particular experience drives us to exclaim 'it was unreal' or 'it was too much'. The  
6 idea of the paradox of excess is that the meaning of an event or a thing or, indeed, an identity will  
7 always exceed our knowledge of it and our capacity to 'capture' it in representational systems  
8 such as language:  
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There is more in my life than any official definition of identity can express. I am not exhausted by my identity. I am not entirely captured by it, even though it is stamped upon me – and even though it enables me. This fugitive difference between my identity and that in me which slips through its conceptual net is to be prized; it forms a pool from which creativity can flow and attentiveness to the claims of other identities might be drawn.

(Connolly 2002, p. 120)

This echoes the idea, noted above, of the 'unfinalizability' of identity and reminds us once again that what at first appears to be a threat to the integrity of identity may turn out to be a source of opportunity.

Thus identity is at once a complex matter of the social and the individual, of discourse and practice, of reification and participation, of similarity and difference, of agency and structure, of fixity and transgression, of the singular and the multiple, and of the synoptic and the dynamic. But what does this paradoxical complexity imply in relation to the indispensability of identities noted above? How can we resist frustration, and even resentment, in the face of the contingency, ambiguity, and limited agency we experience in relation to our identities? What alternative possibilities are opened up by recognizing the above paradoxes? How can teacher educators and student teachers do 'identity work'? To address these questions I explore the connections between identity, ethics, agency, and reflection in the following section, drawing particularly on the later work of Foucault.

### **Ethico-politics and Identity**

Identity has been described as a matter of 'arguing for yourself' (MacLure 1993), rather than as something that is just there. But if identity is a hard-won effect that has to be claimed, rather than being a pre-given reality, then the creation and recreation of our identities is neither an impossibility nor an indulgence but an ethical imperative (O'Leary 2002). And since this self-formation involves engagement with both games of truth and practices of power (Foucault 1997, p. 290), it is inevitably political as well as ethical work. Britzman (1994, p. 71) makes a similar

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3 point: “The politics of identity refers to questions of what it is that structures identity and how  
4 identity is narrated”. Given this conjunction between ethical self-formation and politics, I will use  
5 ethics and ethico-politics interchangeably in the following discussion.  
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9 The idea that identities are ethical and political is implicit in the recognition that they are formed at  
10 the nexus of the individual and the social. In particular, identity entails both “self-reflection and  
11 social recognition, two practices that are, I would argue essential to any substantive account of  
12 ethical life” (Butler, 2005, p. 49). But given the social shaping of identities how much scope  
13 remains for exercising ethico-political agency? To what degree can I act ethically if who I am is, at  
14 least partially, determined for me by social discourses and cultural conventions? These concerns  
15 belie conceptions of power and determination as purely repressive and as necessarily inimical to  
16 the freedom of the self-actualizing subject, rather than seeing power as productive and as always  
17 existing in a relationship with freedom; for “in order for power relations to come into play, there  
18 must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides... If there are relations of power in  
19 every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere” (Foucault 1997, p. 292).  
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27 The pervasiveness of power relations constituting us as subjects, along with the corollary  
28 pervasive existence of freedom that this implies, means that we have to make choices; and once  
29 we recognize that these actually are *choices*, albeit constrained ones, we are in the realm of  
30 ethics: “For what is ethics if not the practice of freedom, the conscious practice of freedom?...  
31 ethics is the concerned form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection” (Foucault 1997,  
32 p. 284). This notion of ethics is not concerned with adherence to a moral code, but with ethical  
33 self-formation or, to use the title of Foucault’s last published book, ethics as ‘the care of the self’  
34 (Foucault 1986). It is in this spirit that Judith Butler argues in relation to the social shaping of  
35 selves that  
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42 This dispossession does not mean that we have lost the subjective ground for ethics. On  
43 the contrary, it may well be the condition for moral inquiry, the condition under which  
44 morality itself emerges. If the “I” is not at one with moral norms, this means only that the  
45 subject must deliberate upon these norms, and that part of that deliberation will entail a  
46 critical understanding of their social genesis and meaning. In this sense ethical  
47 deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique. And critique finds that it cannot go  
48 forward without a consideration of how the deliberating subject comes into being and how  
49 a deliberating subject might actually live and appropriate a set of norms.  
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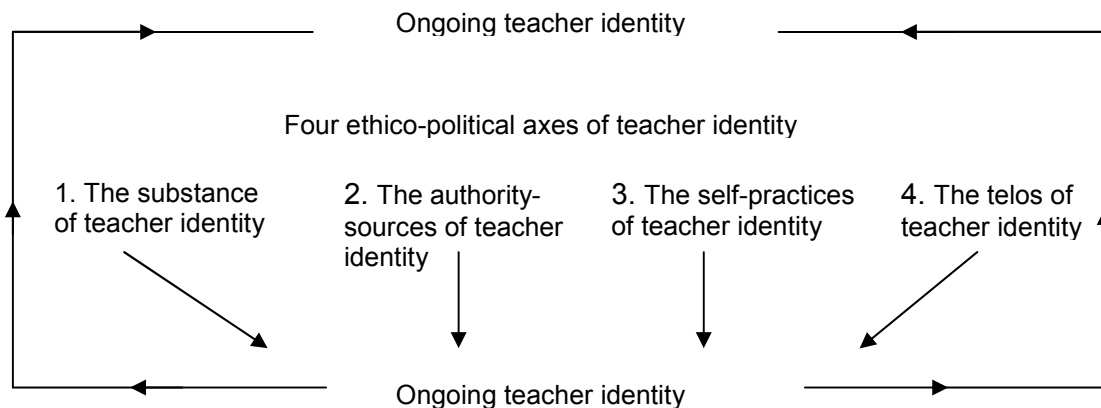
(2005, p. 8).



The conjunction of identities, ethico-politics, and critique provides the basis for the notion of 'identity work' explored below.

### A diagram for doing 'identity work'

In thinking about identity in relation to ethics as the care of the self, it is useful to think in terms of a framework or, to use Deleuze's (1988) term, a diagram of elements that combine to produce identity. The diagram can be conceived "as a plane of constitution of historically specific forms of truth, power and subjectivity" (Prozorov 2007, p. 6). One such diagram, by no means the only possible one, is suggested by Foucault's four aspects or axes of the relationship to oneself (Foucault 1983; Foucault 1985). In brief, these four axes are the substance of ethics, the authority sources of ethics, the self-practices, and the telos, or endpoint, of ethics (O'Leary 2002, chapters 7 & 8; May 2006, p. 109-109). If we translate these into identity we can think in terms of identity in terms of the substance of teacher identity, the authority sources of teacher identity, the self-practices of teacher identity, and the endpoint of teacher identity. These are illustrated diagrammatically below.



The first axis referring to the substance of teacher identity, addresses issues of what part of myself pertains to teaching and what forms of subjectivity constitute – or what forms do I use to constitute – my teaching self? For example, does my teaching self concern primarily my rational mind, along the lines of Rancière's (1991, p. 4-8) 'explicative order' or does it involve intellectual *and* emotional parts of my being? This axis is key in terms of how teaching and being a teacher relates to other aspects of my identity.

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3 The second axis concerns what Foucault calls the mode of subjection, referring to the issues of  
4 why I should cultivate certain attitudes, beliefs and behaviours and what sources of discursive  
5 authority I recognize as a teacher. For example, I might feel that 'theory' is a waste of time and  
6 only place value on 'practical' work that has immediate relevance and clear, concrete application  
7 to the classroom. I might value discourses of teaching as service and sacrifice, reflected in  
8 exhortations to always consider students and their needs first. Or I might recognize the authority  
9 of constructivist discourses of learning and development as entailing particular forms of  
10 professional practice in the classroom in terms of environment, organization and activities. This  
11 axis is clearly caught up with issues of power and politics.  
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18 The third axis concerns the techniques and practices we use to fashion and shape our teaching  
19 selves. Practices commonly used in teacher education programs, like keeping a reflective journal  
20 would fall under this aspect of ethical identity. For practicing teachers, these shaping practices  
21 will often occur outside the classroom through, for example, engaging in particular forms of  
22 ongoing professional learning. These self-practices can open a space for discourse and an  
23 awareness of the contingency and constructedness of teachers' knowledge and thinking.  
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28 The fourth axis concerns the telos or endpoint of our teaching selves: what is my ultimate  
29 endpoint, goal or purpose as a teacher? This might take the form of the oft-cited notion of 'making  
30 a difference' to the lives of individual students or it could be more a matter of economic survival  
31 and meeting basic financial commitments, or any number from a myriad of other possible  
32 purposes. Like the other axes, this one can provide a vehicle for recognizing the slippage  
33 between social norms and conversations about teaching and teachers, and the meanings  
34 constructed by student teachers from their experience, again with the potential benefit of seeing  
35 the constructedness – and hence the potential for reconstruction – of both.  
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## 42 **From theory to practice**

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44 So far this discussion has been a theoretical one but to be of value to teacher educators,  
45 teachers, and student teachers, it needs to be translatable into practice. Thus, in conclusion I  
46 would like to explore the 'diagram' for doing identity work to teacher identity, using comments  
47 posted as part of an experimental, non-assessed, web log developed in order to allow student  
48 teachers in the University of Hong Kong's four-year full-time Bachelor of Education in English  
49 language teaching to communicate with each other during their final year teaching practicum. In  
50 particular, I will focus on the comments of one student teacher, Neil, as a sort of exploratory,  
51 micro case-study. Neil is a highly committed, if somewhat diffident, student teacher who is  
52 particularly concerned about gaining the respect of his students and the quality of his  
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3 relationships in the classroom generally, as we will see by looking at his teaching identity through  
4 the lens of the ethico-political diagram in the vignette below.  
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8 In terms of the first axis of the ethico-political diagram for doing identity work, Neil sees teaching  
9 as chiefly concerned, not with intellect or emotion, but with character:  
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12 Sometimes I feel I am not a suitable person to teach because I am not the type of person  
13 who can scold people. Sometimes I feel very sad because I know my students are taking  
14 advantage of my kind and gentle character while I can do nothing to change my  
15 character...some of my students misbehave in the lessons because they know me very  
16 well and they know that I am a kind person.  
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21 The point is not that there is any right or wrong basis upon which to constitute our teaching self  
22 but that how we construct this self – upon what basis it rests and what is excluded – will critically  
23 constrain and/or enable other possibilities. Because identity is relational, a crucial aspect of the  
24 substance of any teacher's identity is being recognized as a teacher by students. For Neil, this is  
25 clearly something he is aware of and concerned about. But at the same time, he limits his  
26 potential options for working on this aspect of his practice by basing his view of his teaching  
27 capacity on his 'character', which he sees as unchanging and unchangeable. Other possibilities  
28 might come from exploring what is excluded or merely implicit; for example, we might note how  
29 the text of the body is suggested by terms like 'scold' and 'gentle' and consider what insights  
30 could potentially derive from attention to "a more generalized [self-] writing that might be termed a  
31 corporeography" (Kirby 1997, p. 83). Or, focusing on the relational aspect of identity, Neil might  
32 explore further how he can establish a more professional relationship with his students by viewing  
33 being liked by his students as resulting from, rather than being a condition of, fair and effective  
34 teaching (Furlong and Maynard 1995).  
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43 In terms of the second axis, concerned with the sources of authority we recognize in our teaching,  
44 we see Neil advocating discourses of life-long learning and continuous improvement explained  
45 and justified on the basis of narratives about the teacher being a key influence shaping the lives  
46 of their charges:  
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50 Teachers nowadays need to keep on learning new teaching strategies and reflecting the  
51 effectiveness of their lessons in order to improve the quality of their teaching. Teachers  
52 should know that teaching can affect a person's life. If teachers know that their acts might  
53 have lasting impacts on students' developments, they are willing to pay more effort on  
54 teaching.  
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5 Relevant indicators of the sources of authority Neil draws on include what values are assumed to  
6 be shared and what are the operating presuppositions in his texts. Examples of these assumed  
7 values and presuppositions can be seen in the way he frames the requirements he stipulates for  
8 teachers with explicit modal statements like “teachers nowadays need to” and “teachers should”.  
9 Also of key relevance here are the legitimating strategies (Fairclough 2003) used to justify  
10 subjection to certain attitudinal and behavioural requirements. Such strategies here include  
11 rationalization, explaining the utility of the stipulated attitudes and behaviours: “If teachers know  
12 that their acts might have lasting impacts on students’ developments”.

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18 In terms of the third axis, referencing the self-practices we use to shape our teaching selves, the  
19 practices Neil focuses on are located in the classroom:

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23 I have been learning techniques on controlling classroom discipline because I am rather  
24 weak in this aspect and I have difficulties in dealing with off-task behaviors. Also, I have  
25 learnt some tasks that are exploratory in nature because these tasks can motivate  
26 students to think, explore, and solve problems, which are very effective in their learning.  
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30 Such a focus is not surprising given the concern about his relationships in the classroom with  
31 students that we noted above. But beyond this, practices such as seeking guidance from ‘critical  
32 friends’ (who could be more experienced teachers working in the practicum school, or peers)  
33 could offer potential value in helping Neil shape his teaching self in the directions he desires.  
34 Additionally, composing email messages to peers and describing and reflecting on incidents in  
35 the classroom or on teaching in general, such as we see above, are practices of self-formation in  
36 which Neil engages, perhaps without recognizing them as such. Yet engagement in such  
37 practices should not be underestimated for what they entail “is a not matter of pursuing the  
38 unsayable, nor of revealing the hidden, nor of saying the unsaid, but on the contrary of capturing  
39 the already-said, of reassembling what one could hear or read, and this for an end that is nothing  
40 less than then constitution of the self” (Foucault 1997, p. 237).  
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48 The final axis concerns our ultimate goal or purpose in teaching. We get an insight into this  
49 aspect of Neil’s teaching identity in his comments about why he wants to be a teacher: “I think  
50 teaching is a very meaningful and rewarding job. If you can help a rude, irresponsible student  
51 who has limited motivation to study to become a well-behaved person, you will have a great  
52 sense of achievement.” Here the purpose of teaching is construed in terms of a moral crusade,  
53 where teachers as saviours find meaning in achieving redemption for pathologized (‘rude’,  
54 ‘irresponsible’) students, who have wandered from the path of taken-for-granted social values.  
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3 The unproblematized use of terms like 'irresponsible' and 'well-behaved' offers no sense of any  
4 awareness that the educational system or the school might be at issue and at least partially  
5 cause the students' 'rudeness'. Thus Neil's view of view of the telos or ultimate endpoint of his  
6 teaching seems to reflect a fairly conservative model where schooling endorses and reproduces  
7 accepted social values.  
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### 10 11 **A historical ontology of our teaching selves**

12 As noted above the point of conducting this inquiry as a form of 'identity work' is not to correct  
13 wrong or mistaken identities, but to see how our identities have been shaped in particular ways  
14 and to consider possibilities for thinking about the aspects comprising them differently. The point  
15 is "to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently  
16 thinks, and so enable it to think differently" (Foucault 1985, p. 9). This requires recognition of the  
17 discursive constructedness of thinking. Again, Deborah Britzman captures the crucial significance  
18 of this insight for teacher education:  
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25 Unless the narrations of practice are read through theories of discourse – that is, as  
26 representing particular ideological interests, orientations, communities and meanings,  
27 and as deploying relations of power – there remains the danger of viewing the teacher's  
28 practical knowledge as unencumbered by authoritative discourse and as unmediated by  
29 the relations of power and authority that work through every teaching and research  
30 practice.  
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34 (Britzman 1994, p. 72)

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37 In the case of student teachers like Neil, by exploring the influences that have shaped the  
38 particular understanding he has of the nature of his teaching self and becoming aware of other  
39 possibilities, through comparison with peers, or by reading others' accounts, he might be  
40 encouraged to conduct what Foucault calls a 'historical ontology of ourselves' (1997, p. 318). This  
41 can prompt the recognition that we do all have a history and moreover,  
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46 It is a history that is at once constitutive and contingent: it makes us who we are but not  
47 by necessity. If we understand our history, understand who we have come to be, and  
48 understand that we do not have to be *that*, then we are faced with the possibility of being  
49 something else. That is our freedom.  
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52 (May 2006, p. 123)

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55 Of course this freedom can be daunting as it means letting go of the safe anchor of an  
56 unchanging, stable self or of striving for an attainable perfection that once attained can be  
57 maintained and held on to. Yet this too can be seen as liberating. "Suspending the demand for  
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3 self-identity or, more particularly for complete coherence seems to me to counter a certain ethical  
4 violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that  
5 others do the same” (Butler 2005, p. 42). Moreover, recognizing that our identities, like our  
6 pedagogical practices, should not be predetermined, but need to be continually renegotiated  
7 within specific contexts, leaves open the possibility that our pedagogical certainties might be  
8 transformed by encounters with others and by exploration of others’ ideas. Here again, identity  
9 work and ethics are inextricably linked to the operation of critique:  
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15 Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also  
16 be remade in the process of engaging another’s worldview, that we might come to learn  
17 things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement. This requires  
18 that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility  
19 that we may be remade through an encounter with the other.  
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22 (Mahmood 2005, p. 36-37)  
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25 Such transformative identity work is not easy but requires of us that we become social theorists  
26 with a critical awareness of the limits that condition us and the ways in which they constrain and  
27 enable what we can do (Butler 2005, p. 8 & 82). But the alternatives of continuing to view the self  
28 in ‘self-sufficient’, autonomous, sovereign, transcendent terms that denies or ignores the  
29 contingency and constructedness of our identities, or of adopting a fatalistic or deterministic  
30 disregard for the formation of our identities and instead taking them for granted are both  
31 problematic. In the first case, the particular history that comprises the diagram of our identity will  
32 remain in control to the extent that we deny the contingency of that history. Thus in Neil’s case,  
33 his equation of his teaching identity with his (in his view) fixed and unchanging character closed  
34 of any avenue for exercising ethical agency. This strategy embodies what Connolly refers to as  
35 ‘transcendental narcissism’, entailing ratifying a contingent identity by transcendental means  
36 (1998, p. 115). In the second case, we will be liable to resentment against the lack of necessity in  
37 our identities (1998, p. 110) and also unprepared for the inevitable shifts in the particular  
38 configuration of our identities which, like any hegemonic order in late modernity, are inherently  
39 fragile, their apparent solidity at any moment liable to cracks and fissures over time (Laclau and  
40 Mouffe, 1985). Thus by adopting an individualistic perspective on student behaviour, Neil is  
41 setting himself up for potential frustration and disillusionment, since his repeated attempts to  
42 ‘save’ students from themselves are unlikely to be successful or welcome; over time, his self-  
43 assured moral sense is likely to begin to crumble. Yet, ironically this fragility is also a source of  
44 potential freedom. As Prozorov argues, “It is on this basis of the diagram as harbouring the  
45 potentiality of its own unraveling that Foucault’s claim that we always already *are* much freer than  
46 we feel acquires political significance” (2007, p. 92). If Neil were able to take a more socially  
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oriented view of the causes of student behaviour he would feel less individual responsibility for 'correcting' it; indeed his individualistic view of students is mirrored by an equally individualist view of himself as a teacher, determined by his individual character and struggling alone in his classroom to reform and redeem his students. By first recognizing and then challenging these perspectives, he might at the same time ease his own burden of responsibility and recognize new avenues for effective action, such as engaging in dialogue with colleagues or management about school policies.

Thus, as teachers we can be subjects in two different senses. We can be subject to someone else's domination, to a determination "which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him" (Foucault 1982, p. 212). And we can also be a subject in another sense that involves "...an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being" (Foucault 1997, p. 282). Enculturation into being a teacher can hardly avoid the former sense but hopefully it can also take on some of the latter, to counter the tendency whereby "Identities, in the ordinary course of events, tend to congeal of their own accord into hard doctrines of truth and falsity, self and otherness, good and evil, rational and irrational, commonsense and absurdity" (Connolly 2002, p. 173). This requires what I have called 'identity work' involving self-examination at multiple levels – "not just looking *inside* oneself, through the lens of one's socialized conscience, but knowing how one is constituted as a subject, subjectivated by different economies of power, the processes and practices that constitute ones' self as an enculturated self..." (Wain 2007, p. 166).

## Conclusion

Identities are constructed within discourse, through difference and in the context of contingency and ambiguity. Whilst this may at first glance seem disconcerting, it opens up creative possibilities for political practices of ethical self-formation. As I have argued in this paper, such 'identity work' involving tracing the historical ontology, or genealogy, of our teaching identities is ethical in a number of related senses: first, in the sense that identity involves the nexus of the social and the individual, this work involves attention to how we engage in the social, and therefore ethico-political, practices of teaching; secondly, it is ethical in that the freedom bestowed by an awareness of the contingent and constitutive nature of our histories entails the challenge of taking responsibility for our identities; and thirdly it is ethical insofar as it involves maintaining awareness of the inevitable contingency and ambiguity of any identity and embracing what Connolly calls "the agonistic appreciation of difference" (2002, p. 167), rather than the *antagonistic* seeking of its destruction. In this sense, rather than being feared as another attempt to impose a particular moralistic code, the notion of the ethico-politics of teacher identity is



something that could be utilized to resist any attempt to impose a narrowing of focus on the meaning of teaching:

One should welcome the infusion of ethical discourse... because it can be counterposed to all those attempts to translate ethical judgments into apparently more 'objective', 'scientific', rational or uncontested terms... by appealing to the true discourse, and, hence, inescapably, to the authority of those who are experts of this truth. To the extent that it escapes this will to truth, this will to closure, ethico-politics thus allows the possibility of opening up the evaluation of forms of life and self-conduct to the difficulty and interminable business of debate and contestation... within such an ethic, it is not just a question of the discovery of one's truth, of a commitment to the project of one's individual and collective identity, but of the active, material, technical, creative assembling of one's existence, one's relation to oneself, even one's corporeality."

(Rose 1999, p. 192 & 196)

Based on the recognition that like any identities those of teachers' are contingent and constructed, and are thus open to the unsettling and deconstructive capacities of ethico-political identity work, the notion of an active and creative assembling of identities offers a way of moving beyond discussions that focus on trying to define teacher identity as a theoretical concept. This exploratory paper has drawn on the ethical work of the later Foucault in order to outline one possible framework, or diagram, for doing such identity work. Whether such an approach is valid and viable is something that will require further research, but given the recognition of the centrality of identity in teaching and learning to teach, such research is surely worthwhile.

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<sup>1</sup> As for example with the discourses of 'professionalism' and 'professionalization' in teaching Helsby, G. (1995) Teachers' construction of professionalism in England in the 1990s. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, **21**: 3, pp. 317 - 332, Hall, C. and R. Schulz (2003) Tensions in Teaching and Teacher Education: Professionalism and professionalisation in England and Canada. *Compare*, **33**: 3, pp. 369-383, Mak, G. (2003) The professionalization of Hong Kong teachers: Dilemma between technical rationality and individual autonomy. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, **4**: 2, pp. 170-180, Cheung, E. (2005) Hong Kong secondary schoolteachers' understanding of their careers. *Teacher and teaching: Theory and practice*, **11**: 2, pp. 127-149. or the discourses surrounding the marketization of education Marginson, S. (1997) *Markets in education*. (St. Leonards, NSW, Allen and Unwin), Ball, S. J. (1998) Big policies/small world: An introduction to international perspectives in education policy. *Comparative Education*, **34**: 2, pp. 119-130, Luke, A. (2004) Teaching after the market: From commodity to cosmopolitan. *Teachers College Record*, **106**: 7, pp. 1422-1443..

<sup>2</sup> See note 7 on p. 236 and Connolly Connolly, W. (2004) The ethos of democratization, in: S. Critchley and O. Marchart (eds.) *Laclau: A critical reader* (London and New York, Routledge) pp. 167-181. for Connolly's endorsement of the broad thrust of Laclau and Mouffe's work; see Tonder & Thomassen Tonder, L. and L. Thomassen (eds.) (2006) *Radical democracy: Between abundance and lack*. (Manchester, Manchester University Press). for a discussion of their differences.



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