

# Theorising how student teachers form their identities in initial teacher education

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This article investigates the forming of student teacher identities in initial teacher education. By analysing student narratives of school experiences the article argues that although reflective, reflexive and critical discourses are helpful interrogatory tools, they presuppose a prior subjectivity which fails to acknowledge the idea that it is through such discursive practices that subjectivity emerges. Such discourses also suggest an emancipatory project grounded in rationality. The article demonstrates that these reflective discourses fail to take into account non-symbolizable and non-rational aspects of experiencing that have powerful ontological effects on subjectivity and identity. Such aspects are structured in student narratives through fantasy, which allows students to understand their experiences as consistent and meaningful.

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to consider theoretical frameworks that allow some purchase upon student teachers' narratives in which they discuss issues that confront them as they learn to teach. I argue that reflective, reflexive and critical stances towards teaching, as manifested within action research in education, provide helpful interrogatory positions but that they include an element of transcendence, which I dispute, towards self or social reality. Such discourses also, in different ways, seem to place their trust in the ability of language and rationality to effect a better understanding of self, teaching and the institutional contexts of teaching and learning. By using the tools and strategies of reflective practice the subject is able to become a more effective or enlightened practitioner. This places great confidence in the power of language to embrace action in order to effect such enlightenment. I will argue that such discourses fail to take into account non-symbolizable aspects of action, which are hinted at by the Lacanian notion of the Real, and which have powerful ontological effects manifested in processes of desire that cannot be fully accommodated in the symbolic but are structured by fantasy in which subjectivity emerges. I apply Zizek's theory of ideology to argue that it is through such fantasies

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that student teachers develop understanding of their experiences of teaching as consistent and meaningful.

For many student teachers their Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) year and their initial years of teaching will prove to be some of the most challenging as they begin to establish themselves as effective teachers (see Moore & Atkinson, 1998). It is now a requirement in England that everyone involved on an initial teacher education course should meet specific criteria for effective teaching laid down by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA); these are called the Standards for the Award of Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). All intending teachers must satisfy these TTA Standards, which relate to three areas of professional practice: 1. professional values and practice; 2. knowledge and understanding; and 3. Teaching—planning, teaching strategies, monitoring and assessment, class management and inclusion. Although the Standards framework provides a list of requirements, which all intending teachers must satisfy, is also evident to most people who have knowledge and experience of teaching, that teaching involves much more than that which is specified in the Standards discourse. Some years ago, when profiles of teacher competencies were being developed, precursors to current Standards, a colleague made the point that when all the competency statements are taken together they still do not capture what it is like to teach.

The Standards discourse can be viewed as an idealization of teaching, that is to say, a series of benchmarks against which effective teaching can be measured. Although this discourse contains much to be valued and recommended and would be difficult to disagree with, as a series of conceptualizations of teaching it lies at some distance from and tends to obscure a more fundamental series of psychic and social processes that student teachers experience when learning to teach. The latter consists of a series of conscious actions, unconscious processes, interactions and conversations, impulses and responses, planned activities, disruptions and unexpected events and situations.

### **Teacher as rational agent**

In our everyday understanding of teachers and their actions it is quite normal to view the teacher as a self-conscious, reflective and hardworking individual whose practice is consciously planned and initiated. The assumption here, of course, is that of the effective teacher as rational individual, who is able to bring rational judgement and reflection to evaluate the quality of his or her teaching. In the domain of action research in education a number of what might be termed ‘rational discourses’ (although different in intention) have been developed to legitimate and support practitioner-based research into teaching. A simple understanding of the term ‘*reflective practitioner*’<sup>1</sup> (Schon, 1983; Valli, 1992; Laboskey, 1994; Loughran, 1996) assumes such a rational agent engaged within a single hermeneutic process to reflect upon events in the classroom in order to improve practice. The more complex notion of the ‘*reflexive practitioner*’ (Elliott, 1993; Hall, 1996) also involves rational reflection upon classroom practice but also upon the effect of institutional structures on teaching as well as reflection on the self in action in terms of interrogating one’s beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, prejudices and suppositions that inform teaching.

The reflexive practitioner could be said, therefore, to involve a double hermeneutic process. A third associated analytical stance towards teaching concerns the '*critical practitioner*' (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kincheloe, 1993; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996), which involves interrogating political, ideological and social processes that frame educational work in order to expose, for example, power relations in which teachers function, discriminatory practices, victimization and inequalities.<sup>2</sup>

All three stances assume the notion of a transcendent individual, someone who is able to stand back and occupy a neutral position in order to make a rational analysis of practice, self, others or social processes so as to improve practice, modify attitudes or beliefs or achieve a more emancipated educational system. The teacher as rational agent acting on the world or the self lies at the heart of these three interrogatory positions. This idea of subjectivity relies upon an essentialist position from which the subject is able to look outward towards the world and inward towards the self. Let us see if this idea of subjectivity can be helpful when considering how student teachers begin to form their identities as teachers in their struggles to learn to teach. Although these interrogatory stances towards teaching have been developed historically with more experienced teachers in mind, it is the case that student teachers are encouraged to reflect upon and thereby evaluate the quality of their teaching, which often requires them to expose their reasons for pursuing a particular line of action when, for example, introducing a lesson, or interpreting pupils' behaviour or work.

### Angela's story

Angela is beginning her teaching practice in a secondary school on the Isle of Dogs in the East End of London, and whilst many students are challenging, Angela maintains a positive and optimistic attitude. In an initial interview after teaching a class of year 9 students Angela remarked:

You have to be careful not to give these kinds of pupils any choices otherwise they get confused and just sit there staring at you or each other wondering what to do. This happened in a lesson where we were doing collage and I gave them a choice of how to proceed to make their collages. After I finished speaking they just looked confused. I knew I shouldn't have given them a choice ... I should have just told them what to do because that's what they expect. After the lesson I felt awful and I know that in future I won't make the same mistake, I won't give them a choice because I've learned that's what they can't handle.

This teaching context means that classroom supervision and management of pupils are a constant concern for most teachers in the school and they are certainly high on Angela's agenda. The interesting point for me about Angela's statement is to read it as a discourse in which she is forming herself as a particular kind of teacher and her students as particular kinds of learners through the interpretation she makes of her actions and her students' responses. Angela appears to occupy an objective or transcendent position *vis à vis* her students' responses and her teaching strategy. She identifies her students' learning habits and the weakness of her teaching strategy. From this analysis she derives an improved teaching strategy for future lessons. This analysis would seem to confirm the value of reflective practice. Two or three points emerge here; is Angela's interpretation of her students' attitude and approach to

learning a true reflection of their capabilities, or is her discourse a form of defence in which she is able to provide reasons for an unsuccessful lesson? In offering choice was she able to cope with the consequences of her actions and provide detailed support for individual responses? Or, as someone learning how to teach, is it the case that she has not yet acquired the support skills and strategies which allow her to respond to the different ways her students respond to her actions? This is perfectly understandable for someone beginning to teach. In other words, her *intention* to allow her students a degree of choice in their learning was a laudable strategy but *putting this into practice* is another matter entirely. Paul Klee (1953) captures this difference between ideation and practice:

The contrast between man's [woman's] ideological capacity to move at random through material and metaphysical spaces and his [her] physical limitations is the origin of all human tragedy. (p. 54, my brackets)

When I spoke to Angela's school tutor about Angela's comment on this lesson, she told me that she had encouraged Angela in her intentions to offer choice: 'Okay, it didn't work this time but it is a strategy worth working on'. Yet she told me that Angela was quite convinced that she had to change her tactics due to the learning habits of this particular class.

At this moment in her teaching Angela believes that she must adopt a specific teaching strategy with this class. She is positioning herself and her students within a particular pedagogic discourse in which certain power relations manifest themselves in the form of a didactic and instructional pedagogy. All this seems to be the outcome of a particular lesson that did not go according to plan. Angela blames herself, that is to say, she blames her planning and organization of the lesson, which she interprets as flawed and unsuccessful. For her, giving this class choice is perceived as a mistake. She does not acknowledge at this stage of learning to teach that putting pedagogies into practice is something that will require perfecting, that will require practising! Rather than persisting with a sound pedagogical idea, which would encourage difference and variety in the art practices of her students, or attempting to consider alternative strategies to her teaching during the lesson, which would support the idea of choice, Angela wants to reduce the possibility of failure in her eyes, by imposing a tighter form of pedagogic control. This response is not untypical of someone beginning to teach, who has planned carefully, but due to a lack of practical experience is not yet able to cope with the responses of students. Desforges (1995) draws attention to similar predicaments that student teachers experience when learning to teach (see also Edwards & Protheroe, 2003).

Angela fetishizes her students: 'They can't handle choice, they need firm guidance'. In other words, during and after the lesson she confers on her students a certain lack, and in making this reading she is forming her students as particular kinds of learners who appear to be deficient in some capacity. She is also forming herself as a particular kind of teacher by subscribing to a particular pedagogical discourse in which her students and herself acquire specific pedagogized identities. How will this initial perception and reading of her students and her teaching strategy influence and inform her pedagogy with this class in future lessons?

Another reading of Angela's analysis can be made in which she creates an *imaginary identification*, an imaginary image of her students by conceiving them as unable to cope with choice and who therefore require explicit instructions. By implication she imagines that these students are unable to explore and experiment in their learning and therefore require a didactic kind of teaching. Such imaginary states will be explored below.

This vignette raises several issues relating to the forming of self-identity in social contexts and the identity of others, and to the socio-psychic processes in which such identifications are formed and change, issues which are not easily explained by the earlier theorizations of subjectivity that assume a transcendent and rational agent. This is, as I argue below, because it is not a case of Angela perceiving her students or herself directly in her analysis; rather, she constructs both herself and her students retrospectively within imaginary identifications supported by specific ideological frameworks in which the failure of the lesson is accounted for. In conversation with her two days after her lesson, Angela was encouraged to adopt a more reflexive stance towards her teaching. I asked her to consider how her labelling of students as particular kinds of learners was affecting her view of them and their capabilities and also her view of her actions as a teacher. But does this reflexive stance rely entirely on a rational exposition of what happened and why it might have happened, and if it does, what might such a rational discourse exclude? I will return to this issue below.

### **Andy's story**

Andy is teaching in a school where issues of student supervision and classroom management are less keen than in Angela's school, though occasionally such issues do confront him. The teachers have a burning enthusiasm for their work and strong opinions about teaching and learning in the field of art and design education. Andy's initial observations of art lessons were that they were uninspiring compared, for example, with stimulating mathematics lessons he had witnessed. His memories of learning art at school were of an enjoyable experience, but perhaps this was his biased feeling because, as he admitted, it may not have been a positive experience for his school friends. However, the initial art lessons he observed on teaching practice made him feel depressed because he felt that they focused far too much upon technical training in specific skills and not enough upon developing ideas in visual form.

My main worry is planning schemes of work according to school briefs. I need to fight my corner in terms of the outlook of the department. I'm aware that I'm training and I might not do things confidently and I need support ... but at the same time what's it all for ... I have a stake in all this, I need to pursue that otherwise I won't be able to go for jobs in the places that will support that way of working.

Andy has been highly motivated by 'issues-based' art education, a form of pedagogy and practice in which pupils explore social, cultural and personal issues through art action. Workshops and lectures on the university-based part of the course, provided

by invited school teachers and university tutors, have introduced him to this way of working. He perceives a big problem in not being able to develop work in which he is interested in his teaching practice school. He experiences a feeling of being instructed what to teach so that ownership of his teaching, of himself as a teacher, diminishes; he hints at a kind of cloning process, a kind of ventriloquism:

I'm not being told exactly how to do things but they say things like, if you give kids a project on war all you'll get are clichés, hackneyed responses.

However, Andy is also experiencing great difficulty in trying to formulate effective project and lesson plans; he struggles to plan a sequential structure to his projects. Andy's desire to 'find himself' as a teacher is strong at this stage and he perceives the system as militating against this desire—the desire for a particular pedagogy and practice, the desire to take on a particular identification as a teacher. It is as though Andy is occupying conflictual positions in different discourses, one concerned with a pedagogy he desires to practise and another concerned with a pedagogy towards which he feels antipathy but which his tutors are demanding. Such conflictual discourses involve conflictual pedagogized identifications. Although Andy has this burning desire to employ a particular pedagogy, he struggles to cope with what might be termed the 'basics of planning lessons and teaching projects'. His desire to facilitate a particular kind of learning through art is hampered by a struggle to understand how to plan, structure and sequence projects. His school tutors feel that he needs to grapple with these issues but he reads their guidance as too invasive and as instructing him how to teach. His observations are coloured by this perceived conflict, and he views the teaching methodology to which he is expected to subscribe constraining, and in reflecting on his experiences this perception prejudices his outlook.

In discussions with Andy I encourage him to recognize that the teachers with whom he is working are equally as committed to their pedagogic principles and that he will learn a great deal from them even though their approach to art education may not be fully consistent with his. I point out that he has been very influenced and excited by his introduction to issues-based pedagogy in art education and that this may be distorting his view of the teaching he is observing. But is my attempt to get Andy to take a more reflexive stance towards his teaching permeated with the rational belief that he should be able to do this, a belief that is further predicated on an idea of an autonomy able to occupy such an interrogatory position? In other words, is there more involved here than the ability to make rational observations and analysis? I will argue shortly that indeed there is.

In these narratives of the struggle to learn to teach we are concerned with significant psychic and social processes in the formation of subjectivity that are based upon a relationship that includes the unconscious self of desire, and imaginary and symbolic identifications which I believe cannot be adequately conceptualized through the idea of a transcendent and rational subjectivity, presupposed by reflective, reflexive and critical discourses. In the narratives of Angela and Andy we have seen how their views on teaching are coloured by imaginary identifications that cannot be accounted for within the idea of a transcendent reflective subject. This is

because although their analytical or reflective discourse gives them a feeling of autonomy in respect of their experiences, they are unaware of the imaginary basis of this discourse and its ideological framework. Similarly, as their tutor, am I aware in my struggle to get them to develop a more reflexive stance that this does not lead to a more objective or truthful account but one which is still subject to similar imaginary and ideological forces? We therefore need to consider such unconscious, imaginary and ideological aspects of subjectivity in the forming of teacher identities.

### **Teacher as antagonistic subject**

In a different reading of subjectivity from that presupposed by more rational discourses, Mouffe and Laclau (1985, 2001, pp. 114–122) theorise the human subject as conflictual or antagonistic. They view the subject in terms of an articulated series of positions in discourse and practice that are often antagonistic and which the subject has to resolve. The self does not exist along a teleology of emancipation through rational processes. They argue that it is perfectly possible, and indeed, common for the positioning of the subject in discourse to involve *conflictual positions*. Billig *et al.* (1988) construct a related argument when describing how individual practice often involves ideological dilemmas, as, for example, when a teacher argues for discovery learning on the part of the child but at the same time provides calculated prompts to encourage the child to take a particular action.

Pecheux (1982, pp. 97–129) proposes a theory of subjectivity based on the work of Althusser in which he argues that ‘ideology interpellates individuals as subjects’ (p. 101). Essentially, individuals are called into being as subjects through particular ideological practices and discourses, such as education. The key point here is that unlike the transcendent subject of reflective, reflexive or critical subjects (articulated earlier), the interpellated subject does not assume a prior conscious standpoint because the subject only emerges through ideological interpellation. In other words, this idea of subjectivity forms a critique of consciousness; *there is no pre-existing subject on whom interpellation is performed, interpellation brings the subject into being*. Thus, for our purposes the identity and subjectivities of student teachers are formed within the ideological practices and discourses of initial teacher education, such as reflective, reflexive and critical discourses. In such practices and discourses the student teacher is interpellated as a particular subject. It is, therefore, not a case of student teachers acting reflectively, reflexively or critically, but of themselves, their tutors and teaching being constructed as such by these discourses, such discourses bringing these phenomena into being. The idea that subjectivities are produced discursively is well established in post-structural theory (see Foucault, 1972). Writing in 1977, Coward and Ellis (p. 1) argue that ‘Because all the practices that make up a social totality take place in language it becomes possible to consider language as the place in which the social individual is constructed’. Later, Walkerdine (1990) takes this position further when considering language and social regulation:

Modern apparatuses of social regulation, along with other social and cultural practices,

produce knowledges which claim to 'identify' individuals. These knowledges create the possibility of multiple practices, multiple positions. To be a 'clever child' or a 'good mother', for example, makes sense only in the terms given by pedagogic, welfare, medical, legal and other discourses and practices. These observe, sanction and correct how we act; they attempt to define who and what we are. (p. 199)

For Althusser the idea of interpellation illustrates the 'hailing' of the subject into being, that is to say, he demonstrates how, within particular social and ideological practices (ideological state apparatuses) we are called into being as subjects within legal, educational or medical discourses. Pecheux argues that the constitution of meaning (identity, subjectivity) is linked to the constitution of the subject in the figure of interpellation. This requires some understanding of the relationship between language, meaning and ideology in the forming of subjectivity. Pecheux (1982, p. 111) argues that the meaning of words or phrases does not exist in itself but through the ideological positions in which words are produced. This is an extension of Wittgenstein's (1958, p. 43) relation of meaning to use (the meaning of a word is its use in the language), in that Pecheux argues that use is determined according to ideological formations in which positions of use are inscribed:

Words change their meaning according to the positions held by those who use them ... they find their meaning by reference to those ideological formations in which those positions are inscribed. (1982, p. 111)

For Pecheux, a discursive formation is inscribed within an ideological formation and it circumscribes what can or should be said, so that words gain their meaning from the discursive formation in which they are produced:

Individuals are interpellated as speaking-subjects (as subjects of their discourse) by the discursive formations which represent 'in language' the ideological formations that correspond to them. (1982, p. 112)

Thus, whereas in the earlier ideas of reflective, reflexive and critical subjects the subject is viewed in terms of being able to occupy positions of transcendence or autonomy towards reality through the transparency of rational and critical discourse, according to these latter ideas on subjectivity such positioning is imaginary. The former position presupposes *a subject who is able to be* reflective, reflexive or critical; the latter position argues that there *can only be subjects of these different practices*, which is to argue that the subject comes into being as a subject through such practices—the subject does not exist independently or prior to them. Thus, the subject is not someone who responds to phenomena with the critical tools of reflection but someone who is called into being as a subject through the discursive form of reflection in which phenomena are constituted. Hence, the subject is always already a subject of discourse.

Perhaps we can see this happening in both Angela's and Andy's narratives in which they comment upon their initial teaching experiences. In such remarks they construct pupils as particular kinds of learners (Angela) and teachers as particular kinds of teachers (Andy), and in such statements they are also constructing their own pedagogized identities. These narratives involve imaginary identifications of others and the self. It is in these narrative practices that student teachers are forming



and re-forming their identifications as teachers. The notion of the teacher as a rational and independent individual able to occupy an objective or transcendent position with regard to her or his teaching becomes less tenable when we consider these fluctuating discursive positions that involve such imaginary identifications that are not recognized as such but which provide the individual with a sense of autonomy in relation to their early teaching experiences. However, the theory of interpellation as a process that produces the subject does not take into account the point that on many occasions interpellation fails.

### **Lacan, Zizek and the subject**

The chief architect behind these more unstable ideas of subjectivity is the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose theory of the subject is based upon three orders, the imaginary, the symbolic and the Real. It is that which resists symbolization, the Lacanian Real, and our way of coping with it, that Althusser's notion of interpellation fails to take into account when theorizing the subject. Whilst the notions of reflective, reflexive or critical practitioner discussed earlier presuppose a subject who is able *to be reflective* etc., the Lacanian subject emerges as a production of imaginary and symbolic aspects of these discursive practices in which practice (teaching) and beliefs are construed, but the subject also emerges through the Real of desire and the structures of fantasy.

For Lacan, the subject is never a subject-in-him or herself but always a subject of the imaginary and symbolic orders, and likewise with others we can never know them in themselves but only through imaginary and symbolic identifications. Thus, our ideas of self and others are based on who we imagine ourselves or others to be, or who the other thinks we are. Because it is not possible for language to identify the self or the other in-themselves we are faced with the idea of lack in both the symbolic and the subject. We can perhaps begin to see that in this theory any idea of a transcendent position from which to identify one's self or others is impossible. The symbolic never fully represents the subject nor can the subject ever state who he or she is.

Imaginary identification concerns the idea of an ideal other; it concerns the image of who we would like to be or become. Buchanan (2000, p. 117) cites as examples of such identification the striving for educational qualifications in which is incorporated a desire for another self. We can see this process in the struggle to achieve good A level results, a degree or even a successful PGCE qualification in order to become a teacher. Symbolic identification concerns identification with the place from where we are observed (Zizek, 1989, p. 105), for example, institutional practices and discourses such as law, medicine or education that position and regulate individuals as subjects. These identification processes can be seen as regulatory systems in which the gaze of symbolic identification tends to dominate. The symbolic order is the order of language and other social practices in which we acquire our subjectivity and identity. It is the order in and through which we understand ourselves, the world and others. Meaning is achieved through the interrelation of signifiers and not according to a fixed relation between signifier and signified. For Lacan, 'a signifier

represents the subject for another signifier' (1979, p. 207). That is to say, the signifier never represents a subject-in-itself but always for another signifier.

The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as a subject. (p. 207)

Zizek (1998 p. 74) provides a good illustration of this process. He focuses on the medical chart, which usually hangs at the bottom of a hospital patient's bed. This chart, as a signifier, does not represent the patient-in-him or herself; rather, it represents the patient for the signifying chain of medical discourse. A pupil's school report does not represent the pupil-in-herself but for the signifying chain of different subject-knowledge discourses. Similarly, the National Curriculum Attainment Levels do not represent the progress of pupils-in-themselves but for the pedagogical/ideological discourse which they reflect. The teacher educator's report on a student teacher's progress does not represent the student teacher in-herself but according to the signifying chain of the TTA Standards discourse. Similarly, Angela and Andy's narratives do not represent them, their pupils or their supporting teachers in-themselves but according to particular pedagogic discourses. The consequence of this theory of meaning is that the symbolic order, the Other, is always lacking; it cannot contain the subject-in-herself but only according to the shifting fields of signifiers that function within ideological frameworks in which identifications are produced and policed.

It is important to consider what are the normalizing conventions that police teacher identifications, what are the dominant ideological frameworks whose gaze maintains particular psychosocial identifications of teaching. This question can be addressed to reflective, reflexive or critical discourses developed in action research in education in order to explore their ideological framing and how they regulate and police teacher identifications. We can begin to enquire how these ostensibly emancipatory discourses function as interpellatory practices that form operations of surveillance that are psychically and socially maintained; a way of healing the inevitable inconsistencies and disruptions of acting.

Lacan theorizes the Real in different ways (see Zizek, 1989, pp. 169–173). The most uncomplicated sense refers to that which lies beyond symbolization, to brute reality. The Real cannot be symbolized but symbolization involves a cut into the Real and on occasions the Real disrupts the symbolic order. Miller (in Zizek, 1989, p. 171) notes:

The Real is a shock of a contingent encounter which disrupts the automatic circulation of the symbolic mechanism; a grain of sand preventing its smooth functioning; a traumatic encounter which ruins the balance of the symbolic universe of the subject.

Lacan does not limit his theory of subjectivity to imaginary and symbolic identification because the symbolic is always lacking (the content of the Real cannot be symbolized). Everyday illustrations of this lack include, for example, trying to provide an absolute definition of teaching, or trying to capture the fullness of a classroom event; in such cases words are simply not enough, there is always

something left out of our attempts to describe or explain what happened. Similarly, signifiers that constitute interpellation are never all-inclusive, they do not capture the subject in him or herself, and according to Žižek (1989, pp. 120–121) interpellation always fails! We can notice this lack in the symbolic or this failure of interpellation and the contingent encounter of the Real when student teachers begin to teach. Many often feel frustrated and a few experience feelings of panic, stress or extreme anxiety when all their planning and expectations break down, when their pupils refuse to listen and when they lose control of a lesson. In such extreme situations the student fails to live up to the symbolic mandate of being a teacher, or another way of putting this is that such occurrences involve a failed interpellation. We might see such disruptive experiences as an interruption of the symbolic order of teaching by the real-of-teaching.

Of course, when such moments arise things do not come to an abrupt halt, the student teacher continues to struggle to cope and reach the security of the end of the lesson! Afterwards students will normally find a way of talking about such experiences and express their feelings. In such narratives they will frequently blame themselves, sometimes their pupils and sometimes their tutors or the training course itself. It is in such narratives that we can recognize causal strategies that students employ to explain the ‘problem’. It is these discursive strategies that Lacan and Žižek are concerned with as the means by which subjects deal with failed interpellation because the content of such discourses, the element which is perceived by the subject to be the cause of the problem, forms the Lacanian symptom.

By blaming the failed teaching experience on their lack of ability or the pupils etc., students produce a symptom, a disruptive element that is perceived to prevent a successful lesson. The symptom invokes a desire supported by a fantasy discourse that masks the inconsistency of reality and compensates for the discomfort of failure, and in doing so fills the lack in the Other, the failed interpellation. At the same time the symptom is invested with enjoyment (*jouissance*). As such, the symptom defines and gives consistency to identification:

The function of fantasy is to serve as a screen concealing this inconsistency (the lack in the Other) ... it constitutes the frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful. (Žižek, 1989, p. 123)

But even in cases when the subject passes through the fantasy and recognizes the symptom, why does the symptom still persist? Žižek (1989, pp. 72–75) describes how Lacan tried to account for the radical ontological status of the symptom-as-Real by focusing on *jouissance*, a kernel of enjoyment attached to the symptom but lying beyond the symbolic. It is this surplus of enjoyment that the symbolic order, the figure of interpellation, fails to embrace but which is responsible for identification. Žižek demonstrates this surplus of enjoyment in relation to racist ideologies: the other is not disliked because they possess pathological qualities; on the contrary, *they are like that because they are*—in other words, the other possesses an indefinable element that is in him more than himself and which gives rise to racist discourse.

When we listen to student teachers’ explanations for a disappointing lesson we can detect this process of failed interpellation (a lack in teaching), which precipitates a

desire for the Other (to be part of the symbolic order of teaching). The student teacher fetishizes the symptom (themselves, pupils, the course, etc.) and places it within a fantasy scenario that screens the initial lack and gives a sense of consistency to being. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for the enjoyment of their symptoms to persist even when they may have been able to ‘pass through the fantasy’ of their explanations. Take the example of another student teacher, Sally, who was experiencing difficulty in providing effective introductions to her lessons and whose desire to succeed was supported by a fantasy scenario which took the form of a total conviction in the belief that if the instructions and guidance provided by her tutors were clear enough then she would be able to teach effectively:

In college no one said how you do it ... this is how to break it down. I felt I got all these theories and everyone skirted around the issues but no one had really said this is how it's done step by step, no one told me a step by step how you do it. The school would say we want you to plan something on identity but I somehow felt there was this void and I was ... I don't know what went there...

This led into a difficult series of discussions in which she berated her tutors for not providing clearer guidelines. The difficulties she was experiencing in action (the real-of teaching) were crystallized in the form of ‘poor guidance’, a transference mechanism through which ‘poor guidance’ becomes a symptom riddled with jouissance. The production of desire supported by a fantasy structure in which the symptom is invested with jouissance complements interpellation. But how are these processes manifested in discourse? Lacan's solution is the *point de capiton*.

### **Point de capiton**

Translated into English as ‘quilting point’ or ‘anchoring point’, this term refers literally to an upholstery button, a device which pins down the stuffing in upholstery work. Lacan (1977, p. 303) uses the term to discuss how particular signifiers retroactively stitch the subject into the signifying chain. In *The sublime object of ideology* (1989, pp. 87–128), Žižek develops the notion of quilting with reference to the Althusserian idea of interpellation and shows how key signifiers interpellate or ‘hail’ individuals into subject positions. He describes how meaning is structured through key nodal points or signifiers, which articulate the truth of a particular ideological discourse. We have already seen how medical signifiers do not represent the subject in-herself but for other signifiers in medical discourse. Žižek also shows that when discourse concerned with freedom is quilted through communism, a particular structure of meaning will develop, relating to class struggle and so on. On the other hand, if this discourse is quilted through an idea of liberal democracy, a different structure of meaning develops. He argues (p. 88) that what is at stake in the ideological struggle is which of the nodal points, *points de capiton*, will totalise the structure of meaning. The *point de capiton* is thus a signifier which, as a signifier, unifies a given field, constitutes its identity: it is, so to speak, the word to which things themselves refer to recognize themselves in their unity (pp. 95–96). The importance of this term for the constitution of subjectivity and identity is crucial

because individuals are interpellated into subject positions through discourses whose structure of meaning is unified by *points de capiton*:

The *point de capiton* is the point through which the subject is sewn to the signifier, and at the same time the point which interpellates individual into subject by addressing it with the call of a master signifier ... — in a word, it is the point of the subjectivation of the signifier's chain. (p. 101)

In relation to Andy's narrative, if 'teaching' is quilted through an ideology of lesson plans, project plans and so on, a particular structure of meaning emerges than if it is quilted through Andy's desire for developing a particular pedagogy. In these two discourses teaching is constructed differently and it seems that what is at stake in this particular teacher education domain is a struggle for a particular ideological discourse to totalize the structure of meaning.

However, and this is crucial to my point about ideological interpellation, the *point de capiton* is not a signifier attached to a specific signified; on the contrary, it is a signifier without a signified but which relies for its meaning on an ideological framing. When we consider the production of the symptom in student teacher narratives and the fantasy scenarios in which their experiences are given consistency, we can see how the *point de capiton* holds the place of the ideological symptom, the fantasy element that structures their narrative.

We can analyse Angela and Andy's remarks by considering key terms that structure their narratives, thus illustrating how these in turn are structured by ideological formations and not some objective transcendent position. Ironically, it is the belief in being able to occupy such a position of transcendence that is the ultimate position of ideology. That is to say, it is the ultimate ideological interpellation, creating the belief in an autonomous rational subject who is able to make a detached observation of action, or reasons for action, in order to reveal their truth. For Angela, the inconsistency and disruption experienced during teaching (the real-of-teaching) is screened out through her pathological discourse in which she identifies her pupils as not being able to cope with choice. In other words, the signifier 'choice' in the sense that her pupils cannot handle choice, acts as a symptom around which her fantasy scenario is constructed within an ideological framework of didactic pedagogy.

In her narrative, imaginary identifications of her pupils as particular kinds of learners, as well as a particular identification of herself as a failing teacher, become dominated by the symbolic gaze of a didactic pedagogy. For Angela, the signifier 'choice' when read within the framing of this pedagogy is full of Lacanian jouissance as it is used to denote the reason for an unsuccessful lesson, and further, that if this element is removed then harmony will be restored. Here there is no 'actual' teacher or 'actual' pupils, for both Angela and her pupils are formed within imaginary and symbolic identifications that create the idea of real subjects. Angela's narrative interpellates herself and her students within an ideological discourse in which students are labelled as particular kinds of learners and in which she begins to construct herself as a teacher within a particular didactic pedagogy. Thus, the signifier 'choice' relies upon a specific ideological framing for meaning to arise; in

itself it has no meaning. It could be argued, therefore, that through the signifier 'choice' and the fantasy scenario in which it is formative Angela constructs the pedagogized identities of her students and herself.

It is important that this process of interpellation is not seen simply as a product of imaginary and symbolic identification processes but that it is also affected by that which lies beyond interpellation, the Lacanian Real. Thus, disruption to the symbolic order of practice is explained through processes of desire to meet the symbolic mandate (to teach effectively), and this desire is supported by fantasy scenarios in which the disruptive element takes the form of a symptom invested with enjoyment and which, once removed, will effect the desire.

In Andy's narrative he expresses difficulty in learning to teach because he finds he is unable to achieve his desire to develop a particular pedagogy in art education with which he has become infatuated. He reads his school tutor's efforts to get him to construct more effective lesson plans and teaching projects as invasive and interfering. Of course, Andy's reading of his experience could be interpreted in a different way by arguing that he is using his desire as a defence mechanism in order to sidestep the concerns of his tutors, the fact that in their professional opinion he is as yet unable to construct effective lesson plans and put them into practice.

Today it would be almost heretical in the domain of initial teacher education to argue against the idea of producing clear and coherent lesson and project plans, but it has to be recognized that this approach to teaching is informed by a particular ideological framework which constructs teaching and, by implication, learning, as a formulaic and teacher-led process. Thus, Andy occupies conflictual discursive positions between his desire for a particular pedagogy and the demands of his tutors for a different approach to pedagogy. Essentially these are ideological conflicts within which this student teacher is struggling to form his identity as a teacher. Such conflicts hinge upon *preferred identities* and their related forms of practice and understanding.

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the use of reflective (reflexive or critical) discourses to evaluate teaching experiences and rationales is important and I have discussed two short narratives in which two student teachers have reflected on their experiences in order to become more effective teachers. However, the intended emancipatory function of these reflective practices obscures the point that they are always already interpellatory and that they produce their own boundaries and policing mechanisms, their own normative frameworks. I have argued that such interpellations rely upon imaginary and symbolic identifications that are fused with processes of desire supported by fantasy (ideology) in which problematic elements are framed and objectified in the form of symptoms which when removed will lead to improved teaching. Thus, the element of transcendence presupposed by reflective (reflexive or critical) practice and its attendant notion of a prior consciousness or subjectivity able to reflect is replaced by the notion that reflective practice produces subjects and that such practice is always already ideological; the student teacher does not exist prior

to reflection; he is interpellated as a student teacher through reflective practice and policed by its particular ideological framing that maintains specific psychosocial identifications of teaching. The apparent transcendent element of reflective practice can therefore be seen as an ideological illusion, the ultimate ideological position. The consequences of this theorization of subjectivity for initial teacher education are that those involved in this enterprise are constantly positioned within series of discourses and practices in which the 'constituent parts', i.e. teaching, student teachers, tutors and pupils, are never fixed or substantial but always changing according to how they are quilted within the ideological frameworks that structure understanding.

From a Lacanian perspective the problem with reflective practice is that it fails to acknowledge the lack in the Other, the symbolic order, through which understanding is achieved, and the persistence of the Real. If we only consider the imaginary and symbolic constituents of reflection when trying to evaluate problems in teaching then we fail to take into account how the real-of-teaching is screened through processes of desire and fantasy in which problems become problems within ideological frameworks of reflection. The unavoidable difficulty with reflective practice is that the Real cannot be symbolized and yet its inevitable omission from the symbolic means that we are forever seeking answers to the Real through the symbolic and the answers are always lacking ... and so we keep on inquiring.

## Notes

1. Donald Schön, in *The reflective practitioner*, develops an important distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, which my use of the term '*reflective practitioner*' does not convey, but nevertheless I think that both positions assume a notion of transcendence towards practice, that is to say, a position from which *one can be reflective*, whether during the event or afterwards.
2. John Elliott's advocacy of reflexive practice is grounded in the hermeneutic philosophy of Gadamer and Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Gadamer's philosophy is concerned with the central ideas of tradition and language. Meaning can only emerge through already assimilated meanings that influence interpretation of new experiences, but in making such interpretations both the subject and the tradition of which he is part are inevitably changed. Thus, for Elliott, change in practitioner-based research involves an ongoing process of interpretation of teaching phenomena, including the self, in which both self and phenomena evolve. Any theoretical perspective selected by the teacher to inform future practice will therefore only make sense if it can be integrated into his or her project of praxis.

In relation to critical practice, Wilfred Carr and Stephen Kemmis look to the Frankfurt School and, in particular, Jürgen Habermas, for their philosophical grounding. Whereas Gadamer argues that we can never escape the prejudicial affects of tradition and language and are therefore always involved in an ongoing evolutionary dialogue with practice, Habermas aims for a post-ideological situation of undistorted communication. He is concerned with extra-linguistic phenomena such as class and power. Applied to educational contexts this means developing a political awareness of institutional frameworks, discourses and power relations in which teachers function in order to expose their ideological and hegemonic structures. Habermas's project is therefore transformative, to enable a more equitable, socially just and democratic system.

Although the contrasting philosophical groundings of reflexive and critical practice lead

to either evolutionary or transformational projects, both place an emphasis upon language and rationality to achieve these different ends. It is my contention that both leave out important ontological dimensions that impact upon perceptions of practice and future approaches to practice. These ontological dimensions are non-rational and unable to be captured in language but have an important impact upon the forming of subjectivity. I shall discuss these issues in relation to Lacan's theory of the subject, which I will apply to the forming of teacher identities.

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