THINKING WITH THEORY: TOWARD AN ALTERNATIVE ETHICO-ONTO-

EPISTEMOLOGY IN EDUCATION

by

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(Under the Direction of Stephanie Jones)

ABSTRACT

In this study, I use theories of poststructuralism, feminist new materialism, posthumanism, and affect to investigate and theorize my experiences as a classroom teacher entangled with dominant discourses related to gender, social class, neoliberalism, and postfeminism. This dissertation is non-traditional in structure, as it addresses teacher educators, educational researchers, and teacher practitioners in three manuscript-length chapters for publication in scholarly journals. In the first manuscript, I draw on my experience as an elementary school teacher who attempted to create a "Pinterest-perfect" classroom. Using vignettes, images, and poststructural conceptualizations of subjectivity and discourse, I demonstrate that despite dominant notions of individual choice, the Pinterest-perfect classroom can be understood as an object of discourse that both produces and is produced by discursive power (Foucault, 1972). In the second manuscript, I theorize my engagement with classroom transformations as a cruelly optimistic attachment (Berlant, 2011) tied to my demoralization (Santoro, 2018) as a teacher working in a destructive educational environment dominated by policies and practices designed to uphold neoliberal capitalism. I demonstrate that my attachment to classroom transformations and my vision of good work (Gardner et al., 2001) as a teacher

were ultimately connected to fantasies of the good life (Berlant, 2011). Finally, in the third manuscript, I turn to ontology and make an argument for integrating and explicitly teaching theories of immanence in teacher education courses. I argue that integrating and explicitly teaching theories of immanence can radically reorient students' thinking, being, and doing, which can fundamentally change how they approach teaching.

INDEX WORDS: Discourse; Thinking with theory; Feminist new materialism; Posthumanism; Poststructuralism; Cruel optimism; Immanence; Ontology; Teacher education; Intra-action; Entanglement; Thing power; Subjectivity; Neoliberalism; Postfeminism; Social Class; Foucault; Barad; Bennett; Berlant; Demoralization; Classroom transformations; Pinterest perfect classrooms

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: IN SEARCH OF AN ALTERNATIVE ETHICO-ONTO-EPISTEMOLGY

A Memory from My Life as an Elementary School Teacher

I sit at my assistant principal's desk, smiling politely and nodding as she talks about the scores on my observations throughout the year. She seems pleased, pointing out the 4s and 5s I was awarded in various areas of the Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards (TAPS). Despite the praise, I could feel sweat developing under my Friday spirit wear. I remind myself to calm down. After all, my observation scores are high. I am a highly requested teacher among families. I always come to work early and stay late. Last year I even received the coveted bonus reserved for teachers whose students showed the most academic growth. I was also nominated for Teacher of the Year. I have nothing to worry about.

Her smile fades as she opens the manila folder on her desk and stares at the graph inside. She is looking at my Teacher Effectiveness Measure (TEM), the numerical score with an accompanying graph designed to show my students' academic growth. She points at the bubble on the graph, "Your students showed growth, but you really want your bubble to be over here." She points her pen to the quadrant to the right. Apparently, they grew, but not enough, according to the standardized test scores that were used to calculate their growth.

I readjust my body in the chair and hold back tears as I look up at my boss. "So, is this something I should be concerned about?" She assures me that it is ok *this time.* She tells me that the district monitors these scores and since they know I am a great teacher, it will be ok as long as it doesn't happen again next year.

I stand up to leave, surprised by how shaky my knees feel. I drift back to my classroom, blankly smiling at the teachers and children who pass by as my mind swirls with questions and anger rises in my chest. Where do these numbers come from? Who gets to decide how much growth is enough? How are they even defining growth? How can everything that happens in the classroom be reduced to these numbers?

The anger I felt that day and the questions that raced through my mind were not new for me. At this time, I had been teaching for nearly a decade and I had spent my entire career questioning the ubiquitous focus on testing, which seemed to reduce education to test preparation, leaving little room for anything else, including meaningful and transformative learning for students, which was the reason I became a teacher. Like many teachers, I entered the profession because I wanted to contribute something positive to society (Moore & Clarke, 2016; Rots & Aelterman, 2012; Wilkins et al., 2012). I also wanted to "promote greater equality of opportunity for young people" (Moore & Clarke, 2016, p. 667). In short, I went into teaching, despite its relatively low status and material rewards, for moral and ethical reasons. However, as a public school teacher, I found myself in a system that seemed to be at odds with my values. I was not able to access the moral and ethical rewards of teaching (Santoro, 2011), which were the reasons I became a teacher in the first place. My struggle to make sense of this predicament is what brought me to doctoral studies. I wanted to understand how education had become consumed with testing and data and how I could continue my work as an educator in a way that was more aligned with what I believed education should look and feel like.

Approach to Inquiry: Thinking with Theory

In this non-traditional, three-manuscript dissertation, I *think with theory* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) to analyze my experiences as a teacher. Thinking with theory is the process of

using theoretical and philosophical concepts to analyze data, rather than relying on some more conventional "qualitative" methodologies for analysis like coding, theme generation, grounded theory, and others. This process I use involves "putting theory to work," which means that researchers who take up this approach use "theory to think *with* their data (or use data to think *with* theory)" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. vii). The purpose, as Jackson and Mazzei (2012) wrote, is "to accomplish a reading of data that is both *within and against interpretivism*" (p. vii). In other words, the goal is not to *represent some kind of essential reality*—to create a logical narrative that centers the research participants and seeks to uncover or understand truth or meaning. Rather, thinking with theory is "about cutting into the center, opening it up to see what newness might be incited" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. viii). The idea is to "gain deeper and multilayered understandings of social life" (Thiel, 2015, p. 118) that cannot be achieved through mechanistic and reductive coding practices of what "exists" in data generated by a scholar (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). For example, in the manuscript that follows, I use poststructural theory, specifically the concepts of subjectivity and discourse, to analyze my endeavor to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom. Rather than collecting data about these types of classrooms and analyzing them through coding, grounded theory, or theme generation, I draw on my experiences creating a Pinterest-perfect classroom and analyze those experiences with poststructural concepts. In other words, I think about the "data" (vignettes of my experiences) and the theory together. By "plugging into" poststructural concepts, I was able to open up a different way of thinking about my "data" (i.e., my endeavor to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom).

Thinking with theory is similar to *writing as method* (Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) in that the focus is on the *topic* of research, rather than the *participants*. In this approach, the researcher uses "conventional and transgressive data to theorize without delivering

anyone or any place in authentic, more adequate, persuasive representations" (St. Pierre, 2007, p. 5306). The use of "conventional and transgressive data" here is important. While researchers who think with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) sometimes use conventional data (e.g., interview and observational data), they also use data that traditional qualitative researchers might not use and would likely consider to be "uncodable, excessive, out-of-control, out-of-category" (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 179). This reconceptualization of data and data analysis that thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) requires cannot be thought without a reconceptualization of research itself. Thus, thinking with theory can be thought of as a form of post qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2011a).

What is Post Qualitative Inquiry?

Post qualitative inquiry, a term which first appeared in print in 2011 (St. Pierre, 2011a), began in 1994 when Elizabeth St. Pierre was writing the methodology chapter of her dissertation (St. Pierre, 1995). St. Pierre had studied poststructuralism and postmodernism independently throughout her doctoral program, but she was trained in conventional humanist qualitative methodology and completed her dissertation research based on that training. It was during the writing of her methodology chapter, however, that "poststructuralism finally kicked in, and qualitative methodology failed" (St. Pierre, 2021a, p. 5). One of the first concepts to fail was the conventional understanding of data. As she wrote, she recognized that she was using "data that were not textualized, fixed, and visible" (St. Pierre, 2011a, p. 621). She was working outside of qualitative research's neat categories (data, data collection, data analysis, the field, the interview) and instead was thinking with the words of poststructural theorists and all sorts of other data, which she has called "transgressive data"—emotional data, dream data, sensual data, memory data, and response data (St. Pierre, 1997). Claiming these types of data, rather than suppressing

them, set in motion the deconstruction of the entire structure of conventional qualitative inquiry. After many years of deconstructing the structuring concepts of "conventional humanist qualitative methodology," what she and others called "working the ruins," St. Pierre called for something new. She stated, "I suggest that we've worked within/against the ruined structure long enough. We could now, if we wish, give up conventional humanist qualitative inquiry and its structuring concepts and categories—just let it go" (St. Pierre, 2011a, p. 623). By refusing conventional qualitative methodology, St. Pierre contended that we "can now do something different from the beginning" (St. Pierre, 2011a, p. 623). For her, that "something different" was post qualitative inquiry.

But what *is* post qualitative inquiry? Following St. Pierre (2021a), who reminds us that "in philosophy, negative definitions are a good place to begin" (p. 6), I begin with what post qualitative inquiry is *not*. As St. Pierre emphasizes throughout her work, post qualitative inquiry is not a methodology and does not employ predetermined methods. There is no preexisting research process that ensures "validity," and no preconceived research designs. It is also not a variation of qualitative research, nor is it a rejection of conventional qualitative research. Post qualitative inquiry is a different approach altogether. As St. Pierre put it, the purpose of post qualitative inquiry is "not to find, describe, interpret, and represent what is" (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 9) as in conventional humanist qualitative methodology. A focus on representation and interpretivism is unthinkable in post qualitative inquiry because it centers the human being of Enlightenment humanism, a legacy that poststructural theory deconstructs.

The Human Being and Methodology

The human being at the center of qualitative inquiry is a legacy of Enlightenment-era thinker Descartes, who established a mind/body dualism and the idea of the conscious, thinking subject

who can "discover, describe, and know" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 494). From this perspective, truth and reality are discoverable by the unchanging and agentic human being. St. Pierre (2017) described this subject as "a unique, unified, agentive, coherent, self-contained individual/person/self uncontaminated throughout his life by culture, by history, by living" (p. 687). This conception of the human, so ingrained in many of us in the colonized west and northern hemisphere, is normalized to the point of imperception and conventional qualitative inquiry is grounded in its assumptions (St. Pierre, 2017). Qualitative inquiry's reliance on the humanist subject permeates the entire structure, from methods to data analysis to findings, the entire approach revolves around this "knowing, speaking, inquiring subject" (St. Pierre, 2011b, p. 51).

Poststructuralism and other "post theories" (e.g., posthumanism) however, deconstruct the Enlightenment-era human being. From this perspective, the human is described in terms of subjectivity, rather than a stable identity. The poststructural subject is an unstable, ongoing construction, a description, subjected to power, and produced in relation to power. As St. Pierre (2011b) explained, "subjectivity implies the ongoing construction of human being, human being in flux, in process–at every moment being disciplined, regulated, normalized, produced, and, at the same time, resisting, shifting, changing, producing" (p. 46). With this shift in the human subject comes a reorientation of other related concepts, such as truth, language, reality, and freedom, which together structures our understanding of the world. This reorientation makes traditional qualitative research unthinkable with poststructural theory.

So what *is* post qualitative inquiry? This question comes from a humanist perspective, rooted in the idea that post qualitative inquiry must be a stable concept, easily defined and described.

Nonetheless, I understand post qualitative inquiry to begin with poststructuralism and its accompanying ontology of immanence (St. Pierre, 2021b).

Immanent ontologies are based on the idea that *one* mode of being exists. This is a radical departure from classical, taken-for-granted ontology, which is rooted in transcendence, or the idea that *two* modes of being exist. Classical transcendent ontologies are found in the work of many philosophers, such as Plato, Kant, and Descartes, among others. In these two-world ontologies, one mode of being is considered transcendent over the other. For example, Plato wrote about two distinct realms, the world of forms and the world of appearances. The world of forms is the transcendent, or the Ideal, while the world of appearances is the non-ideal, the "lower" or subservient mode of being. Similarly, the God of the Abrahamic religions is a transcendent substance, not of this world, while the physical world where humans exist is the imperfect. In these examples of two-world ontologies, the "higher" mode of being is the Ideal and "lower" mode of being is akin to an imperfect or flawed reflection of the Ideal. Here, there is Truth to be found (i.e, the transcendent). Thus, philosophical systems rooted in these ontologies foster a focus on explaining or discovering transcendence or Truth. Here, there is an emphasis on what exists, what *is*. In other words, the focus here is on *being* rather than becoming.

Immanent ontologies, on the other hand, are rooted in the idea that there is only one mode of being or one substance. These univocal ontologies can be found in the work of philosophers such as Spinoza, Deleuze, and Foucault, among others. Immanent ontologies flatten the hierarchy among modes of being because no substance or mode of being is considered supreme or ideal. There is no transcendent Truth to be found. From this perspective, the universe is an expression of something from within, not a creation from the outside, and it is in a constant state of flux. Thus, these ontological systems foster a focus on what is to come, what might be. Rather

7

than fostering a focus on what *is*, which is what is often produced in transcendent ontologies, immanent ontology emphasizes *becoming*.

Immanence refers to "what can not yet be thought and done" (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 4) and this creation of new ways of thinking is the work of philosophy. As St. Pierre (2017) put it, "philosophy is both the creation of concepts and the laying out of a plane of immanence" (p. 692). These philosophies of immanence, oriented to what might be, or what could be, requires experimentation and creativity that moves the inquirer beyond the dogmatic, the inherited image of thought, which is why post qualitative inquiry refuses methodology and does not provide a "recipe." As St. Pierre (2021b) explained, poststructural theorists, such as Deleuze, Foucault, Derrida, and Lyotard, "refused pre-existing, formalized, systematized, procedural methods and methodology because they overdetermine thought and practice, closing off what *might be* thought and done in favor of doing, thinking, finding, and representing *what is*, what exists" (p. 164). In other words, a preconceived methodology is not aligned with poststructuralism's ontology of immanence and is therefore incompatible with post qualitative inquiry.

Although post qualitative inquiry does not involve predetermined methodology, St. Pierre (2015a) suggested that researchers interested in post qualitative inquiry engage in three specific practices. These include: (1) rejecting conventional humanist qualitative methodology; (2) reading extensively in "post" theories; and (3) identifying a theory or concept from theory that is helpful in thinking about the research topic. These three components ensure that theory and philosophy guide the inquiry, which could potentially allow us to think and live differently. The purpose of all of this is to engage with a new ontology that might reorder our thinking and bring about material change in the world. As St. Pierre (2018) pointed out, the goal of post qualitative inquiry is to "create different worlds for living" (p. 604).

This dissertation represents my work as a doctoral student and former teacher searching for something different. I began this journey as an elementary school teacher searching for answers about how education had become testing and data-centered and why this approach was so deeply embedded in schooling. I was deeply troubled by the top-down mandates that required me to abandon my teaching philosophy and moral and ethical convictions daily as a classroom teacher. I wanted to *be* different in the classroom. I wanted to move away from teaching academic skills in isolation, disconnected from the world, from any sort of context, including students' lives. I wanted something authentic that involved active and ethical engagement with the subject matter. I wanted to follow students' interests. I wanted to foster collaboration instead of competition. I didn't have the language to articulate it at the time, but essentially what I longed for was a reconceptualization of education that recognized the entanglement of knowing, being, and ethics, which is what scholars refer to as ethico-onto-epistemology.

The term ethico-onto-epistemology was coined by feminist-physicist-philosopher Karen Barad (2007) to indicate the inseparability of ethics, ontology, and epistemology. Barad introduced this concept in their theory of agential realism, which proposed a reconceptualization of reality that moves away from traditional dualisms (e.g., mind/body, subject/object, nature/culture) and instead emphasizes entanglement and intra-action. In other words, Barad's agential realism is rooted in an immanent ontology that "refuses the notion of *separation* as the *a priori* starting point of existence" (Ringrose et al., 2020, p. 5). Barad argues that these types of ontological frameworks that begin with separation "ignore the natural intimacy and proximity of the universe" (Ringrose et al., 2020, p. 5). Their notion of ethico-onto-epistemology coincides with their theory of agential realism as it emphasizes the *entanglement* of ethics, being, and knowing.

As I mentioned above, I think of my doctoral journey as a search for something different, as a journey that began as an ethico-onto-epistemological search for a way to teach and do school differently. Along the way, I studied various theories and was immediately drawn to feminist and poststructural philosophy. To say that I experienced a "shock to thought" (Massumi, 2002) during this time seems like an understatement. The more I read these theories, the more they became part of me, restructuring my thinking and living. Eventually, I realized that many of my long-held, taken-for-granted beliefs and views of the world and myself had deconstructed. What started as a journey related to the ethics of teaching and education became a much broader and deeper exploration into philosophy and theory that brought me to fundamental questions about knowledge (epistemology) and the nature of existence itself (ontology). The three manuscript-length chapters that follow offer a glimpse into this exploration. In each chapter, I analyze my experiences as a teacher using theories of immanence (e.g., poststructuralism and feminist new materialism). Overall, I aim to show how thinking with these theories reoriented my thinking, being, and doing, or my ethico-onto-epistemology, and how this type of reorientation can produce new forms of thought and life for others as well, including teachers.

Overview of Chapters

In chapter two, "The Pinterest-Perfect Classroom: An Object of Discourse" I explore my experience as a teacher working to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom, an ideal that is well-known among teachers in the U.S., particularly elementary school teachers (Caudill, 2018; Mscourterrest, 2023; Watson, 2017). Characterized by stylish furniture, elaborate decor, and meticulous color schemes, these spaces have emerged in recent years with the rise of influencer culture and have become an ideal that many women teachers aspire to emulate. Using vignettes, images, and poststructural conceptualizations of subjectivity and discourse, I demonstrate that

despite dominant notions of individual choice rooted in the ontological assumption that human beings are insular and autonomous individuals, these classrooms can be understood as an object of discourse that both produce and are produced by discursive power (Foucault, 1969/1972).

In chapter three, "Classroom Transformations: A Cruelly Optimistic Attachment" I explore my engagement with classroom transformations as a cruelly optimistic attachment (Berlant, 2011) tied to my demoralization (Santoro, 2018) as a teacher working in a destructive educational environment dominated by policies and practices designed to uphold neoliberal capitalism. I demonstrate that my attachment to classroom transformations and my vision of good work (Gardner et al., 2001) as a teacher were ultimately connected to fantasies of the good life (Berlant, 2011).

In chapter four, titled "Theories of Immanence as a Way Forward for Teacher Education," I turn to ontology and make an argument for integrating and explicitly teaching theories of immanence in teacher education courses. Using political theorist Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of thing power and theoretical physicist Karen Barad's (2007) concepts of entanglement and intra-action, I demonstrate how philosophies of immanence reorient thought and produce "a lively new ontology" in which "the world's radical aliveness comes to light" (Barad 2007, p. 33). I argue that integrating and explicitly teaching these theories can radically reorient students' thinking, being, and doing, or their ethico-onto-epistemology.

Finally, chapter five, "Thinking-Being-Doing Something Different" offers a reflection on the main themes that run through the dissertation. I reiterate the idea that discursive power produces subjectivity, or how we think and live in the world, and that poststructural conceptualizations of subjectivity allow for refusal of dominant discourses and imply a continual changing or becoming. I also describe the impact that theory and philosophy have had on my

11

thinking-being-doing, or ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007) as a way to highlight the need

for *all* teachers to have access to theoretical and philosophical concepts so they can think-live-be

in ways that are empowering and lifegiving.

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CHAPTER 2

THE PINTEREST-PERFECT CLASSROOM: AN OBJECT OF DISCOURSE

Creating a Pinterest-Perfect Classroom

I stand in the middle of my third-grade classroom, hands on my hips and head tilted to the right. I squint and chew my lip, trying to figure out where I've gone wrong. I just put what I thought would be the finishing touches on the reading nook I have been creating over the past few days, but something is not quite right. It doesn't say, "Cozy, but elegant" like the reading nooks I have been studying on Pinterest.

It looks sparse.

I pull out my iPhone and open the Pinterest application, where I have saved images of classroom "pinspirations." I scroll through the photographs until I reach the image of the reading nook I am attempting to recreate. The room is an oasis of soft, neutral colors–creams, sage green, and muted yellow. I enlarge the photo for a better look.

What am I missing?

I have a couch with decorative pillows. I have a coffee table with a vase of colorful artificial flowers resting on top. I have placed two cozy chairs on either side of the couch, and the area is anchored with a fluffy rug. Decorative signs hang on the wall behind the couch, proclaiming, "Home sweet classroom" and "Love never fails." But it still doesn't compare to the beautiful space I am staring at on Pinterest.

I look back at the Pinterest image and notice that the reading nook featured in the photograph has end tables on either side of the couch, which are topped with lamps. I shove my phone into my back pocket and grab my keys.

Where can I buy cute end tables and lamps?

Figure 1

Screenshot of my Pinterest board
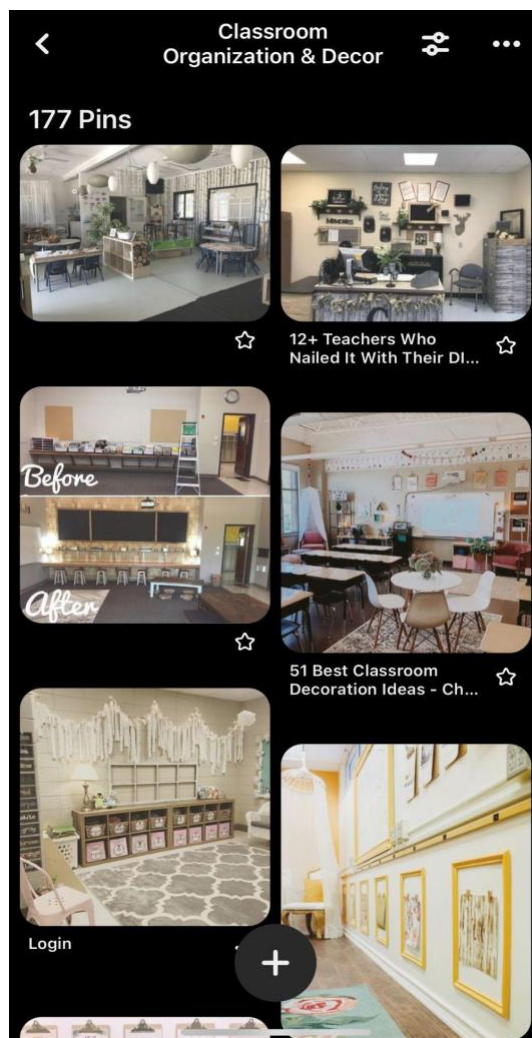
The classroom I was emulating on Pinterest is what teachers refer to as a *Pinterest-perfect* classroom. These classrooms are characterized by carefully curated color schemes,

stylish furniture, and perfect-looking décor. Pinterest-perfect classrooms vary in style, as some follow a specific theme (e.g., nature, ocean, tropical), while others showcase a particular decorative style, such as bohemian, farmhouse, or vintage. The Pinterest-perfect classrooms that I was drawn to were typically of the latter category and showcased stylish furniture, carefully curated color schemes, and homelike décor.

Images and videos of these various Pinterest-perfect classrooms have proliferated across social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok[1]. In fact, the popularity of the Pinterest-perfect classroom has become so widespread that it has been the focus of various publications on mainstream websites for teachers (e.g., Caudill, 2018; Mscourterrest, 2023) and on educators' personal websites (e.g., Henley, n.d.; Lamb, 2019; Watson, 2017). Within mainstream texts like the ones mentioned above, and in everyday conversations, the idea of the Pinterest-perfect classroom is often understood as an individual choice for teachers, something that some teachers choose to pursue because it is enjoyable, while others avoid it because it does not bring them happiness. For example, in a 2020 blog post titled, "Why I Won't Have a Pinterest-Perfect Classroom–And That's OK" the author classifies herself as the type of teacher who simply does not enjoy decorating: You see, I'm not one of those teachers who enjoy the arduous task of making her classroom look like Disneyland on steroids. I hate decorating. I hate coming up with a 'theme' for the new school year. I hate trying to bargain hunt at Home Goods or Target for an item that fits in with my non-existent theme in the correct color scheme (Mscourterrest, 2023, para. 2).

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[1] See Figures 2 and 3 below for examples.

Figure 2

Screenshot of a classroom from a Facebook Reel

Note. Reel posted by Schoolgirl Style Classroom Décor (2023)

Figure 3

Screenshot of a classroom from a TikTok video

Note. Video posted by Kaylor (2023)

     In the blog post described above, the author implies that there are two types of teachers: those who enjoy decorating their classrooms and those who do not. Although she does not see herself as part of the former category, she humorously implores teachers who enjoy decorating to be true to themselves: "Dear reader, I challenge you to go on with your unique, bad self. If you LOVE decorating your classroom, get high off those paint fumes and document it."

On the other hand, she encourages those like her, who do not enjoy decorating: "If that's not your thing, it's ok. Take a break from social media and remind yourself of your strengths, not your weaknesses."

In this blog post, the idea of the Pinterest-perfect classroom is presented as a personal choice, based on whether the teacher is good at and enjoys decorating her classroom. Similarly, teacher and author Farrah Henley (n.d.) pointed out that even budget-conscious teachers can create a "perfect *Pinterest Classroom* filled with color, organization, and designs that will awe students" (para 2). In one of her blog posts, she advised her readers that although "it can be difficult to see a way around the cost of items when scrolling through the thousands of pins [on Pinterest] …there are plenty of ways to dial down the dollars and still create a room of wonder" (para. 4). Henley explicitly acknowledges a common barrier to creating a Pinterest classroom— money—and offers some solutions. In the end, Henley still presents this kind of classroom aesthetic as attainable for all teachers, and again, simply an individual choice to be made.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, I aim to complicate the idea that the Pinterest-perfect classroom is an individual affair, freely chosen by a "unique, unified, agentive, coherent, self-contained individual" (St. Pierre, 2017, p. 687), and instead demonstrate how these kinds of classrooms can be understood as an object of *discourse* (Foucault, 1969/1972). In other words, I hope to offer teachers a way to think about the Pinterest-perfect classroom that moves beyond individual choice and highlights how powerful discursive forces operate in our everyday lives, affecting us in a multitude of ways, including how we approach designing and decorating our classrooms. Secondly, I critique this practice as problematic because it reproduces destructive discourses and power relations. For example, I highlight how the Pinterest-perfect classroom

reinscribes the idea that upper-middle-class femininity is superior and desirable, that women's worth is tied to beauty, and that postfeminist and neoliberal ideals of individualism and consumption should structure our ways of being. In what follows, I think with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) and draw on my experience as a woman teacher who strove to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom. I use vignettes and images from my experience to theorize the Pinterest-perfect classroom as an object of discourse that both produces and is produced by discursive power. In the next section, I offer a brief explanation of a poststructural understanding of discourse before exploring the specific discourses that produced my desire to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom.

Discourse and Subjectivity

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines discourse as "verbal interchange of ideas." However, this understanding of discourse is quite different from a poststructural[2] conceptualization of discourse, which is what I will engage within this paper. From a poststructural perspective, "discourse is not a language or a text but a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs" (Scott, 1988, p. 35). Although everyday understandings of discourse emphasize language and communication, poststrucutural thinkers argue that "discourse can never be just linguistic since it organizes a way of thinking into a way of acting in the world" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 485). Feminist philosopher Karen Barad (2003) emphasized this point when she wrote:

Discourse is not a synonym for language. Discourse does not refer to linguistic or signifying systems, grammars, speech acts, or conversations. To think of discourse as mere spoken or written words forming descriptive statements is to enact the mistake of

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[2] For an overview of key philosophical concepts in poststructural thought, see: St. Pierre, E. (2000). Poststructural feminism in education: An overview. Qualitative Studies in Education, 13(5), (477-515).

23

representationalist thinking. Discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and

enables what can be said. (p. 819)

Barad's idea of discourse restricting and enabling what can be said and done was the focus of

much of French philosopher Michel Foucault's work. In Foucault's (1969/1972) book, *The

Archaeology of Knowledge*, he argued that nothing meaningful exists outside of discourse. In

other words, it is discourses that allow us to make sense of the world; they structure language,

thought, knowledge, and "truth." They also constitute human subjectivity.

Subjectivity in feminist poststructuralism is "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and

emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the

world" (Weedon, 1997, p. 32). From this perspective, individuals are understood as subjects who

are constructed according to social relations and codes (St. Pierre, 2000). This notion of

subjectivity "implies the ongoing construction of human being, human being in flux, in process–

–at every moment being disciplined, regulated, normalized, produced, and, at the same time,

resisting, shifting, changing, producing" (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 46). In other words, feminist

poststructural thinkers reject the idea that human beings have an unchanging core self, an

identity that is "unified, coherent and relatively static" (Davies, 2003, p. xiii). Rather, human

beings construct themselves "by taking up available discourses and cultural practices" (St. Pierre,

2000, p. 502). This conception of subjectivity is a drastic departure from the dominant

understanding of human beings rooted in Enlightenment humanism, which is based on the idea

that every person is born with a unique core self. As educational researcher Mindy Blaise (2005)

wrote:

The concept of subjectivity is different from the concept of identity, as it shifts our

attention away from thinking of individuals as rational, unified, and universal beings and

toward focusing on how our everyday experiences are often shifting and sometimes

fragmented. (p. 17)

We can see this notion of subjectivity in the vignette above which describes my struggle to create

a reading nook in my classroom. I was trying to recreate an image from Pinterest that represented

what I thought my classroom should look like. In other words, the images I saw online shaped

my desire to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom. They shaped my subjectivity. If I were a

rational, unified, relatively static individual with a core identity, these images would not have

produced a desire to create this sort of classroom. A human with an identity, or core essence,

would remain relatively untouched by the discourses embedded in media images.

Foucault's work emphasizes the crucial connection between discourse and human

subjectivity, as he theorized that the human subject is produced within discourse. This means that

discourses shape how we think of ourselves, including our social identities, such as gender.

This connection between discourse and subjectivity is what I will focus on in the

remainder of this paper. My aim is to show how particular discourses, which exist in what

Foucault (1966/1970) called *discursive formations*, related to social class, gender, and

neoliberalism were operating in my life and how they shaped me as a subject who desired to

create a Pinterest-perfect classroom. In the following section, I present a vignette that illustrates a

powerful discourse that was operating in my life during the time that I worked to create a

Pinterest-perfect classroom—the discourse of biblical womanhood.

The Discourse of Biblical Womanhood

Life in a Discursive Formation

I stand in front of my seat, staring down at my black ankle boots, hands clasped in front

of my dress, waiting for the closing prayer to end so we can be dismissed. When my pastor says,

"Amen" I lift my head and glance over at my husband. He grins at me and we gather our belongings.

Just as I slide my purse onto my shoulder, Ms. Smith[3], who sits directly in front of me each week, turns to say goodbye, except this time, her French-manicured fingers reach for my arm. I move forward, expecting a hug and a whiff of her Chanel perfume, but instead, she freezes and stares into my eyes. She squints, tilts her head, and asks in a southern drawl, "How are you?" in a way that makes me think she really wants to know.

I'm not in the mood to linger here, so I smile and give her the typical, "Great! How are you doing?" response. She doesn't bother to answer and leans in further as her fingers rest on my arm. I glance over at my husband, who is headed toward the door, hoping that she sees this as a cue that I am ready to leave.

Instead, she gets to the point. "So, are y'all going to have children?"

I blink and hold my breath, unsure how to respond.

Moments pass.

In my mind, I replay a statement that one of our pastors had made to me and my husband: "There is no biblical example of a childless marriage." Finally, I smile and stutter, "Yeah, um, I think so. We're probably going to adopt." She finally lifts her fingers from my arm and exclaims, "Oh! That's wonderful! It would be such a *waste* if you didn't have children."

As I walked out of church that day, I thought about what Ms. Smith had said— "It would be such a *waste* if you didn't have children." I knew exactly what she meant: My life would be a waste, meaningless without children. Our marriage would be for nothing, a waste.

Our middle-class home and way of life?

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[3] All names are pseudonyms.

Also, a waste.

I also thought about Matthew 3:12, a bible verse I had heard often in reference to how God would sort people into two groups for eternity, the hell-bound and the heaven-bound: "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (English Standard Version Bible, 2016). Was I the chaff, the waste? Was my failure to have children proof that I was not living the way God meant for me to live? Perhaps Ms. Smith was speaking the truth out of love.

The Teachings of Biblical Womanhood

One might wonder how someone could come to this conclusion–that life without children is completely *wasted*, for nothing, and that it could be a sign of an eternity in hell. Looking back, the answer to that question is quite clear to me. Mrs. Smith and I were both immersed in a powerful discourse that is often referred to as *biblical womanhood*. In many fundamentalist and evangelical Christian circles, biblical womanhood is understood as the God-ordained truth about who women are and how they should be. In the book *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*, historian Beth Allison Barr (2021) succinctly summarized the teachings of biblical womanhood: "God designed women primarily to be submissive wives, virtuous mothers, and joyful homemakers. God designed men to lead in the home as husbands and fathers, as well as in church as pastors, elders, and deacons" (p. 2). Although this gender hierarchy is presented as sanctified truth in some Christian circles, Barr (2021) points out that this discourse of biblical womanhood is essentially a sanctified version of the *cult of domesticity*, a movement that reached the height of its influence in the late nineteenth century.

The cult of domesticity refers to an ideal of femininity that historian Barbara Welter (1966) first described as the *cult of true womanhood*. Later dubbed the *cult of domesticity* by Aileen Kraditor (1968), this definition of femininity was the set of attributes "by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society" (Welter, 1966, p. 152). Welter (1966) articulated these attributes into four primary components: piety, purity, submission, and domesticity.

This ideal of womanhood emerged as a result of the Industrial Revolution (Barr, 2021; French & Poska, 2007; Petersen, 2023) when "large scale factory work became the norm" and "a gender gap—which grew into a chasm—distinguished white upper-class men as outside earners and white upper-class women as confined to the doyennes of domestic affairs" (Petersen, 2023, p. 39). Of course, this ideal of womanhood was classed and raced since only upper-class white women had the option to devote themselves solely to the private sphere. As Petersen (2023) points out, "all women were judged by the same standards, placing women of color and working class women in an impossible position" (p. 39).

The discourse of biblical womanhood, which is essentially another version of the cult of domesticity, remains a classed and raced ideal of femininity that is pervasive in conservative evangelical popular culture. For example, the social media sub-culture known as "tradwives" (short for "traditional wives") reflects and reproduces the discourse of biblical womanhood via Instagram, YouTube, and Tiktok. Comprised almost exclusively of white women conveying an upper-middle-class aesthetic (Petersen, 2023), tradwives are known for embracing traditional gender roles and many of them subscribe to fundamentalist Christianity, where biblical womanhood is prevalent. As scholar Mariel Cooksey (2021) points out, "In some circles, being a tradwife…also means being a fundamentalist Christian" (para 4). In fact, two popular tradwife

influencers, sisters Kristen Clark and Bethany Beal of the YouTube channel "Girl Defined," who have 159 thousand subscribers, are self-proclaimed "biblical women" (Phillips, 2021). Their collection of over 500 videos on their YouTube channel offers advice for women on how to be "biblical" and "God-honoring" by proclaiming, for example, that "married couples are called to make babies," that women who choose not to have children are a sign "that things have taken such a downward spiral," and that waiting to have children until one is ready is selfish (Clark & Beal, 2023).

My encounter with Ms. Smith described above occurred at a time in my life when this discourse about what it means to be a woman enveloped me. Biblical womanhood—patriarchy labeled as divine truth—was everywhere in my life. It was in my church, the small Southern town where I lived, and the media I consumed. Its ubiquity allowed it to become what Foucault (1977/1980) called a *regime of truth*, or a discourse that is effective in "organizing and regulating relations of power" (Hall, 1992, p. 89). Literary critic Paul Bové (1990) described these types of discourses— those that constitute a regime of truth—as self-evident and commonsensical, which allows them to "have the privilege of unnoticed power" and "this power produces instruments of control" (p. 54). In other words, truth regimes are powerful discourses that are unquestioned and function as a form of control in the lives of individual subjects.

The discourse of biblical womanhood was so pervasive in my life that I had never thought to question it or its teachings. In fact, it was only a couple of years before the incident with Ms. Smith that I had ever heard anyone speak outside of this discourse. When I overheard a colleague, a fellow teacher, talk about how she did not want to have children, I was utterly shocked. I had never heard a woman say this before. I could not believe it and I did not know what to make of it, which is because

once a discourse becomes 'normal' and 'natural,' it is difficult to think and act outside it.

Within the rules of discourse, it makes sense to say only certain things. Other statements

and other ways of thinking remain unintelligible, outside the realm of possibility. (St.

Pierre, 2000, p. 485)

In my world, it was impossible to think outside of biblical womanhood, with its emphasis on

motherhood and domesticity. To me, being a woman was synonymous with motherhood,

homemaking, and domestic prowess. Thus, when I heard another woman speak about not

wanting to have children, I could not make sense of it. It was strange to hear because I had never

thought about whether or not *I wanted* to have children. Motherhood was an unquestioned path

that I would follow. This is the power of discourse. It renders some thoughts unthinkable,

unintelligible, outside the realm of possibility.

In the next section, I describe how this discourse produced my desire to create a

Pinterest-perfect classroom. In other words, I demonstrate how my Pinterest-perfect classroom

became an object, or material manifestation, of the discourse of biblical womanhood.

The Connection Between my Classroom and Biblical Womanhood

Discovering Pinterest-Perfect Classrooms

I vividly remember the first time I stumbled across a Pinterest-perfect classroom online.

It was the summer between my seventh and eighth years of teaching. I was standing in my

kitchen with my smartphone scrolling through images on Pinterest. I was searching for a new

way to arrange the student desks in my third-grade classroom, but at some point, my search for

desk arrangements led me to images of classrooms with stylish furniture, immaculate color

schemes, and home-like decor. I was instantly hooked. I began saving these images in the

Pinterest application, which led to my endeavor to create the beautiful, home-like classroom I described at the beginning of this paper.

Foucault (1969/1972) wrote that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49). In other words, discourses produce things, including people, their desires, and their actions. In my case, the discourse of biblical womanhood was a truth regime that structured my thoughts and actions for many years. It produced me— it shaped who I was and what I pursued, including my pursuit of a Pinterest-perfect classroom. In the following section, I share several images of photographs that I saved on Pinterest during this time of my life. These images were saved to a collection of photos that were organized in my Pinterest account on a board[4] that I titled, "Classroom Decor and Organization." This was my collection of "pinspirations" mentioned earlier, which grew to 177 images. The purpose of sharing these images is to demonstrate how the discourse of biblical womanhood, with its emphasis on motherhood and domesticity, shaped my desire to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom.

The images below are photographs of classrooms and classroom decor that I discovered on Pinterest and saved when I was immersed in biblical womanhood. These images are representative of the aesthetic that I was most drawn to and wanted to recreate in my classroom.

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[4] A Pinterest board is where users save images, or pins, in the Pinterest application. Users can create multiple boards and dedicate each one to a particular topic. In this way, boards are organizational tools within the application.

Figure 4

*A piece of classroom décor that I saved
and planned to purchase*

Note. Photo found on Pinterest. Original source
unknown.

Figure 5

A classroom that I envied and aspired to recreate

Note. Photo from 55 Best Classroom Decoration Ideas for Teachers (n.d.)

Figure 6

A classroom that was made over by a classroom

makeover specialist

Note. Photo posted by Jeltema (2019)

Figure 7

An alternative perspective of the room featured in Figure 5

Note. Photo from 55 Best Classroom Decoration Ideas for Teachers (n.d.)

As mentioned earlier, Pinterest-perfect classrooms are not a monolith; there is a variety of styles, themes, and aesthetics across classrooms that are considered Pinterest-perfect. However, the classrooms that I was drawn to, the ones that I saved and aspired to emulate, had a distinct look.

I was attracted to classrooms that resembled homes—classrooms that signaled upper-middle-class domesticity, a style presented in the images above.

Image Analysis: Biblical Womanhood Infused in Pinterest-Perfect Classrooms

In Figure 4, for example, a small sign hangs from a door handle proclaiming, "Home sweet classroom." I remember saving this image because I loved that it conveyed two ideas. First, it conveyed the message: "I spend *a lot* of time here. I spend so much time here that I consider it my home away from home." Second, it conveyed the idea that I *enjoy* thinking of my classroom as a home away from home and that I embrace the idea of bringing domesticity to the space. This piece of décor made me think of the images of the homelike classrooms on Pinterest

and Instagram that belong to teachers who can "take a bleak, government-funded classroom and transform it into an oasis for learning" (Gillespie & Thompson, 2021, p. 260). In other words, I felt that this piece of decor aligned well with who I wanted to be— a good, domestic, biblical woman.

Figures 5-7 send a similar message of domesticity. The classroom in Figure 5 showcases neutral colors, soft textures (e.g., the ottomans and pillows), and other home-like decor, including a sign resting atop a bookshelf that reads, "We are a team and family." This message of family and home life is also evident in Figures 6 and 7. The classroom in Figure 6 features wallpaper and homelike furniture (e.g., a couch, decorative pillows, and upholstered chairs), while a floral arrangement rests on a table in Figure 7.

My attraction to these classrooms that signal domesticity is connected to the powerful discourse of biblical womanhood which taught me that being a woman meant "excelling in the domestic sphere" (Irons & Mock , 2015, p. 17). Thus, even though I did not have children and I was working outside the home, I could still perform biblical womanhood through the domesticity I produced in the classroom. By putting my domesticity on full display—creating a classroom that was home-like and referring to my students as "my kids"— it was as though I was fulfilling my God-ordained role as a domestic woman who, even though I didn't have children of my own, was mother-like.

The Conflation of Teaching with Motherhood and Domesticity

Although I would not have been able to articulate it at the time, my understanding of the classroom as a domestic space was rooted in the idea that the classroom and the home are both "naturally feminine realms in which women [can] nurture the next generation" (Goldstein, 2015, p. 18). This idea, which Catherine Beecher put forward in the mid-nineteenth century to justify

the need for women to enter the teaching force, is rooted in patriarchal theology and the discourse of biblical womanhood which teaches that "woman is ontologically and theologically different from man" (Elliot, 1989, p. 26), meaning that women are made for domesticity and motherhood.

Given my immersion in biblical womanhood as I entered my teaching career, it is not surprising that I conflated teaching with motherhood. I saw the classroom as an extension of the home, a place where I could draw on my God-given calling to nurture children.

This idea that the classroom is an extension of the home is addressed in the book, *Bitter Milk*, written by feminist education scholar Madeleine Grumet (1988). Here, she made the compelling argument that teaching and domesticity are tightly intertwined, both relationally and aesthetically. Relationally, there are parallels between the mother-child and teacher-student relationships, as they both rely on enduring trust. Additionally, Grumet points out that the relationship between (women) teachers and the institution of schooling parallels the relationship between women and the institution of the home. In both domains, women are not understood as leaders. Rather, women are "expected to be the medium through which the laws, rules, language, and order of the father, the principal, the employer [are] communicated to the child" (Grumet, 1988, p. 84). In other words, women are expected to be submissive and obedient, and the conduit through which patriarchy is passed on to the next generation.

In the material-discursive formation of patriarchy, women are limited in both domains (the classroom and the home) because they are "ensnared by the supposedly 'natural' imperatives that established parameters for their experience, perception, and expression" (Grumet, 1988, p. 85). Patriarchal discourses, such as biblical womanhood, produce women's experiences by placing limits on how they should think and live in the world. In my case, the

discourse of biblical womanhood shaped my view of gender, my understanding of myself, and the way I took up teaching, including how I decorated my classroom. However, it was not the only discourse that operated in my life and produced this desire, as subjectivity is produced at the intersection of numerous discourses (Foucault, 1976/1978; Walkerdine, 1997). Dominant discourses (Foucault, 1977/1980) of social class were another powerful force that produced my subjectivity in numerous ways, including my desire to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom that resembled an upper-middle-class home.

Discourses of Social Class

As mentioned earlier, dominant discourses are systems of thinking and being that are normalized, often unquestioned, and operate as common sense, thus upholding and reproducing existing power relations (Foucault, 1977/1980; Gavey, 1997; Weedon, 1997). In the United States, dominant discourses of social class "are often linked to the ideal of the 'American Dream', which emphasizes meritocracy, individualism, and the belief in a classless society" (Hunt & Seiver, 2018, p. 345). Thus, many of the most prevalent discourses related to social class assume that one's class position is the result of one's merit, such as individual work ethic, skills, and intelligence, while factors such as generational wealth (or lack thereof), systemic oppression, and access to social networks, education, and other pathways that are linked to social class, poverty, and classism are ignored (Jones and Vagle, 2013). These assumptions that align social class status with a person's value, alongside dominant discourses of capitalism that emphasize materialistic ways of being, elitism, and classism, produce deficit-oriented discourses about working class and poor people (Hunt & Seiver, 2018; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Bomer et al., 2008; Morris, 2005; Nagle, 1999). As educational researchers Jones and Vagle (2013) pointed out, these discourses "tend to position working class and poor people as either intellectually

incapable of the hard work required for upward mobility, or lazy" (p. 132). Classist discourses circulating in U.S. society also imply that the poor are unmotivated, linguistically unskilled, hypersexual, impulsive, and do not value education (Bomer et al., 2008; Hunt & Seiver, 2018; Morris, 2005; Nagle, 1999). These discourses are dominant in mainstream thought, which means that they have the power to shape the way people of all classes think of themselves. In other words, these deficit discourses about the poor and working class produce subjectivity. They shape how individuals think about themselves and others, which structures ways of being in the world. In short, these discourses, like all discourses, produce reality and the lived experiences of individual people (Foucault, 1977/1980; Henriques et al., 1998; Weedon, 1997).

The Psychosocial Implications of Discourses of Social Class

Various researchers have studied the lived experiences of poor and working class people, some of whom take a psychosocial approach that investigates the "psychological implications of living on the margins of a socially stratified society" (Jones, 2007, p. 160). For example, Lilian Rubin's (1977) *Worlds of Pain* and Sennett and Cobb's (1972) *Hidden Injuries of Class* explored the psychosocial aspects of the experiences of working class and poor people in the United States and highlighted the psychological struggles and internal conflicts they experienced.

Additionally, feminist scholars have added to this body of research by extending the work of socialist Pierre Bourdieu to draw attention to the psychological implications of living in a hierarchically classed society in which social class is embodied. This line of scholarship theorizes social class "as implicit in everyday social processes and interactions" (Reay, 2005, p. 912), rather than being understood solely as an economic position in society. By extending and reworking Bourdieu's theory to examine the psychological aspects of living in a classed society, these researchers highlight how social class is lived and felt, particularly in working class women

(e.g., Jones, 2009; Luttrell, 2006; Reay, 2005; Walkerdine et al, 2001). This line of work reveals that girls and women from working class and poor backgrounds can experience feelings of inferiority, fear, deference, envy, anger, resentment, and shame as they interact with a world that insists that middle and upper-middle-class living and ways of being are the norm and that their social class background is undesirable, a flaw to overcome (hooks, 2000; Jones, 2007; Lucey et al., 2003; Walkerdine et al., 2001). These feelings, produced through their entanglement with the social world and dominant discourses of class and classism, are part of the reason some girls and women from poor and working class backgrounds attempt to engage in a process of self-transformation to become, or at least appear, middle class and rid themselves of all traces of their social class background (Lucey et al., 2003; Skeggs, 2004; Walkerdine et al., 2001). For example, Walkerdine et al. (2001) wrote about the pervasive and "desperate desire of all the working class subjects [in their study] to make their lives 'okay'" (p. 47) and that in becoming upwardly mobile a participant had "attempt[ed] to erase every possible mark of what she used to be" (p. 40). In other words, working class and poor girls and women can internalize the classist, deficit discourses circulating in a society and turn these into judgments about themselves and their own families, perceiving themselves and their families as inferior and less desirable than those in middle and more affluent classes.

As a woman from a working class background, this desire to be upwardly mobile and to remake oneself in the image of the upper classes is familiar. While my desire for upward mobility was connected to the need for money and survival in a hypercapitalistic society, it was also rooted in a deep-seated sense of shame that stems from deficit discourses about working class people. British scholar Annette Kuhn (1995) articulated the sense of shame and inferiority that I felt as a working class woman when she wrote:

39

You can so easily internalize the judgements of a different culture and believe – no,

know – that there is something shameful and wrong about you, that you are inarticulate

and stupid, have nothing to say of any value or importance, that no one will

listen to you in any case, that you are undeserving, unentitled, cannot think properly,

are incapable of 'getting it right'. (pp. 97-98)

From a poststructural feminist perspective, the feelings described above can be thought of as

internalized deficit discourses linked to gender and social class. These internalized discourses

produced my subjectivity, including my desire to transform myself and to "pass" for an upper-

middle class woman. In what follows, I share a vignette that illustrates a moment from this

endeavor of self-transformation.

Becoming Middle Class

A Glimpse into My Self-Transformation: Dressing the Part

I walk into the store and scan the racks of clothes piled into the small space. Britney

Spears blasts from the in-store sound system and I hum as I start pulling hangers apart to

examine the clothes. I don't really need anything, but I have time to kill between classes at the

community college and the hour drive to my house makes it impossible to go home in between

classes.

I am at the nearby shopping mall, browsing at one of my favorite clothing stores.

I like this store because it is filled with inexpensive, stylish clothes for young women. It

is one of the few clothing stores in the mall that I can afford, and today I might actually buy

something because I have a little extra money from my waitressing job. The only problem is that

a lot of the clothes here look *cheap* [5].

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[5] My understanding that the clothes in this store look *cheap* is connected to what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984) calls "legitimate" and "illegitimate" tastes. Bourdieu theorizes that legitimate tastes are those aligned

I pull out a hanger and examine a long-sleeve blouse.

Nope.

The fabric feels flimsy and it just does not *look expensive*—at all. I sigh and shove the hanger back into the overflowing rack of tops. I move on to the next rack, which is full of sweaters. I push hanger after hanger across the rack, eliminating every sweater until I see something that catches my eye. I pull out a beautiful chunky sweater with contrasting threads of cream, grey, and black yarn. It is soft and does not have the scratchy feeling that all of the other sweaters seem to have. I run my fingers across the hem and look for defects. I don't see any loose threads or sloppy seams. *This sweater looks expensive*. I look at the price tag and smile. I can afford it.

The next afternoon, I walk into the restaurant where I work and spot the other waitresses sitting at the bar polishing silverware. I drop my apron and wine opener on the bar and slide onto a bar stool. Emma looks over at me, her green eyes widened, and exclaims, "I love your sweater! Where did you get it?!" I tell her about the bargain store where I browse between my classes. "No way! That looks like a hundred-dollar sweater! I love it!" I smile and nod. "Me too."

This shopping trip and exchange with Emma took place over twenty years ago, but I remember it vividly because I felt successful in my endeavor to remake myself. I had found a piece for my wardrobe that *looked expensive* and it was *Emma-approved*.

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with the dominant social class and are linked to cultural capital, while illegitimate tastes are associated with subordinate social classes and are devalued by the dominant class. In this vignette, I am pursuing distinction (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) by attempting to distinguish myself from my working class background with clothes that mimic the taste of the upper-middle-class. The "cheap" looking clothes in this store are an example of "illegitimate" taste because they do not align closely enough with the "legitimate" taste of the upper-middle-class. In other words, these clothes do not look like the designer clothes associated with cultural capital and the upper-middle-class, a taste that I had acquired by working at exclusive restaurants and country clubs where the clientele displayed this style.

Emma was a young woman, a couple of years older than myself, who I looked up to for her understated style, knowledge of designers that I knew nothing about, and her ease interacting with the wealthy families who frequented the restaurant where we worked.

She seemed like one of *them*.

She could make wine recommendations and talk to them about art and music and the latest happenings at the nearby lake where these families owned vacation homes. I often watched Emma in awe and wished I could carry myself like her and the wealthy women she befriended. My Emma-approved sweater was a step in the right direction toward becoming like them.

My desire to buy expensive looking clothing and to carry myself like Emma and the other wealthy women who frequented the restaurant where I worked stemmed from the shame and inadequacy I felt as someone from a working class background. Although I did not have the language to articulate it at the time, I implicitly understood that "class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being" (Kuhn, 1995, p. 98). I knew that social class is embodied and it is signaled through ways of being, such as speech, bodily movement, and through taste in cultural artifacts, such as music, food, and art (Bourdieu, 1977, 1979/1984). For example, as I described above, I understood that certain types of clothing looked expensive, and I felt that I needed to convey that message to be seen as acceptable and worthy in a hierarchically classed society.

My endeavor for self-transformation stretched on for years after I worked at these fine dining restaurants and searched for expensive looking sweaters at the mall, as dominant discourses about social class continued to position working class and poor people as a problem (Hunt & Seiver, 2018; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Bomer et al., 2008; Morris, 2005; Nagle, 1999). However, my ability to perform class evolved as I experienced upward mobility through

educational attainment and marriage. I completed a Bachelor's degree (the first in my family to do so), obtained a teaching job, and then earned a Master's degree, all of which impacted my social class standing and performance.

However, my marriage to a man from an upper-middle class background had an even more drastic effect.

Our combined income provided me access to more financial resources and experiences that were inaccessible on a teacher's salary alone. I now had more resources to perform upper-middle-classness, including the ability to pursue a Pinterest-perfect classroom. The vignette below illustrates a moment in my pursuit of a beautiful, stylish, classroom that resembled an upper-middle-class home.

A Glimpse into My Self-Transformation: Creating a Classroom for the Part

I cannot help but smile as I make my way back to my classroom. I have just delivered today's testing materials to the front office—a plastic tub full of test booklets, scantrons, and pencils. We have completed the first section of the big end-of-the-year state test and I am heading back to my third-grade classroom. My assigned testing proctor, a colleague who teaches enrichment computer classes down the hall, is monitoring my students while I drop off the testing materials.

I peek through the window of my classroom before I reach for the door handle. My students are sitting at their desks, reading silently, while Ms. Linden slowly wanders around the room. She pauses near the back corner of the room and looks intently at the area I have set up for class meetings and mini-lessons.

A large, beige shag rug rests on the tile floor and a small grey sofa with several decorative pillows sits against the wall. There is a tall floor lamp in the corner, and two small end

tables on each side of the sofa. Ms. Linden peers at the frame that sits on top of the end table on the right. It reads, "What I love most about my classroom is who I share it with." I bought this printable on Teachers Pay Teachers and I thought it looked nice inside the Ikea frame that I had painted turquoise to complement the classroom color scheme.

I take a deep breath and smile as I push the door open. Mrs. Linden glances up at me and smiles as she heads toward me. I am about to thank her for proctoring when she reaches for my arm and leans in. I sense that she is eager to speak to me, as we've been in the room together for hours, but we have not been able to speak to one another on account of testing regulations. "Your. Room. Is. So. Cute!" she raves. "I can't imagine what your house looks like!"

I pause, a smile plastered across my face. "Oh, thank you!"

I'm not sure what else to say as I envision my neglected living room, which I have not decorated because most of my time, energy, and resources are used on this classroom. I feel a mixture of pride and shame.

I am proud that I have created a beautiful classroom, a room that sends the message that I intended to convey—that I am an upper-middle class woman with good taste.

But I can't shake the lingering shame that is always there, inside me like an incurable disease. The truth is that this classroom is a showroom designed to hide who I really am— a working class woman just trying to be good enough.

Shame and Internalized Deficit Discourses of Social Class

This moment stands out in my memory because Ms. Linden articulated an assumption about me that I had hoped she and the other adults who entered my room would make. She had made the assumption that since my classroom is "cute" and well decorated, my home must also look this way. This line of thinking implies that if I have the resources and skills to make my

44

classroom look this way, then I most certainly must have a home that is meticulously decorated and cared for.

This is exactly what I wanted people to think.

When I first began to pursue creating a Pinterest-perfect classroom, I remember sitting in my living room and looking around as I thought about the things I wanted to purchase for my home. I wanted some new lamps and a few other pieces of furniture, as well as a piece of art to hang above the stone fireplace. However, as I scrolled through the beautiful classrooms on Pinterest and other social media platforms, I decided that my classroom would be a better investment of time and money.

Afterall, I reasoned, my classroom was a more public space, visible to others than the inside of my home. Numerous people came in and out of my classroom each day—other teachers, administrators, parents, district leaders. My classroom was an extension of myself and I wanted it to be pretty, cheerful, stylish, and expensive looking, the same qualities I tried to convey in my body and demeanor. Because I had internalized the discourse that middle and upper-middle class aesthetics are desirable and what I should aspire to, I worked hard to create that image.

Literary critic and scholar Rita Felski (2000) pointed out that shame "rises out of a discrepancy between certain norms and values and others perceived as superior" (Felski, 2000, p. 43). In our society, being middle and upper class is considered superior, and if one does not meet that standard, they are likely to be deemed unacceptable (Felski, 2000; Jones & Vagle, 2013; Rose, 1989). My efforts to transform myself, to be perceived as middle or upper-middle-class, were aimed at hiding my social class to protect myself from the shame that accompanies lower class status, as "those who are poor often experience shame when their poverty is exposed before

the eyes of others" (Felski, 2000, p. 43). The shame associated with social class stems from the notion that class position is earned solely through work ethic and other characteristics of the individual. In other words, social class shame is tied to discourses of meritocracy and individualism that insist that our position in the social strata is an individual problem, a failure for which we alone are responsible.

As I have shown through the vignettes above, these discourses have powerful implications for subjectivity, as they carry messages about "who is right/normal and who is wrong/abnormal" (Blaise, 2005, p.16). Thus, they shape desires, actions, and ways of being. In my case, meritocratic and deficit discourses of social class produced a desire to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom that signaled a middle- or upper-middle-class social class status and made me appear acceptable according to those discourses.

Discourses of Neoliberalism and Postfeminism

I have explored how the patriarchal discourse of biblical womanhood and deficit discourses of social class produced and maintained my desire to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom that reflected a domestic upper-middle class aesthetic. In this section, I return to the discussion about individual choice that I introduced at the beginning of this paper. As stated earlier, the Pinterest-perfect classroom is often considered a free and individual choice each teacher can make based on her affinity for decorating. However, if we take up a poststructural understanding of subjectivity and discourse, it is evident that this idea of freedom and individual choice is situated within two overlapping discursive formations— *postfeminisim* and *neoliberalism*. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of neoliberalism and postfeminsm as discursive formations before connecting them to my pursuit of a Pinterest-perfect classroom and the idea that this desire and practice was an individual choice.

Neoliberalism: A Discursive Formation

Neoliberalism is notorious for its various conceptualizations. It is "a slippery concept, meaning different things to different people" (Springer, et al., 2016, p.1), or as Brenner et al. (2010) wrote, it is "a rascal concept – promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested" (p. 184). Neoliberalism has been used to analyze a variety of social and economic practices, projects, and institutions (Schmeichel et al., 2017). However, despite its notoriety for ambiguity, neoliberalism can be broadly understood as "the new political, economic, and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility" (Springer et al., 2016, p. 2). Political theorist Wendy Brown (2015) wrote that under neoliberalism, "all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized" (p. 10). In other words, neoliberalism is a political-economic theory that has profoundly influenced all aspects of human society and experiences over the past several decades by extending market principles into all areas of life (Harvey, 2005; Davies 2014; Mudge, 2008).

From a poststructural perspective, neoliberalism can be understood as a discursive formation consisting of numerous discourses that function to govern subjects and constitute their subjectivities. Foucault (2003) called this type of discursive power *governmentality*, which he described as "a range of practices that constitute, define, organize and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other" (p. 128). Simply put, governmentality is a form of productive power that operates through perceived freedom. As Ball & Olmedo (2013) put it, through governmentality, we "come to want from ourselves what is wanted from us" (p. 89). For example, Foucault (2007) analyzed how the discourses and

practices related to public health can be understood with the concept of governmentality. Public health campaigns advocate certain behaviors and discourage others (e.g., healthy eating and smoking) through the circulation of information meant to shape public discourse and subjectivities.

Governmentality does not work through top-down, disciplinary measures that oppress agency. As, social theorist Nikolas Rose (1999b) wrote, "to govern human beings is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and utilize it for one's objectives" (p. 4). The discursive power of neoliberalism to shape subjectivities has been the topic of study for various researchers (e.g., Rose, 1999a; Brown, 2003; Walkerdine, 2003), including feminist scholars who see neoliberalism as a discursive formation that operates alongside and in conjunction with another powerful discursive formation—postfeminism (e.g., Banet-Weiser et. al., 2020; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Ringrose, 2007).

Postfeminism: Neoliberalism's Accompanying Discursive Formation

Postfeminism, like neoliberalism, is a contested term that has become "overloaded with different meanings" (Gill, 2007, p. 147). Despite its ambiguity, postfeminism can be understood as something like a backlash to feminist ideas and practices and a statement that a society no longer needs feminism since girls and women have achieved some version of social equality, hence the term *post*feminism. Rosalind Gill, a feminist cultural theorist conceived postfeminism as a sensibility that is characterized by the following criteria (Gill, 2007): (1) the idea that femininity is a bodily property; (2) an emphasis on women's sexual subjectivity rather than their objectification; (3) a focus on surveillance; (4) an emphasis on individualism, choice, and empowerment; (5) the prominence of a makeover paradigm; (6) a revival in notions of natural sexual difference; (7) a pronounced sexualization of culture; and (8) an emphasis on

48

consumerism. This broad set of features highlights the complexity and ambivalence of this discursive formation, as it is comprised of an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses (Butler, 2013; McRobbie, 2004). These features of postfeminism also reveal the similarities between postfeminism and neoliberalism.

The Overlap of Neoliberalism and Postfeminism

As Gill and Scharff (2011) pointed out, postfeminism and neoliberalism overlap in at least three ways. First, they are both "structured by a current of individualism," which understands individuals as autonomous and not "subject to pressures, constraints, or influence from outside themselves" (p. 7). This current of individualism also negates notions of the social and the political. Secondly, as Gill and Scharff argue, neoliberalism and postfeminism require similar subjects. While neoliberalism requires an "autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject," postfeminism requires an "active, freely-choosing, self-reinventing subject" (p. 7). This parallel suggests that a postfeminist sensibility "is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas" (p. 7).

Finally, in both discursive formations, "it is *women* who are called on to self-manage, to self-discipline…to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen" to a far greater extent than men (p. 7). For this reason, Gill and Scharff argue that neoliberalism is "*always already gendered*" and women are constructed as ideal neoliberal subjects (p. 7). These overlapping discursive formations—postfeminism and neoliberalism—are powerful and ubiquitous in contemporary U.S. society (Harvey, 2005; Gill, 2007; Gill & Scharff, 2011) and they were connected to my desire to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom. In the section below, I describe a practice called *classroom transformations*, which is essentially an intensified version of the Pinterest-perfect classroom,

and I analyze how this practice is produced and maintained by discourses of neoliberalism and postfeminism.

Classroom Transformations: **A Product of Neoliberalism and Postfeminism**

As blogger and edu-influencer Ashley Marquez explained, classroom transformations are "anything that turns your classroom into a new and exciting learning environment. Then, you create and prepare content and decor to match that theme" (Marquez, n.d., para 2). In this twist on the Pinterest-perfect classroom, teachers choose a theme and remake their classroom accordingly. Then, learning activities are designed to match the aesthetics of the newly transformed classroom.

For example, a teacher may redecorate her classroom as a hospital operating room, complete with faux operating tables, supplies for surgery, and costumes for students to dress up as surgeons. These types of classroom transformations typically last from one day to one week and are often only one of many transformations that occur throughout the school year. Figures 8 and 9 are examples of classroom transformations found online.

Figure 8

A coffee shop themed classroom transformation

Note. Photo posted by TeachersPayTeachers.com content creator, Teaching A to Z (n.d.)

Figure 9

A Super Mario themed classroom transformation

Note. Photo posted on personal blog of edu-influencer Hope King (2016).

In the vignette below, I share several interactions between myself and two of my colleagues when I was a third-grade teacher. The purpose of sharing these interactions is to illustrate how what I call my classroom *beauty practices* were infused with neoliberal and postfeminist discourses. The exchanges described below took place when I, along with two other teachers at my school, began engaging in classroom transformations, or make-overs, which involves remaking the classroom in numerous ways.

A Glimpse into the Postfeminist and Neoliberal Discourses of Classroom Transformations

"Hi!" I look up to see Lisa, a teacher who works on my hall, standing in the doorway of my classroom, her arms full of stacks of fliers and other materials the office staff stuffed into our mailboxes that day.

"Hey! How's it going?" I ask as I turn my attention from straightening the decorative pillows on the couch and move toward the door. She leans against the door frame as her big blue eyes move around the room.

"Fine," she sighs. We chat about the day, and I mention the class down the hall. "Did you see her classroom transformation?! She did a great job with it."

Lisa nods and hesitantly murmurs, "Yeah." She pauses as if she is trying to decide what to say next. "But I'm just not going to spend my money on that stuff." She looks at me, the queen of classroom transformations and classroom décor. "That's just not what I want to spend my money on."

I nod sympathetically. "I don't blame you. It's not cheap." I get the impression that she wants to talk more about this, but she heads back to her classroom, and I turn back to the pillows.

The next day I am walking down our hall at school and I see Amy, another third grade teacher, headed in my direction. The heels of her designer boots click against the tile as she

smiles at me and gestures for me to come into her classroom. I step inside her room and she closes the door.

"Uh-oh" I think. I wonder what has permitted this closed-door conversation. Amy stands in front of her desk, which is decorated with red and white fabric to cover the unsightly metal frame. She leans toward me and whispers, "I feel really bad for Lisa. She feels left out because of what we're doing in our classrooms."

"What do you mean?" I ask, scrunching up my face in annoyance.

"Well, she came to me and she was crying because her students are starting to say things about how they don't get to do fun things like the other classes."

I roll my eyes. "Well, then maybe she should plan something fun for her class," I mutter. "I mean, we all share ideas with her but she acts like she's not interested. Then she gets upset when we use those ideas. I don't understand." I can feel my heart rate increasing. I am frustrated and I don't have time for this.

Amy rubs her temples and looks at me. "I don't know what to do because I want to be a good friend and I don't want to make her feel bad, but I also want to make learning fun for my students and I want to make my classroom pretty. I'm here all the time. I want it to look nice."

I nod in agreement, but I do not understand why she is empathizing with her. I do not feel sorry for Lisa. If it bothers her this much, I think, then she ought to get on board and stop complaining. Why doesn't she just do what we're doing? She *chooses* not to participate. She has no right to act like we have to alter our plans because it makes her feel bad. I am determined to be a good teacher and it is not fair for her to hold me back.

After a long pause, I finally mutter, "Well, I don't know. I just want my kids to enjoy school, and I want to enjoy work, so that's what I'm doing." I move toward the door to signal my

exit from the conversation. All I can think about is the upcoming classroom transformation I have planned.

Lisa is not going to be happy when she sees my room Friday.

Postfeminist and Neoliberal Discourses in Classroom Transformations: Consumerism and a Makeover Paradigm

The vignette above illustrates that my thinking and being were shaped by several characteristics of neoliberalism and postfeminism, including two characteristics of Gill's (2007) postfeminist sensibility—an emphasis on *consumerism* and the prominence of a *makeover paradigm*.

Classroom transformations are inherently tied to consumerism and a makeover paradigm as they require teachers to remake their classrooms over and over again, with each makeover requiring a new list of items to purchase. These transformations require extensive decorations and many store-bought materials to make the room look different each time. For instance, when I transformed my classroom into a faux operating room, I bought all sorts of materials to complete the scene, including plastic knives, latex gloves, surgical caps, and an operation-themed unit from the online marketplace Teachers Pay Teachers[6], among other items. This type of consumerism was typical for my classroom transformations, as well as the ones I envied online. For example, one education blogger and content creator for Teachers Pay Teachers posted the following list of items needed for a "Learning Cafe" classroom transformation that resembled Starbucks (Munch, 2023). See Figure 10 below.

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[6] Teachers Pay Teachers (TPT) is an online marketplace for buying and selling teaching resources. Founded by a public school teacher in 2006, the site hosts "the world's largest catalog of educator-created learning content" (Teachers Pay Teachers, 2024, para. 1) and is widely used by American teachers (Teachers Pay Teachers, 2024).

Figure 10

Screenshot of instructions to create a classroom transformation

What is Needed?

Let's cut to the chase, there are some key components to truly "transform" the classroom. But as stated above, the list for this theme is minimal. There are some I'll classify as "must have" and many that will be "optional." You can always add on more optional items as you redo your transformation in years to come!

Must Have Items:

- Themed Slides or Whiteboard Display
- Café or Jazz Music in the background
- *Apron for the Teacher* (Amazon Linked)
- Coffee Shop Treat (more explained below)
- Café Themed Activities

All the Slides and Activities you need are provided in the Learning Café Resource!

Optional Items:

- *Student Aprons* (Amazon Linked)
- Coffee Shop Backdrop (Amazon Linked)
- Tablecloths (Dollar Tree)
- Café Awning (Made of Butcher Paper)
- Trays, towels, other décor (Dollar Tree and Wal-Mart)
- Coffee for the Teacher (might be a must have for some 😉)

Note. Instructions posted by TeachersPayTeachers.com content creator and blogger Melody Munch (2023)

For the classroom transformation described in Figure 10 above, even if a teacher only bought the items on the "Must Have" list, it would require her to purchase a themed apron, ingredients for a "coffee shop treat" (chocolate milk, whipped cream, cups, straws), and a product from Teachers Pay Teachers (which alone is nearly 20 dollars). Of course, this is not to mention the other items that are listed as "optional." The depth of consumerism involved in

classroom transformations is apparent here and is highlighted by the fact that even though this particular classroom transformation requires the teacher to purchase numerous items, it is considered a theme that requires "minimal" purchases, as the blogger mentions in the post. Additionally, for teachers who engage in classroom transformations, this is only one transformation among many that are created throughout the school year.

Postfeminist and Neoliberal Discourses in Classroom Transformations: Individualism

The vignette above also demonstrates the postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of individualism embedded in my thinking and being. Gill (2007) pointed out that in the overlapping discursive formations of postfeminism and neoliberalism, individualism and choice are paramount, as "every aspect of life is refracted through the idea of personal choice and self-determination" (p. 153). In the vignette above, when a colleague expressed feelings of exclusion and shame, I could not sympathize because I could not see outside of the discourse of individual choice. I understood Lisa's decision not to participate in classroom transformations as a simple choice—she simply chose not to participate. Thus, my line of thinking went, she did not have the right to complain or interfere with what *I* did in *my* classroom. I was working to be a good teacher, and she should either do the same or be quiet. This individualistic thinking produced classist assumptions, even though I came from a working class background and could not afford classroom décor only a few years prior. In other words, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses dominated my thinking. They prevented me from seeing the classism inherent in Pinterest-perfect classrooms and classroom transformations and how these practices produced a classed hierarchy among teachers at my school.

Another aspect of postfeminist and neoliberal individualism that was evident in my thinking at this time was the idea that my participation in classroom beauty practices was an

individual, autonomous choice, based on my enjoyment. In the vignette above, I told my colleague, "I just want my kids to enjoy school, and I want to enjoy work." While it is indeed true that I enjoyed participating in these practices, I was not able to articulate that my desire to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom was connected to outside forces and influences (i.e., postfeminism, neoliberalism, social class discourses, biblical womanhood). In other words, I saw my desire to participate in classroom transformations as an individual choice based on my enjoyment of decorating my classroom. The idea that I was engaging in these practices as a freely choosing, autonomous individual is characteristic of postfeminism. As Gill (2007) wrote, "The notion that all our practices are freely chosen is central to postfeminist discourses, which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever" (p. 153).

Postfeminist and Neoliberal Discourses in Classroom Transformations: Standards of Beauty

Gill (2007) pointed out that this "notion that women just 'please themselves'...presents women as entirely free agents and cannot explain why– if women are just pleasing themselves and following their own autonomously generated desires– the resulting valued 'look' is so similar" (p. 153). Although Gill is referring here to bodily beauty standards, (e.g., hairless body, slim waist) the argument applies to the classroom beauty standards as well. If women teachers who create Pinterest-perfect classrooms are doing this simply because they enjoy decorating and are good at it, how do we account for the fact that the Pinterest-perfect classroom requires a distinct look (i.e., carefully curated color schemes, stylish decor, etc.)? One way to think about this question is by considering how Pinterest-perfect classrooms are connected to beauty pressures placed on women.

Women and Beauty Standards. Women have long been subjected to bodily beauty standards and pressures. In their edited book titled, *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, Elias et al. (2017) reminded us that "questions about beauty have always been central to feminism" and "decades of research, writing and activism by feminists have largely centred on beauty as a tool of patriarchal domination, seen to entrap women in narrow and restrictive norms of femininity" (p. 6). In other words, one of the reasons feminists have focused on beauty is because of the intense pressure many women feel to conform to idealized images of women's bodies, a pressure which serves patriarchy.

Preoccupation with women's bodies is evident in various forms of media, including television shows, magazines, movies, and other media content that elevate bodily beauty as the most important feature of womanhood. In recent years, beauty pressures on women have intensified and extended by reaching into new times in women's lives (deeper into childhood and during pregnancy), into new areas of the body (e.g., the armpits and the soles of the feet), and into the psyche (Elias et al., 2017).

The popularity of the Pinterest-perfect classroom indicates that beauty pressures have also extended to women's classrooms.

The Pinterest-Perfect Classroom as a Beauty Standard. When I first came across images of Pinterest-perfect classrooms online, I was immediately drawn to them. I loved scrolling through the images of these classrooms and admiring the beautiful spaces that teachers had created. However, my admiration quickly turned to comparison. As I scrolled through images of perfectly curated classrooms, I could not help but think about how my classroom did not measure up. For example, many of these Pinterest-perfect classrooms had big, cozy couches and other pieces of furniture that are typically found in homes. As I looked at these images, I

thought of my classroom full of old, school-issued furniture—a worn and stained office chair, battered bookshelves, and mismatched student desks. It seemed that the more I admired the images of Pinterest-perfect classrooms online, the more dissatisfied I became with my classroom. These perfectly curated rooms became a beauty standard that I felt I needed to emulate.

The way that these images of perfect-looking classrooms became a standard that I aspired to is similar to the way images of flawless women's bodies in the media set the standard for bodily beauty. The ubiquity of picture-perfect (i.e., airbrushed and digitally enhanced) bodies in the media produces the idea that these are desirable and superior bodies. Similarly, the Pinterest-perfect classrooms I saw online were presented as a desirable and superior. While the bodies online boasted wrinkle-free skin, straight white teeth, and slim waists, the classrooms showcased cozy-looking upholstered furniture, plush rugs, and decorative touches aligned to a carefully curated color scheme—all purchased by the classroom teacher. In other words, the Pinterest-perfect classrooms circulating online have created a *classed* standard of beauty for women teachers' classrooms. School issued furniture and supplies are no longer adequate. The beauty standard for women's classrooms now requires all sorts of teacher-bought items, which means creating a space like this is most feasible for teachers with financial resources beyond a typical teacher's salary. For example, when I was engaged in these classroom beauty practices, I was not living on my teaching salary alone. I relied on my husband's income. Our combined income allowed me to spend money on the items needed to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom, which was something I pursued because of the pressure I felt to live up to this standard.

The Pressure to Have a Pinterest-Perfect Classroom. The pressure I felt to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom is not unique. Numerous blog posts and articles on websites designed for teachers address the pressure to create these kinds of spaces (e.g., Caudill, 2018; Watson,

2017). In one blog post titled, "My Plain, Boring, Not Picture-Worthy Classroom" a teacher and blogger wrote:

> I was feeling pretty good about the status of my room. The boards looked neat. It was
>
> empty and plain, but functional. Then I went on Pinterest and Facebook and Instagram. I
>
> kept seeing pictures of BEAUTIFUL classrooms. Fabulous libraries. Gorgeous quotes
>
> filling the walls. Comfortable nooks with amazing carpets, chairs you could sink into, and
>
> the perfect lamp in the corner. These pictures were of classrooms to die for. And I felt
>
> inadequate. I felt pressure to make my room as immaculate as what I was seeing in
>
> everyone else's room. ("My Plain, Boring," 2015)

The quote above echoes how I felt after scrolling through images of classrooms online. Before seeing these images, I did not think there was anything wrong with my classroom's appearance. It was simple and functional. However, the beautiful rooms I saw on Pinterest and other social media sites changed my perception of my room. The rooms online had set a classroom beauty standard that I felt pressure to reach.

Conclusion

The Problem with Pinterest-Perfect Classrooms

I have discussed how my desire to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom was produced by various discourses that shaped my subjectivity. But why does this matter? Why does it matter that I did not create a Pinterest-perfect classroom simply because I enjoyed it? Why does it matter that my desire to engage in these classroom beauty practices was tied to discourses operating in my life?

It matters because my participation *reproduced* those discourses, and those discourses are destructive.

In other words, the Pinterest-perfect classroom is problematic because it reinscribes classism, patriarchy, postfeminism, and neoliberalism. Of course, this is not to say that every teacher who creates a Pinterest-perfect classroom is shaped by dominant discourses in the exact same way as myself. For example, not every teacher who strives for a Pinterest-perfect classroom is subjected to the patriarchal discourse of biblical womanhood and the internalized shame associated with a working class background. However, creating a Pinterest-perfect classroom still reproduces discourses of patriarchy, classism, neoliberalism, and postfeminism. For example, Pinterest-perfect classrooms reproduce patriarchy by further extending the intense beauty standards placed on women, which ultimately tie a woman's worth to beauty. These classrooms also reproduce classism because they create a hierarchy among teachers in schools, with the most affluent teachers at the top. Furthermore, Pinterest-perfect classrooms promote neoliberal and postfeminist discourses in that they require teachers to adopt ways of thinking and being that are central to these discourses, such as individualism and a continual imperative for consumption and makeovers.

Implications for Teachers

When I was a teacher working to create a Pinterest-perfect classroom, I enjoyed creating a beautiful classroom. I liked studying color schemes and painting furniture and shopping for my classroom, even though discourses connected to systems of domination produced my desire to do so. I also believed that I was creating a welcoming and comfortable space for my students and myself. I knew that the physical environment of the classroom was important, and I wanted to create a space that would work for me and my students, that was conducive to learning, (while also signaling social class and domesticity). Many teachers who create these spaces justify classroom beauty practices in this way. They want to create an inviting and comfortable space in

their classrooms, and they see this as crucial to the learning environment. In other words, they understand that classroom environment *matters*.

What is missing, however, is a reflective and critical analysis of what the Pinterest-perfect classroom *produces*.

As a classroom teacher consumed with creating and maintaining a Pinterest-perfect classroom, I focused much time and energy on creating a particular look and feel to my room that I assumed would be beneficial to me and my students. However, I never paused to reflect on what my Pinterest-perfect classroom was *actually producing*.

By considering what our classrooms produce, we can set aside our intentions and focus on what is happening. We might ask ourselves questions like: How is the classroom affecting my students? What is being produced in my relationships with my colleagues? How is my classroom shaping the way I spend my time and money, and how does this affect other areas of my life? What is being produced in my teaching? What messages am I sending about social class? About gender? About consumption?

An honest engagement with these sorts of questions can help us identify the gaps between our intentions, what we hope to produce, and what is being produced. This can help us move toward ways of being and doing that are aligned to our values, beliefs, and teaching philosophies.

Implications for Teacher Education

As I have discussed throughout this paper, Pinterest-perfect classrooms are a product of discourse, which means they are produced by systems of power, and they also reproduce systems of power. Yet, there is a widespread assumption among teachers that this practice is simply an individual choice for each teacher to make and that it is not connected anything beyond the

teacher's affinity for decorating. In short, there is a lack of criticality here, a failure to recognize and analyze the power dynamics connected to the Pinterest-perfect classroom. Thus, the popularity of the Pinterest-perfect classroom suggests that teacher education programs need to do more to foster a sense of criticality in teachers.

One powerful way to foster criticality in teacher education is to expose students to theories and philosophies that uncover and critique dominant power structures in society. For example, integrating feminist theories into teacher education courses can illuminate patriarchal power and domination in society and give students language and analytical tools to think with as they examine their own lived experiences with patriarchy.

Additionally, the popularity of the Pinterest-perfect classroom suggests that teachers understand, on some level, that the physical classroom environment matters. One way teacher education can develop this understanding is by providing explicit study of various theories of classroom environment. For example, teacher educators might include study of the Reggio Emilia approach, which emphasizes the vital role of classroom environment as the "third teacher," and the study of the Montessori approach, which centers the "prepared environment." Teacher educators can also help students develop a deeper understanding of classroom environment by drawing explicit connections between the physical classroom environment and justice-oriented approaches to education. For example, teacher educators can ask students to consider the implications of culturally responsive (Gay, 2000) and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) for classroom environment.

A study of classroom environment might also include an introduction to theories that highlight the productive power of the material world, of the non-human, such as feminist new materialism and critical posthumanism. These theories emphasize the productive power of non-

human forces, which can open new ways of thinking about classroom design and the physical environment of the classroom.

Discursive Power, Subjectivity, and Resistance

In this paper, I have explored several discourses that operated in my life and contributed to my pursuit of a Pinterest-perfect classroom. However, I would like to emphasize that in doing this, my aim is not to convey the idea that "through a process of development and learning, [I was] able to reflect upon experiences and make sense of them" as an "an individual subject in control of…her thoughts and actions" (Danaher et al., 2000, p. 30). To the contrary, my purpose here has been to disrupt this image of the human being as an autonomous, unique, and self-contained individual. In other words, I have tried to show how human beings can be understood as subjects constructed through discourses and cultural practices. On the other hand, I am also not suggesting that discursive power is totalizing, rendering subjects as powerless. As Vivien Burr (1995) wrote, "discourses and their attendant practices [do not] form some kind of impenetrable web, locking us all into our oppression for evermore" (p. 74). Rather, discursive power can be contested. As Foucault (1976/1978) wrote, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (p. 101). In short, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault 1976/1978, p. 95).

This potential for resistance is implicit in a poststructural understanding of subjectivity, which I have attempted to highlight throughout this paper, as it emphasizes the "*consensual* [emphasis added] regulation of individuals" (Weedon, 1997, p. 108). In other words, in poststructural thought, subjectivity involves "a subject that exhibits agency as it constructs itself by taking up available discourses and cultural practices" while "at the same time, is subjected,

forced into subjectivity by those same discourses and practices" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 502). This

simultaneous production of subjectification and agency means that discourses are not powerful

unless they are taken up by individual subjects. As theorist Chris Weedon (1997) explained, "To

be effective, they [discourses] require activation through the agency of individuals whom they

constitute and govern in particular ways as embodied subjects" (p. 108). Thus, one way to

disrupt harmful discourses is to refuse their associated subject positions and practices (Butler

1990, 1995; Davies, 2004). Philosopher Judith Butler (1995) called this practice *subversive

repetition* (p. 135). However, subversive repetition is not possible unless we are able to

recognize the discourses that constitute our subjectivities. By highlighting the specific discourses

that operated in my life and produced an everyday practice (i.e., classroom decorating), I hope

others might begin to consider the discursive power operating in their lives. As philosophy

scholar Jana Sawicki (1991) wrote, "freedom does not lie in discovering or being able to

determine who we are, but in rebelling against those ways in which we are already defined,

categorized, and classified" (p. 27).

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CHAPTER 3

THE CRUEL OPTIMISM OF CLASSROOM TRANSFORMATIONS

In Chapter 2, I introduced the practice of classroom transformations as an intensified version of the Pinterest-perfect classroom and demonstrated how my engagement with classroom transformations was fueled by discourses of neoliberalism and postfeminism. In this chapter, I theorize my engagement with classroom transformations as a cruelly optimistic attachment (Berlant, 2011) tied to my demoralization (Santoro, 2018) as a teacher working in a destructive educational environment dominated by policies and practices designed to uphold neoliberal capitalism. I demonstrate that my attachment to classroom transformations and my vision of good work (Gardner et al., 2001) as a teacher were ultimately connected to fantasies of the good life (Berlant, 2011).

I begin with a description of classroom transformations and a vignette that illustrates a classroom transformation that I implemented in my third grade classroom. I then develop the connection between my classroom transformations, good work (Gardner et al., 2001) and demoralization (Santoro, 2018). From there, I discuss neoliberalism and its impact on education and teaching to illustrate the ordinary crisis (Berlant, 2011) of teaching under neoliberal educational initiatives. Finally, I use Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism to theorize that my relationship with classroom transformations and "good teaching" were tied to my view of education as "the great equalizer" (Mann, 1849/1997) and a cornerstone of the American dream. Overall, I aim to illuminate how the contemporary conditions of teaching are profoundly shaped by neoliberalism and can be linked to teacher demoralization (Santoro, 2018) and cruelly

optimistic attachments (Berlant, 2011) that are harmful to teachers. My purpose here is to provide a pedagogical piece that offers teachers a way to think about their experiences with theoretical concepts that they may not have encountered (i.e., neoliberalism, demoralization, and cruel optimism), which may lead to new ways of thinking, being, and teaching.

What are Classroom Transformations?

Classroom transformations, which have become quite popular in recent years, particularly among elementary school teachers, are when a teacher temporarily decorates her classroom according to a particular theme and implements theme-based learning activities (Buczyna, 2022). Some common themes for classroom transformations include Glow Day, Candy Land, Jurassic World, and Rock and Roll. (See Figures 11 and 12 for images of classroom transformations.) Oftentimes, the transformation is a surprise to students, as teachers typically transform the classroom after school hours. When students arrive in the morning, the classroom has been transformed and the activities throughout the school day are based on the theme of the room. For example, if a teacher chooses a "rock and roll" theme, she will provide games and worksheets aligned to this theme. Many teachers turn to the online marketplace Teachers Pay Teachers[7] for these themed items, where they can purchase a set of materials that can be used for each content area. For example, one seller on Teachers Pay Teachers offers a rock and roll-themed package designed for students in second through fourth grade (The Rocket Resource, n.d.). The package includes digital copies of ten "tour stop" activities for students to complete, including worksheets and games that reinforce skills in various content areas. Some of the activities include math

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[7] Teachers Pay Teachers (TPT) is an online marketplace for buying and selling teaching resources. Founded by a public school teacher in 2006, the site hosts "the world's largest catalog of educator-created learning content" (Teachers Pay Teachers, 2024, para. 1) and is widely used by American teachers (Teachers Pay Teachers, 2024).

worksheets, reading passages with fill-in-the-blank notes, and board games to reinforce skills

such as identifying the meaning of prefixes.

Figure 11

A "glow day" classroom transformation

Note. Image posted by edu-blogger Smith (2019)

Figure 12

A carnival themed classroom transformation

Note. Photo posted on Instagram by Kennedy (2019)

A Glimpse into a Classroom Transformation

I scanned the room and nearly burst with excitement. *THIS. IS. SO. CUTE!* I had spent

countless hours transforming the classroom into an operating room. The everyday classroom

decor was covered by plastic blue tablecloths that hung from the ceiling to give the room a sterile

look. Students' desks were pushed together into "operating tables" and were covered with white

butcher paper, complete with a tray of surgical supplies. A steady *beep...beep...beep* came from

the huge screen at the front of the room where a hospital-style heart rate monitor appeared via

YouTube. The windows were covered with official-looking signs that said things like,

"WARNING: DO NOT ENTER! AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY" and "DO NOT

DISTURB WHILE SURGERY IS IN PROGRESS".

I watch as my students work diligently to "operate" on multiplication equations to model the distributive property of multiplication. Their little hands grasp plastic knives, their heads are covered in surgical caps, and their faces are hidden behind surgical masks. They gently cut through the arrays they had built with cubes and record the equations with dry-erase markers. As I scan the classroom, I cannot help but smile. My students seem to be having fun. I feel like I've done something good here.

Figure 13

A photo of my operating room classroom transformation

The fun and excitement of this first classroom transformation were intoxicating. I felt a sense of purpose and joy, something that I rarely felt in the classroom under the constant focus on testing. I also liked the sense of approval I received from others when I posted images of my classroom transformation on social media platforms. People commented on what a wonderful teacher I was and how my students were lucky to have me.

It felt amazing.

After this first classroom transformation, I immediately planned the next one.

And then another.

And another.

I transformed my classroom into a forest with a campsite, a spooky haunted house, and a café, among other scenes. I loved seeing the looks of wonder and awe on my students' faces when they entered the classroom each time it was transformed. I loved the praise I received for 'going above and beyond.'

Classroom transformations were fun and exciting, but ultimately, they did not satisfy me in the ways that I thought they would. They did not fill the void that I was desperate to fill. I had hoped that classroom transformations would foster something new and different in my classroom. I was demoralized (Santoro, 2018) by the mandates placed on me to teach in a way that felt joyless, dehumanizing, and harmful to my students. I wanted learning to be joyful, meaningful, and empowering for my students. I wanted to feel good about the work I was doing. Although classroom transformations seemed like the perfect way to revitalize my teaching and provide engaging learning experiences for my students, I eventually learned that they did not fill the void that I was longing to fill.

The void I felt as a teacher was rooted in the disconnect I felt between my purpose for teaching and the type of teaching I was required to do. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, I became a teacher because I wanted to contribute something positive to society. As a woman from a working class background, I wanted to "promote greater equality of opportunity for young people" (Moore & Clarke, 2016, p. 667). I saw education as "the great equalizer" (Mann, 1849/1997) and I wanted to help build students' educational foundation in the early years. I also

had deeply held beliefs about pedagogy and learning. For example, I believed that education should be driven by students' interests and curiosity and should foster a love for learning. However, strict mandates that called for scripted curriculum, rigid pacing guides, and data and test-driven practices meant that I could not pursue the *good work* (Gardner et al., 2001) that I set out to do.

The Desire to Do Good Work

The notion of good work stems from the work of psychologists Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and William Damon (2001), and began in the mid-1990s as an inquiry into how and if individuals and society can be both creative and innovative, while also humane. This question emerged at a time when "the country took a sharp turn to the right politically" and "One of the themes stressed was that the role of the federal government should be reduced wherever possible, and that most functions of society…were better left to the private sector" (Gardner, 2008, pp. 203-204). Gardner and his colleagues were skeptical about the power of the market's "righting mechanisms" and were concerned that society would not function properly if public services, like healthcare and education, were all left to market forces. On the other hand, they studied human creativity and did not want to "impose constraints on individuals or society, unless they were exceedingly well advised" (p. 204). These concerns brought them to the following question, which guided their research: "Is it possible to have individuals, institutions, and societies that are at once creative and innovative, yet at the same time are also humane, providing for those who cannot fend for themselves?" (Gardner, 2008, p. 204). The concept of *good work* came out of this research project.

Good work (Gardner et al., 2001) is defined as work that one sees as excellent, ethical, and engaging. As Gardner describes it, "The word good thus draws on three separate

connotations: good quality, feels good, and embodies the good pole of morality" (pp. 205-206). These perceptions of *good* are based on one's self-assessment of "how well the values and commitments inherent to the work can be enacted in the work" (Santoro, 2018, p. 49). In other words, a person engages in good work when they believe "(1) the work serves a social purpose that contributes to the well-being of others *and* (2) the way the work is conducted is aligned with that social purpose" (Santoro, 2018, p. 50).

Teaching with a Purpose: My Notion of Good Teaching

Although I did not have the language of "good work" at the time, I went into teaching for the moral and ethical aspects of the work, or what educational researcher Santoro (2018) describes as the social purpose of the work that contributes to the well-being of others. I saw two aspects of social purpose in my work. In a broad sense, I felt that I was contributing something positive to society by supporting public education, which I saw as a key component of a democratic culture that promotes freedom, justice, and equality. I also saw teaching as a way to contribute to the well-being of others on a more individual level in that I could be a part of fostering my students' development and growth as people, while also helping them build the educational foundation they would need to attain "the good life" (Berlant, 2011). I wanted my students to improve their lives and take hold of the opportunities available to them. I wanted them to secure good jobs, achieve upward mobility, and have a good life.

My purpose for teaching shaped my approach in the classroom. Because I was concerned with supporting both a democratic culture and the holistic growth of my students, my teaching philosophy was rooted in several interrelated beliefs that aligned with those goals. As a teacher, I believed that good work (1) centered students' interests, (2) fostered a love for learning, (3) attended to the development of the whole child, and (4) developed critical thinking and a sense

of social responsibility. In practice, this meant that I aimed for a student-centered approach that seriously considered students' interests and allowed them to inquire into the things that mattered to them. It meant supporting students' social, emotional, and physical development. It also meant developing in students a sense of empowerment and the belief that they have a place in society. Overall, I wanted my students to develop empathy, compassion, resilience, and a strong sense of equity and justice. These were certainly lofty goals, but they were my purpose for teaching and I wholeheartedly intended to pursue this vision of good work.

Unaligned Goals

When I began teaching in a public school I quickly learned that my vision of good work (Gardner et al., 2001) as a teacher did not align with the type of teaching I was required to do. I was expected to focus on "data-driven instruction" that would ensure my students would pass the end-of-year state assessment. In this system, it was required that my planning and teaching looked something like this:

1. Look at the district curriculum map to see which academic learning standards to teach for the week.

2. Study the end-of-the-week quiz provided by the district to see how students will be assessed on these standards.

3. Plan lessons based on the standard and how it will be assessed. Make sure students have time to practice the skill before the quiz on Friday.

4. Administer the district-mandated quizzes on Friday. Grade the quizzes before the end of the day. Input student scores into the district database.

5. Have students record their scores in their data notebook and on the data wall in the classroom.

6. Repeat every week.

In this approach, I was not expected or encouraged to consider what my students wanted to know, as the state and district mandated exactly what students were supposed to learn. Students' interests and backgrounds were deemed irrelevant and these mandates were meant to structure every moment of the school day. Additionally, the order and pacing of these academic skills were predetermined, which meant that it was difficult to address topics in an interrelated way. In other words, the curriculum required that academic knowledge be taught in isolation, with each content area disconnected from the others, and detached from the real world and students' lives. This standardized and testing-centered approach was not *aligned* (Mucinskas & Gardner, 2013) with what I believed constituted good teaching. Thus, I looked for ways to incorporate pedagogical practices that more closely aligned with my values as an educator. For example, I incorporated students' interests as much as possible, worked to highlight the connections between content areas, and replaced mandated texts and curriculum materials with those that were better suited to my students. Working around some of the mandates that did not serve my students was a way for me to exercise some autonomy and pursue good work (Gardner et al., 2001).

Gardner and his colleagues who coined and studied the notion of good work in various fields found that "good work is easier to achieve when the various stakeholders are in broad agreement about the goals and means of the profession" (Mucinskas & Gardner, 2013, p. 455). This type of agreement on the overall goals and ways of pursuing those goals within a profession is termed *alignment* (Mucinskas & Gardner, 2013). In my case, the standardized teaching described above, with its emphasis on testing and isolated academic skills, implied a purpose and means for education that was not aligned with my vision of the purpose and practices of

education. In other words, I could not enact the values that motivated me to teach, and I began to feel that I was doing more harm than good, which is a condition that educational researcher and philosopher Doris Santoro (2018) calls *demoralization*. In the following section, I describe Santoro's (2018) concept of demoralization and the connection between my demoralization and my engagement with classroom transformations.

Demoralization

Santoro (2018) described demoralization as a form of professional dissatisfaction that "derives from teachers' inability to enact the values that motivate and sustain their work" and it "reaches its peak when teachers believe that they are violating basic moral expectations that educators should embody: do no harm to students, support student learning, engage in behavior becoming of a professional" (p. 43). This description of teacher demoralization stems from Santoro's research on veteran teacher attrition, a topic that she began studying when she discovered that there was little research related to this topic, and the research that did exist used the notion of *burnout* to explain the cause.

The Difference Between Demoralization and Burnout

Santoro distinguished demoralization from burnout in that burnout implies an *individual* problem within a teacher, while demoralization points to problems with *the conditions of work*. Santoro (2018) described the difference between burnout and demoralization as follows:

> Burnout signals that something is amiss with a teacher who could otherwise be doing good work in her position. Demoralization points to a *normative* problem the teacher sees with the context of the work. The teacher considers it very difficult, if not impossible, to engage in good work in her position. The source of burnout is an individual teacher's current psychological profile. Demoralization signals a problem with conditions of the

work that impede the realization of the teacher's significant commitments and beliefs

about the purpose and conduct of good work. (p. 44)

In other words, burnout implies an *individual problem* that can be remedied through individual

efforts and characteristics, such as resilience and boundary-setting, while demoralization points

to a problem with the *work context or environment*. Santoro (2018) pointed out that this

distinction between burnout and demoralization is important, particularly at a time when a

dominant discourse circulating in education suggests that resilience in teachers is the solution to

teacher attrition.

Demoralization: A Conflict in Values

Demoralization, in contrast to burnout, pinpoints the root of dissatisfaction among many

experienced teachers. Santoro's research suggests that the type of teacher dissatisfaction that

leads to demoralization stems from teachers' continual value conflicts with educational policies,

mandates, and practices (Santoro, 2018). These ongoing conflicts "threaten the ideals and values,

the moral center, teachers bring to their work" (Santoro, 2018, p. 5) and can lead to

discouragement and despair. Teachers reach a state of demoralization when they "can no longer

access the sources of satisfaction that made their work worthwhile" (p. 49). These sources of

satisfaction are tied to moral rewards that contribute to a teaching life that is considered

worthwhile and good. For example, a preschool teacher in Santoro's study became demoralized

when the mandated curriculum violated her core beliefs about children and learning. As an

educator who studied various pedagogical approaches and drew her approach from tenets of the

Reggio Emilia and Montessori philosophies, which emphasize student choice, exploration, and

inquiry, this teacher "believed she violated her core beliefs about children and what they

deserve" by adhering to the mandated curriculum that removed those components (Santoro,

2018, p. 51). The problem for this teacher was that she was not able to do what she understood to be *good work*. This was also my problem, which is part of what brought me to classroom transformations.

The standardized teaching environment I described above, which required me to isolate academic skills, teach to the test, and ignore students' interests, produced a deep sense of cognitive dissonance. What I was required to do every day did not align (Mucinskas & Gardner, 2013) with my values as a teacher, and even worse, I began to feel that I was complicit in harming the children in my care. The vignette below illustrates one of the many moments in my teaching career when I felt that I was harming children, which contributed to my demoralization.

Data Walls: A Mandate to Harm Children

I slowly swivel back and forth in my desk chair as I watch the children seated at the table in front of me. We have just finished reading a short book together, a "leveled reader," which is part of our school's mandated reading program. Now they are answering the comprehension questions at the end of the book. I glance up at the clock and see that it is nearly time for lunch.

I lean in toward my students. "Please find a good place to stop. We need to get ready to go to lunch."

Lucas slides his book to the center of the table and springs from his seat as if he has been waiting for this moment. Jennifer and Marco continue writing, determined to complete the last comprehension question.

I gently shake the bell I use as a signal to the class that it is time to clean up. The other children, who are working at literacy centers around the room, begin putting away their materials. I stand and begin organizing the supplies at the table as I scan the room. Most of the

children are busily putting away their materials and happily chatting as they form a line at the door.

Except for Hannah.

She is standing in the back of the room, staring intently at the Data Wall. She pushes her hands into the pocket on the front of her black hoodie as her shoulders and chin fall. Her body seems to shrink. I draw in a deep breath and begin to move toward her. She turns on her heel and slowly moves toward the other students. She is the last to join the line.

"Ok, let's go, line leader!" I call to the student at the front of the line. I walk toward Hannah and put my hand on her shoulder. "You're usually at the front of the line when it's time for lunch."

She hangs her head and shrugs her shoulders. I lean down to make eye contact as tears spill from her eyes. She quickly wipes her eyes with the backs of her hands. I wrap her in a hug, my own eyes filling with tears.

Figure 14

Image of a data chart similar to the one Hannah studied on the data wall

Note. Photo posted by Maneuvering the Middle (2018)

Harming Children: A Source of Demoralization

The "data wall" that Hannah studied was a display of various charts to track students'

academic progress. Data walls became a popular practice in elementary schools after the passage

of No Child Left Behind (National Education Policy Center, 2019) and remain a common

practice today (Harris et al., 2020). Originating in the 1990s, data walls are said to motivate

students by helping them set and monitor learning goals (Jimerson et al., 2019; Potenziano 2014;

Singh & Glasswell, 2013). They are also linked to the idea that students can and should be

motivated by comparison and competition with their peers (Marsh et al, 2016). Regardless of the

intentions, the data wall that I was required to post in my classroom did not motivate Hannah. It

*de*motivated her, shamed her, and humiliated her.

When Hannah looked at the charts on the wall, she could see that the rows representing her academic achievement stood out. According to the charts, she was among the lowest-achieving students in the class in several content areas. Despite my constant reminders to students that this data wall was meant to help us keep track of their progress, set goals, and celebrate their accomplishments, moments like the one illustrated in the vignette above made it clear that this was harmful to students. Posting this data wall in my classroom made me complicit in shaming and humiliating students and diminishing their motivation and joy for learning. In other words, I felt that how I was required to carry out my work was causing harm to my students, a feeling that Santoro (2018) pinpoints as one of the most prominent sources of demoralization among teachers.

In her book, *Demoralized*, Santoro (2018) wrote about teachers in her research who were troubled by how their work damaged students. Despite entering the profession to support and empower students, demoralized teachers reported that the way they were required to conduct their work was often "developmentally inappropriate, pedagogically ill-advised, or damaging to students' social-emotional well-being" (p. 62). The vignette above is one example of a required component of my work that was harmful to my students' social and emotional well-being and contributed to my demoralization. However, it was not the only part of my work that I felt was harmful to my students. Rather, it was part of a constellation of practices that were detrimental to my students.

A Constellation of Harmful Practices

The feeling that I had no choice but to comply with mandates that violated my conscience and teaching philosophy became increasingly pervasive in my work as a teacher over the years. The emphasis on data and accountability in the wake of No Child Left Behind, and its successor

the Every Student Succeeds Act, produced practices in the public schools where I worked that were harmful to students (Jeffries, 2018; Meier & Wood, 2004), such as narrowed curriculum, an emphasis on isolated academic skills, rigid pacing guides, scripted curriculum, and constant student testing. In other words, the data wall was only one of many harmful practices that I was required to implement as an elementary school teacher. This constellation of practices that conflicted with my values as an educator is linked to broader trends in educational reform, sometimes referred to as GERM, or the global educational reform movement (Hargreaves et al., 2001; Sahlberg, 2016). This international movement in education is rooted in market-oriented logic that promotes standardization, prescribed curriculum, high-stakes accountability for teachers and students, and the use of corporate management practices (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019; Sahlberg, 2014). The global educational reform movement (GERM) stems from a broader movement referred to as *neoliberalism*.

In the following section, I briefly describe neoliberalism and some of its impacts on and manifestations in education, including the Assessment Industrial Complex (Conn & Tenam-Zemach, 2019; Tenam-Zemach et al., 2021), the datafication of education (Roberts-Holmes, 2015), and the effects of neoliberal educational policy on the working lives of teachers. My intention in the following section is not to provide an extensive analysis of neoliberalism, nor a comprehensive review of the literature related to neoliberalism in education. Rather, my purpose here is to briefly introduce teachers and other stakeholders to neoliberalism and some of its impacts on education, including its effects on teachers.

Overall, my aim in the following section is to begin connecting my demoralization and classroom transformations to the harmful environment of teaching in the ordinary crisis (Berlant, 2011) of neoliberal capitalism. I begin by describing how the educational policies and practices

linked to neoliberalsim have produced a harmful environment for teachers, an environment that is saturated with everyday traumas (Berlant, 2011; Thompson & Jones, 2021) that have become normalized. I then theorize the role of my classroom transformations within this context as a misrecognition (Berlant, 2011) that stemmed from my cruelly optimistic (Berlant, 2011) relation to teaching and notions of the good life.

Neoliberalism

What is Neoliberalism?

One way to think about neoliberalism is that it is a family of theories related to economics and government that are rooted in several underlying assumptions. These underlying beliefs include (1) that humans are fundamentally self-interested, (2) that the market is beneficent in nature, and (3) that the government should be a promoter of markets and market behaviors (Hodge, 2017; Olsen & Peters, 2005). The economic and social policies that stem from these assumptions "promote individual self-interest, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere" (Lipman, 2011, p. 6).

Neoliberal economic and social practices emerged as a response to progressive reforms in the U.S. and Western Europe in the second half of the twentieth century (Foucault, 1979/2008) and gained traction in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Neoliberal policies are thought to be "largely responsible for a wide range of social, political, ecological and economic problems" (Springer et al., 2016, p. 2), including a precarious existence for people living in the wake of these policies. Cultural theorist Laruen Berlant (2011) described this historical moment of precarity under neoliberal capitalism as a crisis that has become normalized as part of everyday life, an "ordinary crisis."

Neoliberalism can also be understood as a dominant discourse, or what French philosopher Michel Foucault (1977/1980) referred to as a regime of truth. In other words, neoliberalism is ubiquitous in society, often unquestioned, and operates as "common sense." Because neoliberal logic operates as an unquestioned truth, it is often unnamed. As scholars have pointed out, many people are not familiar with the term neoliberalism (e.g., Jones, 2023; Hursh, 2017), even though it has "become the dominant economic policy across the globe" (Hursh, 2017, p. 1524) and "shape[s] nearly every aspect of our lives" (Jones, 2023, p. 130).

The term neoliberalism has been used extensively across a range of domains in scholarly literature and "means different things to different people" (Springer et al., 2016, p.1). Thus, it has become known as "a rascal concept – promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested" (Brenner and Peck, 2010, p. 184). In fact, some scholars argue that the term has been used in so many different ways that it is difficult to describe it in a way that offers consensus (e.g., Sharma et al., 2023). Despite the various uses of the term, education scholar Ajay Sharma (2020) wrote that one common theme that runs through ideas associated with neoliberalism is "the sociopolitical positioning of individualized, market-based competition as the preferred governing principle for shaping human action in all areas of life both at the individual and collective, societal levels" (para 1). Simply put, neoliberalism involves the expansion of market principles into all areas of life, including public education (Brown 2015; Shamir 2008; Springer et al. 2016).

A key point to understand about neoliberalism is that it emphasizes "deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision" (Harvey 2005, p. 3). Thus, neoliberal policy prioritizes corporate interests and seeks to generate profit from public

services, such as education. Scholar Stephanie Jones (2023) explained that two main goals of neoliberal policy include:

1. Opening up formerly public services and goods to the private sector for-profit and,

2. Ensuring that the state puts policy in place that *mandates* the use of private goods and services to sustain the flow of public tax dollars into private industry. (p. 128)

As Jones (2023) pointed out, examples of public services that have been opened to the private sector include state-run prisons, county-operated ambulance services, and public schools.

Examples of Neoliberalism in Education

The Assessment Industrial Complex

When it comes to education, one example of neoliberal policy that prioritizes corporate interests over public interests is the multi-billion-dollar testing industry in which "corporations now have a direct pipeline into billions of public/tax dollars through the public school systems that have to pay the industry for all of their goods and services" (Jones, 2023, p. 128). As Jones (2023) pointed out, "private corporations…lobby for and benefit from the policy mandates coming from state and federal legislators that *require* testing, thus guaranteeing a constant revenue stream of local, state, and federal tax dollars" (p. 128). In other words, neoliberal policy has allowed private corporations to profit from public education. By mandating testing in public schools and requiring these schools to purchase testing materials from private corporations, the testing industry produces huge profits. Essentially, public tax dollars are being siphoned to the testing industry. Scholars call this process the Testing Industrial Complex (Roberts, 2015) or the Assessment Industrial Complex (AIC) (Conn & Tenam-Zemach, 2019; Tenam-Zemach et al., 2021).

Similar to the Military Industrial Complex (MIC) (Eisenhower, 1961/2011), which also stems from neoliberal policy and prioritizes corporate interests over those of the public, the Assessment Industrial Complex relies on public tax dollars to support corporate and political interests (Conn & Tenam-Zemach, 2019). "Education corporations lobby for profitable educational policy, and in turn, policymakers rely on standardized assessments to validate their policies" (Conn & Tenam-Zemach, 2019, p. 124). The diagram below illustrates the Assessment Industrial Complex as a cycle in which tax dollars that are designated for public education are used to purchase goods and services from corporations, who then lobby legislators to mandate policies that require testing and the purchasing of their materials.

Figure 15

The Testing Industrial Complex in Education
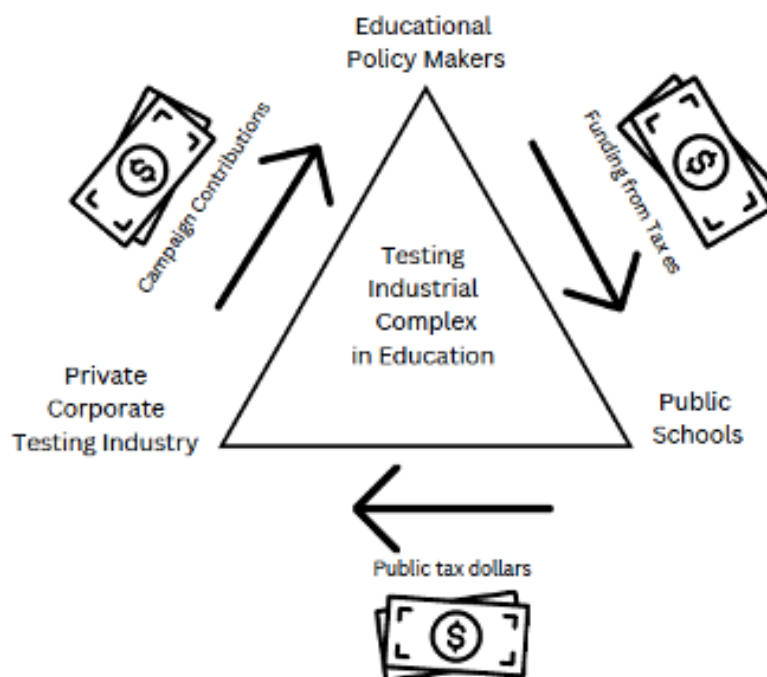
Note. Figure inspired by Astore's (2023) diagram, "Iron Triangle of the Military Industrial Complex"

97

The Testing Industrial Complex (Roberts, 2015) is only one manifestation of neoliberal policy in U.S. public education. In the next section, I discuss another way that neoliberal logic has reshaped public education. That is, through the *datafication* (Roberts-Holmes, 2015) of education.

The Datafication of Education

As mentioned above, the Testing Industrial Complex (Roberts, 2015), or the Assessment Industrial Complex (Conn & Tenam-Zemach, 2019; Tenam-Zemach et al., 2021) is part of the broader neoliberal project that aims to prioritize corporate interests and apply market principles to all areas of life. Thus, it operates in conjunction with other neoliberal discourses and practices. For example, the Assessment Industrial Complex is only possible because of the dominant discourse that teaching and learning can and should be numerically quantified. This idea that something as complex as education can be represented with numbers is part of a neoliberal rationality emphasizing productivity, efficiency, measurable outcomes, effectiveness, and competition. In a neoliberal environment, "people are expected to make sense of the fast-paced and complex nature of the world we inhabit through numbers," (Benson, n.d.). These numbers create metrics that allow us to compare and assign value to every facet of life, including human beings. This widespread use of data in all spheres of life is referred to as datafication (Roberts-Holmes, 2015) or the "tyranny of numbers" (Ball, 2015). The neoliberal "deification of data" (Hardy & Lewis, 2017, p. 676) has resulted in education systems around the globe being governed by numbers and data (Grek, 2009; Rose, 1999), and 'good instruction' is now primarily defined by measurable outcomes (Holloway et al., 2017). This focus on data has shaped schooling in numerous ways and led to practices such as the narrowing of curricula and pedagogy to that which is tested (Au, 2011; Berliner, 2011; Cormack & Comber, 2013;

Kumashiro, 2012), and the rationing of teaching resources to groups of students most likely to improve school scores—a practice known as 'educational triage' (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). In short, neoliberal datafication has remade education by reducing it to that which is measurable and producing practices that prioritize data.

The Impacts of Neoliberalism on Teachers

The neoliberal logic and policies that have produced the Testing Industrial Complex (Roberts, 2015) and the datafication of education (Roberts-Holmes, 2015), among other problematic practices, have created an environment that is demoralizing and traumatic for students and teachers. In the following section, I discuss the profound impact of neoliberal policies and practices on teachers to illustrate the atmosphere of teaching in the ordinary crisis (Berlant, 2011) of neoliberal capitalism.

Reshaping Teacher Subjectivity: Producing Personal Ontological Dilemmas

Renowned scholar of education policy Stephen Ball (2003) wrote that neoliberal educational initiatives do not simply change *what* teachers do, it changes *who they are*. Using French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard's notion of *performativity*, Ball (2003) argued that neoliberal educational reform has produced "new kinds of teacher subjects" (p. 217) whose values are "challenged or displaced by the terrors of performativity" (p. 216). Essentially, Ball (2003) demonstrates that neoliberal education reform relies on performativity as a way to control teachers. He wrote:

> Performativity is a technology, a culture and mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change—based on rewards and sanctions…The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or

'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. (p. 216)

The datafication of education has produced a performative culture in which teachers are monitored, judged, and assigned value according to their "output" (i.e., students' test scores). At the same time, Ball (2003) argued, a new language and ethics of education emerged, both based on market logic. For example, educational achievement is understood as a set of 'productivity-targets', and the ethics of education shift from an ethic of care, cooperation, and professional judgment to an ethic of competition and performance. In the performance regime, there is no place for caring and authentic relationships, and a teacher's "commitments to and purposes for teaching…have no place" (p. 222). This new kind of teacher is one "who can maximize performance, who can set aside irrelevant principles, or out-moded social commitments, for whom excellence and improvement are the driving force of their practice" (p. 223). The result for many teachers, Ball (2003) argued, is a sense of meaninglessness and inauthentic practices and relationships, which has a profoundly detrimental effect on the inner lives of these teachers.

This sense of meaningless and inauthenticity that Ball (2003) described is similar to Santoro's (2018) notion of demoralization, both of which describe how I felt as a teacher working under neoliberal educational policies. Santoro (2018) wrote that demoralization is "rooted in discouragement and despair borne out of ongoing *value conflicts* [emphasis added] with pedagogical policies, reform mandates, and school practices" (p. 3). These value conflicts lead to demoralization when teachers are expected to implement practices that are harmful to students (Santoro, 2018). Similarly, Ball (2003) explained that neoliberal performativity

100

practices often require "damaging practices" (p. 220) that lead to personal "ontological dilemmas" (p. 222) among teachers whose moral and ethical purposes for teaching do not align with the requirements of teaching in a performative environment.

The Demoralization of Teachers Under Neoliberalism

The body of research related to teacher satisfaction and well-being under neoliberalism supports the ideas put forward by Santoro (2018) and Ball (2003) described above. Researchers have documented the numerous detrimental effects of neoliberal education policies on teachers (e.g., Crawford-Garrett et al., 2017; Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy, 2022; Santoro, 2018; Thompson & Jones, 2021). For example, Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy (2022) reported that datafied and performative conditions have resulted in "an increasingly demoralized and devalued profession" (p. 18). One of the main causes of the demoralization of the teachers in their study was witnessing the impacts of datafied school environments on students, which the teachers believed eviscerated students. Additionally, the teachers' feelings of devaluation were linked to the tension they felt between their ethical beliefs and their practices. Ultimately, this study demonstrated that datafied educational conditions, which led to teacher demoralization and devaluation, resulted in the 'disappearance' of the teacher through the removal of educational interactions that foster authenticity, relationships, and genuine student engagement and learning.

The Traumatic Nature of Teaching Under Neoliberalism

Studies have also documented the *traumatic* nature of teaching under the neoliberal logic of datafication. For example, Garrett-Crawford et al. (2017) wrote about the "trauma of teaching in an era of high-stakes accountability," revealing three types of trauma that teachers endured as a result of neoliberal policy initiatives:

(1) the physical toll exacted by an unrealistic workload focused primarily on the

execution of meaningless tasks, (2) a sense of psychic disequilibrium and cognitive

dissonance resulting from teachers having to reconcile their own local understandings of

their classroom, school and community with broader depictions of the school as failing,

and (3) experiences of ongoing marginalization based on repeated instances of de-

professionalization. (Crawford-Garrett et al., 2017, p. 8)

These findings echo other studies that have reported on the harm done to teachers when the work

they are required to do does not contribute to education in the ways they had hoped (Berliner,

2018) due to the reshaping of teaching under data-driven education initiatives.

Thompson and Jones (2021) also wrote about the trauma of teaching under neoliberal

regimes, describing neoliberalism in education as a normalized trauma produced by the continual

"pressures to ignore children's social, emotional and bodied needs and desires in service of test

preparation and test scores" (p. 90). With a focus on women teachers, they show how the

neoliberal takeover of schools places women teachers in a position to perpetually strive for

"good enough" via the production of students' test scores. Overall, they demonstrate how the

focus on testing in schools has produced violently dehumanizing conditions for children and

teachers.

The Deprofessionalization of Teachers Under Neoliberalism

Scholars have also written about the *deprofessionalization* of teachers under

neoliberalism (e.g., Au, 2011; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Crawford-Garrett et al., 2017).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2006), for example, wrote about the increasingly prominent view of

teachers as technicians with little autonomy under No Child Left Behind legislation. Similarly,

Au (2011) linked neoliberal educational reforms that rely on high-stakes testing to the

deprofessionalization of teaching. He argued that "such testing is promoting the standardization

of teaching that both disempowers and deskills teachers. (Au, 2011, p 30). Additionally, researchers Gale de Saxe et al., (2020) demonstrated "how educators are delegitimized and deprofessionalized through privatization, education 'reform,' and policies that reduce the profession to one that is both technicist and rote" (p. 51). This work, along with the other literature discussed above, provides some insight into the current conditions of teaching—an environment that has been produced by educational policies designed to support neoliberal capitalism.

Making Connections: Neoliberalism, Demoralization, and Classroom Transformations

I have discussed my demoralization (Santoro, 2018) as a teacher that resulted from my desire to do good work (Gardner et al., 2001), which was rooted in a particular vision of public education—a vision that was not aligned to the neoliberal imperatives that dominate public schools and the U.S. education system as a whole. But how are classroom transformations connected to this experience? In the following section, I connect my engagement with classroom transformations to my state of demoralization in an educational environment that was unaligned (Mucinskas & Gardner, 2013) with my view of good teaching. I theorize that classroom transformations operated as a misrecognition (Berlant, 2011) and a cruelly optimistic attachment that I believed would fulfill my desire to engage in good work (Gardner et al., 2001) as a teacher. I demonstrate that ultimately, my attachments to classroom transformations and good teaching were rooted in my cruelly optimistic attachment to the good life (Berlant, 2011).

Classroom Transformations: Bringing the Joy Back

When I began my teaching career, I quickly learned that my values as a teacher and my teaching philosophy were not aligned with the neoliberal goals and practices in public education that centered high-stakes testing and other harmful practices. However, I was sometimes able to

make adjustments to my work that made my teaching feel meaningful. For example, there were times when I was not closely surveilled, which allowed me to exercise some autonomy, such as not using a mandated scripted curriculum and implementing integrated units of study that offered my students some choice in their learning connections to the world outside of school.

Over the years, however, my autonomy became increasingly limited, and my notion of good teaching became more difficult to access. Eventually, I became demoralized (Santoro, 2018) as my purposes for teaching and the practices that I believed aligned with them became increasingly difficult to pursue. The hope and joy I felt in teaching faded and most days left me feeling like a "cog in a deeply flawed machine" (Gillespie & Thompson, 2021, p. 259).

However, my last two years as an elementary school teacher brought a much-needed reprieve from the tightly controlled environment I had endured for several years under a particularly authoritarian principal. When the administration at my school changed, teachers were given slightly more autonomy than we had been given over the past several years. The main difference was that we were no longer expected to teach the exact same lessons as our colleagues at precisely the same time each day. We were also not required to use scripted or commercially produced lessons anymore. I was thrilled with this change, even though many other aspects of teaching remained unchanged. For example, teachers were still required to teach according to the grade-level pacing guide, which prescribed which state standards were to be taught each week. We were also still required to utilize certain computer software programs, and "progress monitoring" (testing) systems that the district purchased. However, the newfound freedom to create my own lessons was exciting and I was determined to use this opportunity to bring some joy into my classroom—something that had been missing for a long time. It seemed

that I would be able to move beyond the impasse (Berlant, 2011) of demoralization where I had been stuck for years.

Each week, I scoured the internet for the most engaging and exciting lesson ideas I could find. I combed through Google searches and spent hours on Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers. One day, I came across a teacher's blog which described something called a classroom transformation. The page was filled with images of a classroom that had been transformed into an operating room. The students wore surgical masks and gloves as they gathered around faux operating tables performing "surgery" on characters as a way to practice the third-grade state reading standard related to identifying character traits.

I was instantly hooked. I *had* to do this transformation in my classroom.

Figure 16

Image of an operating room transformation

Note. Image posted by edu-blogger Hannah Powell (2018)

As I wrote at the beginning of this chapter, this classroom transformation was my first of many. It felt good to do something that felt creative and different. I had spent years teaching joyless, cookie-cutter lessons and this felt like a way to shake things up, a way to infuse some fun and excitement in the classroom. It seemed like classroom transformations would bring me closer to my vision of good teaching that had been so very elusive over the years. In other words, I misrecognized (Berlant, 2011) classroom transformations as a way to gain proximity to good work (Gardner et al., 2001).

Classroom Transformations: A Misrecognition

Misrecognition, as I use it here, refers to cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's (2011) use of the term. Berlant's (2011) notion of misrecognition, which is central to their concept of cruel optimism, "describes the psychic process by which fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire" (p. 122). In my case, the classroom transformations that I encountered online, and later implemented in my classroom, allowed me to imagine that they would fulfill my desire to do what I considered good work (Gardner et al., 2001). As discussed above, my view of good teaching was rooted in particular values and beliefs about the purposes and aims of education and teaching. However, my demoralization made me feel desperate to experience the rewards of good teaching—joy, engagement, creativity, and the sense that I was doing good in the world. Thus, classroom transformations were appealing because they seemed to offer these experiences. In other words, they were a reprieve from the everyday traumas (Thompson & Jones, 2021), of the classroom—a place that had become shaped by policies and practices designed to serve and reproduce neoliberal capitalism.

When I saw the images of classroom transformations online, they were often accompanied by descriptions from teachers who gushed about how engaging, motivating, and fun they were. Many images of smiling teachers, decked out in costumes and standing in their transformed classrooms, were paired with promising captions that said things like, "The kids had such a good time!" (Gallagher, 2023) and "Today reminded me of how fun teaching can be!" (DeMello, 2023). These messages allowed me to project qualities onto classroom transformations that would permit me to love them. As Berlant (2011) wrote, misrecognition is "to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those

qualities—which it might or might not have" (p. 122). In this case, I projected the qualities that I believed constituted good teaching onto classroom transformations. I believed classroom transformations offered a cluster of promises (Berlant, 2011) for the good work (Gardner et al., 2001) that I had always envisioned, a type of teaching that was engaging, empowering, joyful, and contributed to the well-being of my students and society. This misrecognition can be understood as part of a cruelly optimistic (Berlant, 2011) relationship I had with teaching.

Cruel Optimism

Background: Lauren Berlant's Theory of Affect

The concept of cruel optimism comes from the work of late cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2006, 2011), whose work focused primarily on political *affects*. Berlant (2020) described affects as the "often inchoate senses that you have in your body that are the effect of the impact of the world" (Coalition Margins, 2020, 19:04). These unconscious, bodily senses circulate, creating shared "affective atmospheres" (Berlant, 2011, p. 15) within historical times. Berlant explored this sort of affect in their work, including their book titled *Cruel Optimism*, as well as in a series of three books, referred to as their "national sentimentality trilogy," in which they argued that national identity was connected to affects, rather than conscious decisions. Berlant coined the concept of cruel optimism as a way to recognize the particular affect operating in the world under the precarity of neoliberal capitalism.

In their (2011) book, *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant argues that fantasies of the good life began fraying in the period after the Second World War and have continued to do so in the contemporary world under neoliberal capitalism. These fraying fantasies include "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy" (Berlant, 2011, p. 3), as well as "the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for

individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair" (Berlant, 2011, p. 3). All of these "dissolving assurances" (Berlant, 2011, p. 3) have produced a historical moment characterized by precarity and ongoing crisis. This "ordinary crisis" of everyday life has produced an affective atmosphere in which people rely on *cruel optimism* to navigate the overwhelming present.

The Concept of Cruel Optimism

Berlant (2011) wrote that "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (p. 1). Berlant described these objects of desire as *attachments* that provide a *cluster of promises* for us. For example, Berlant wrote that an attachment and its accompanying cluster of promises could be "embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—whatever" (p. 23). In other words, we can have an attachment to anything that offers us a cluster of promises.

What makes an attachment *cruel*, however, is that it involves a double bind (Anderson, 2023; Berlant, 2011). A cruelly optimistic attachment simultaneously sustains and harms us (Berlant, 201). As cultural-political geographer Anderson (2023) explained, cruel optimism "names a relation of attachment in which being in proximity to an object simultaneously harms whilst holding out the promise of flourishing, a promise that the subject remains attached to even in the midst of actual harm" (p. 400). In other words, an attachment has become cruel when it is "significantly problematic" (Berlant, 2011, p. 24) in that it harms while holding out promises for prosperity. The optimistic promises for flourishing sustain the subject, giving her a "sense of what it means to keep living on and to look forward to being in the world" (Berlant, 2006, p. 21). To give up the attachment would be to give up hope for the promises of the future.

An example of a cruelly optimistic attachment, which Berlant explores in their (2011) book, *Cruel Optimism,* is the American dream or the "the good life." Despite the unlikelihood of

attaining the good life under neoliberal capitalism, people maintain an attachment to the fantasy, an attachment which produces "a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it" (Berlant, 2011, p. 27). In other words, neoliberal capitalism offers a cluster of promises for the good life, or the American dream, that sustains people, offering them hope in a system that actively harms them and is unlikely to deliver the associated cluster of promises.

Classroom Transformations: A Cruelly Optimistic Attachment

The concept of cruel optimism is a helpful analytical tool for making sense of my relationship with classroom transformations and teaching. As I described above, classroom transformations seemed to offer a cluster of promises (Berlant, 2011) that would bring me closer to doing good work (Gardner, et al., 2001) as a teacher. This misrecognition (Berlant, 2011) pulled me into a cycle of constantly creating these classroom transformations as I tried to gain proximity to the elusive fantasy of engaging in good work (Gardner, et al., 2001).

Anderson, describing Berlant's (2011) notion of cruelly optimistic attachments, wrote that cruelly optimistic attachments "allow people to inhabit and make liveable worlds, especially in damaging conditions" (Anderson, 2023, p. 393). In my case, classroom transformations made the teaching world liveable for me in the damaging conditions of education under neoliberalism. They seemed to provide the joy and meaning I had lost in my teaching and allowed me to access some of the rewards of teaching that I longed for—engaging and creative work that would enrich the lives of children. I felt like I had found a way to teach in an atmosphere that was traumatic and demoralizing.

It did not take long, however, for this attachment to become harmful. Each transformation required my money and countless hours of labor. For example, any one classroom transformation

required many hours of planning, shopping, and decorating—all done outside of contract hours. These costs, combined with the conflict that classroom transformations created among my colleagues (as I discussed in Chapter 2), added up to an expensive and harmful practice. What made them cruelly optimistic, however, is that I remained attached to them, even though they did not deliver their cluster of promises (Berlant, 2011).

Classroom Transformations: Unfulfilled Promises

Classroom transformations seemed to offer something different, a way to bring joy, engagement, and meaning back to my work. This cluster of promises (Berlant, 2011) associated with classroom transformations was seductive, especially since I had become demoralized (Santoro, 2018) and felt that I was not able to do the type of good work (Gardner, et al., 2001) that I intended to do as a teacher. Looking back, however, I can see that classroom transformations never provided authentic, meaningful learning experiences for my students. They were not empowering for my students. They didn't foster creativity. They didn't cultivate curiosity. Classroom transformations were an artificial substitute for these things. They were worksheets with themes to match the decorated room. They were games to practice isolated academic skills. They were task cards that mimicked test questions. Classroom transformations were just more of the same approach. They were test preparation masquerading as innovation, a way to "dress up" a form of education that is disempowering, dehumanizing, and traumatic. In other words, they didn't challenge neoliberal educational practices.

They *reproduced* them.

In a 2016 interview, Berlant described cruelly optimistic attachments as those "that actually help to reproduce what's damaging in the world," but they also "represent the world to the people who have them such that they can't give up their attachments even though the

consequences are terrible" (IPAK Center, 2:16). Despite the cost of classroom transformations and their unfulfilled promises, I could not let them go. Somehow, they seemed to be bringing me closer to the good teaching that I wanted to do, teaching that would enrich the lives of my students and set them on the path to the good life (Berlant, 2011). To give up classroom transformations would be to give up the fantasy of good teaching, which would also mean giving up the idea that I could contribute to bringing the good life (Berlant, 2011) to fruition for my students.

The Entanglement of Good Teaching and the Good Life

My notion of good work (Gardner et al., 2001) as a teacher meant several different things to me. It meant offering my students meaningful and authentic learning experiences. It meant centering their interests and cultivating a love for learning. It meant attending to their social, emotional, and bodied needs. It meant empowering them and helping them develop the skills they needed for life in a democratic society.

And it also meant preparing them for the good life—to take their place in a liberal-capitalist society that would provide opportunities for job security, upward mobility, and political and social equality (Berlant, 2011). In other words, my understanding of good teaching was entangled with the meritocratic myth (Groeger, 2021) of education as "the great equalizer" (Mann, 1849/1997) and the cruelly optimistic promises of the good life under neoliberal capitalism.

This fantasy of the good life, in which my students could get a good education, secure stable jobs, and create a stable life under neoliberal capitalism, ultimately created a "bad life" for me as a teacher, a life "dedicated to moving toward the good life's normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time" (Berlant, 2011, p. 169). Classroom

transformations constituted my "survival time," my way of "holding onto the ledge, treading water" (Berlant, 2011, p. 169), in the impasse of education under neoliberal capitalism.

The Impasse of Neoliberal Capitalism

Berlant (2011) used the term impasse to refer to the present as a "stretch of time that is being sensed and shaped" (p. 199). The impasse of neoliberal capitalism is characterized by a collective sense of precarity that has emerged as a result of a "profound, collective, material, and fantasmatic loss" (p. 222), an "unraveling [of] institutions and social relations of reciprocity" (p. 197). This impasse requires "embarking on an intensified and stressed out learning curve about how to maintain footing, bearings, a way of being, and new modes of composure" (p. 197). In other words, the current historical moment of neoliberal capitalism has produced an atmosphere of instability in which fantasies of the good life—"upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively durable intimacy" (Berlant, 2011, p. 3)— are fraying.

The fraying of these fantasies has produced an ongoing sense of crisis, "crisis ordinariness" (Berlant, 2011) in which we form attachments to things that appear to offer us a way to live in the impasse. However, these attachments are often cruelly optimistic in that despite their promises for flourishment, they work against us and cause us harm, while keeping us attached. In a 2020 lecture, Berlant described the "new normal" of the impasse of neoliberal capitalism as "a space where people are grimacing because all they have left to hold onto is something that they kind of affectively know doesn't work" (Coalition Margins, 2020, 27:00). In other words, there is an affective atmosphere that our bodies are perceiving, a way of registering the mass crisis produced by capitalism. Yet, we stay attached to its promises.

Teaching in Neoliberal Times as an Impasse

The impasse is a way to think about the neoliberal present as an ongoing situation, "a stretch of time" (p. 199) in which people "try to maintain themselves in it until they figure out how to adjust" (p. 195). Similarly, my work as a teacher in a neoliberal environment involved my sensing the moment and trying to find a way to teach in it. In other words, teaching in an environment saturated with neoliberal directives and logic felt like an impasse, an ongoing situation to which I constantly tried to adjust in the hopes that I could engage in my notion of good work (Gardner et al., 2001).

Berlant (2001) used the term impasse to convey the idea of a situation akin to a cul-de-sac. They wrote:

> One takes a *pass* to avoid something or to get somewhere: it's a formal figure of transit. But the impasse is a *cul-de-sac*—indeed, the word *impasse* was invented to replace *cul-de-sac*…In a cul-de-sac one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*. An impasse is a holding station that doesn't securely hold but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around in a space whose contours remain obscure. (p. 199)

The image of an impasse as a cul-de-sac, a holding station where one dogpaddles around within a space, is what teaching felt like to me. I felt trapped in an enclosure, but I could not name what that enclosure was. The contours were obscure as I did not understand what enveloped me. I just knew it did not feel right.

I now know that I was swimming in a sea of neoliberal logic, practices, and ways of being. I was dogpaddling around in the confines of a space that required a neoliberal ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007), and I was looking for a way to adjust or make it out of the enclosure and into the realm of good teaching that would help my students reach the good life. When I

came across classroom transformations, they appeared to be a lifeline, something to hold onto,

something that promised to move me out of this demoralizing (Santoro, 2018) space. It turned

out, however, that the lifeline was a mirage. Classroom transformations and their cluster of

promises (Berlant, 2011) to offer something different, a way out of the enclosure, only kept me

tethered to neoliberal thinking, being, and doing.

Conclusion

Attachments and Discourse

Throughout this chapter I have tried to show how my cruelly optimistic attachment to

classroom transformations was connected to my notion good work (Gardner et al., 2001) and

fantasies of the good life (Berlant, 2011). As a teacher, my overarching purpose was to

contribute something good to society and that included helping students attain social mobility. I

wanted to be a part of "the great equalizer," (Mann, 1849/1997) and contribute to promoting

equality of opportunity for all children. To me, the institution of education and the American

dream were deeply intertwined and I chose a career in education, in part, because I wanted to be

a part of helping children from poor and working class backgrounds improve the material

conditions of their lives. I wanted to be a part of bringing the good life (Berlant, 2011) to fruition

for my students.

Somehow, it never occurred to me that this fantasy of attaining the good life (Berlant,

2011) through education was just that—a fantasy. It never occurred to me that perhaps public

education was *not* an equalizer. I could not see that public education often reinscribes social

inequality, essentially maintaining the social strata (Kozol, 1991/2012, 2005)—even after

experiencing the shocking reality of attending two very different high schools myself and

teaching in schools that reproduced social inequality.

It also never occurred to me that the fantasy of the good life (Berlant, 2011), the American dream of upward mobility and security, was a dream that had been fraying for decades (Berlant, 2011; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010), not to mention that it was completely inaccessible for many groups of people who were excluded from its promises from the beginning.

A question that arises from my inability to recognize the fantasies that sustained me is *how was this possible*? How did I not see that much of what I had built my life around was a fantasy? And where did these fantasies come from in the first place?

One way to think about these fantasies and attachments to them is through a poststructural view of discourse. Scholar Vivien Burr (1995) described discourse as "a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events" (p. 48). For me, the interrelated fantasies of the American dream, of education as the route to the good life, and teaching as a way to contribute to my students' attainment of social mobility and security, were produced through the stories and statements circulating in society, the dominant discourses that insist these things are possible.

From this perspective, the fantasies and attachments that I formed were produced through discursive formations that constituted my subjectivity (Foucault 1969/1972). I took up the discourses that were available to me and formed attachments to them. In other words, dominant discourses about education, the American dream, and meritocracy produced my desires, motivations, and ways of being in the world, including my approach to teaching.

Implications for Teacher Education

Given the power of discourse to constitute subjectivity (Foucault 1969/1972), including the way teachers approach their work, as teacher educators, we have a responsibility to name dominant discourses and offer students theories and philosophy that challenge those discourses.

116

We have a responsibility to name, for example, *neoliberalism* and engage students in an analysis of how neoliberal logic and practices operate in society and in education. We also have a responsibility to offer theories and philosophies that challenge dominant discourses. This opens the possibility for our students to imagine and attach (Berlant, 2011) to something different, to things that might actually contribute to their flourishing, rather than to their demise. If we are not naming dominant discourses in teacher education and offering our students opportunities to grapple with them, then we are essentially contributing to their reproduction and thus foreclosing opportunities for our students to imagine something different.

In addition to naming and challenging dominant discourses in society, such as neoliberalism, teacher education also has the responsibility to address dominant discourses operating within and about education, including those related to teachers and teacher attrition. This is particularly important at a time when job satisfaction levels for teachers are at the lowest in five decades (Kraft & Lyon, 2022). As teacher educators, we should be preparing students to enter this affective atmosphere and Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism can serve an analytical lever in this process. Aimed at "addressing the affective component of historical consciousness" (p. 15), cruel optimism has the potential to help us apprehend the historical present (Berlant, 2011) in education. As an analytic for teachers and teacher education, cruel optimism can bring our attachments to the level of consciousness and allow us to examine and question them. Thinking this way is a "process of getting to know our present" and "asking what to do about it" (McCabe, 2011, para 1). It allows us to consider how we might overcome attachments to forms of life that don't work and potentially fantasize a new reality, including a new reality in education. It allows us to ask questions like, "How can we build a pathway to something new and better?" (McCabe, 2011, para 1).

For teacher educators, Berlant's (2011) *Cruel Optimism* also points to fundamental questions about the purposes and aims of our work. *Cruel Optimism* gestures to the question of what we what we are to do when the promises of life under capitalism begin to fail, when we are "living amid the breakup of modernity's secure institutions of intimacy and reciprocity—the state, the corporation, the family, liberal publics" (Berlant, 2011, p. 222). How does teacher education fit into a society in which the social contract is crumbling? Considering such questions suggests that we reflect on the purposes of education and how might prepare students for such conditions while also fostering in them the ability to imagine something different, "divergent imaginaries of the better good life" (Berlant, 2011, p. 222) that they would like to bring into being. As Berlant (2020) pointed out, to create a new world "we have to try to make something that was a radical thought or a thought whispered between people into common sense" (Coalition Margins, 29:00).

Implications for Teachers

One of my hopes for this chapter is that it speaks to teachers, especially those who feel demoralized (Santoro, 2018) or those who feel that they cannot do good work (Gardner et al., 2001) and are "dogpaddling around in a space whose contours remain obscure" (Berlant, 2011, p. 199). By using Santoro's (2018) concept of demoralization and Gardner et al.'s (2001) notion of good work, alongside Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism, I hope to offer teachers theories and concepts to think with as they navigate their own experiences. I also hope to illuminate the current affective atmosphere in education so that teachers have the language to apprehend the historical present (Berlant, 2011) and potentially develop ways of being in the impasse that do not rely on cruelly optimistic attachments, like classroom transformations.

At the end of *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant (2011) described the painting on the cover of the book, which is an image that she connected to living in the impasse. The painting, titled "If Body: Riva and Zora in Middle Age," by Riva Lehrer, depicts a woman (Riva) lying on the floor behind her dog, Zora. Zora is blind in one eye and wears a cone around her neck, but appears to be happy, as "her tail seems intimately to brush Riva on the floor in the background" (Berlant, 2011, p. 265). Riva, lying on the floor, covers one side of her face with her hand "as though she can be blind like Zora" (Berlant, 2011, p. 266). As author Hua Hsu (2019) wrote, "They are, by conventional standards, limited and vulnerable beings. But, to Berlant, they are a 'team'" (para 22). Berlant (2011) wrote that "Zora and Riva seem to be at peace with each other's bodily being, and seem to have given each other what they came for: companionship, reciprocity, care, protection" (p. 266). Berlant used this image to convey the message that although being in the impasse is vulnerable, we can still experience solidarity, care, and reciprocity. For teachers, this image is a reminder that we are in the impasse of education under neoliberal capitalism together, with each other and with our students, which means that there is potential for solidarity even as vulnerability hovers. As Berlant (2011) wrote, even in the "middle of disrepair" we can take comfort in "having adventures and being in the impasse together, waiting for the other shoe to drop, and also, allowing for some healing and resting, waiting for it not to drop" (p. 266).

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CHAPTER 4

THEORIES OF IMMANENCE AS A WAY FORWARD FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

In this paper, I make an argument for integrating and explicitly teaching theories of immanence in teacher education courses. Using vignettes of two encounters at an Italian preschool, I think with theory (Jackson and Mazzei 2012) to demonstrate how philosophies of immanence reorient thought and produce "a lively new ontology" in which "the world's radical aliveness comes to light" (Barad 2007, p. 33). The theoretical concepts I use include political theorist Jane Bennett's (2010) concept of thing power, along with physicist Karen Barad's (2007) concepts of entanglement and intra-action. My aim is to demonstrate that taking up concepts from theories of immanence can radically reorient teacher education students' thinking, being, and doing, which can fundamentally change how they are able to see, perceive, and make sense of events that unfold in their classrooms. I begin by situating this work within the material and ontological turns in social theory and education, before turning to a discussion on the distinction between ontologies of transcendence and immanence.

The Material and Ontological Turn

Social theory is undergoing what scholars call the 'material turn.' Education scholars Stephanie Jones and James Woglom (2016) describe this as "a turn toward perceiving and analyzing the materiality of our social worlds (e.g., bodies, architecture, furniture, objects, clothing, modes of transportation, landscapes, nature, nonhuman animals, money, resources)" (p.

444). This renewed focus on materiality builds on what philosopher Richard Rorty (1967) first called the 'linguistic turn', which emphasized the importance of language and discourse in the constitution of reality. As feminist scholars Coole and Frost (2010) put it, "materialism is once more on the move after several decades in abeyance" (p. 2). This renewed emphasis on the material can be thought of as part of the posthuman movement, "which refuses to take the distinction between human and nonhuman for granted" (Kuby, 2017, p. 877). The posthuman movement is a shift away from focusing on epistemology and instead centers ontology, specifically ontologies of immanence. For instance, in educational research some scholars are moving away from investigating how learning takes place, or how students come to know, and instead are focusing on issues related to truth(s) and reality(ies) (Kuby, 2017). For example, education scholars Thiel and Jones (2017) wrote about the power of place and materiality in producing meaning. In this work, they argued that the material and discursive forces in places come together to produce possibilities specific to every space. This work is ontologically-focused, as it reconsiders the nature of reality by highlighting the power of material objects and spaces, which is often considered inert, or passive. Similarly, education scholar Sherbine (2020) explored the intra-actions between a child and a chair, and how these intra-actions produced new opportunities for literacy and belonging. Here, the nature of reality is explored anew as Sherbine showed how inert objects, such as a teacher's chair, have the power to produce reality. In a related vein, Strom (2015) wrote of the rhizomatic nature of teaching to emphasize the inherent flaws of educational policies that assume the teacher to be "an autonomous actor who 'does' teaching to students" (p. 321), without the influence of other multiple factors in the assemblage.

Educational scholars have been taking up the ontological turn for more than a decade (Kuby, 2017). For example, early childhood education scholar Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010,

2011) proposed what she calls a relational materialist approach to teacher education and an intra-active pedagogy in early childhood settings and in teacher education that aims to overcome what she called the liberal humanist binaries that are embedded in 'traditional' educational approaches, such as the mind/body and self/other dichotomies. Other education scholars have used posthuman and immanent concepts to theorize scenarios in elementary school classrooms (e.g., Kuby, 2017; Sherbine, 2020; Thiel, 2015). In the following section, I briefly explain ontologies of *transcendence*, which tend to operate more in teacher education programs, before describing ontologies of *immanence* for which I am arguing.[8] I will then present several vignettes and use concepts from theories of immanence to interpret these encounters.

Ontologies of Transcendence

Schwandt (2015) describes ontology as "the philosophical study of the nature of existence, being, or reality; it is the study of problems surrounding whether a certain thing exists" (p. 221). Ontologies of transcendence, which tend to underpin many theories and philosophies that structure modern thinking and ways of being, are found in the work of 'traditional' philosophers, such as Plato, Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. These prominent two-world ontologies are based on the idea that humans and the world around us are separated from something above or beyond us, which is often thought of as universal truth. Smith (2003) describes transcendence:

> transcendence would include…the 'Good' in Plato, the 'One' in Plotinus–all of which are said to be 'beyond' Being, 'otherwise' than Being ('transcendent' to Being), and are thereby used to 'judge' Being, or at least to account for Being. (p. 48)

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[8] I have presented these two types of theories–immanent and transcendent–as completely distinct from one another for the purpose of this paper. However, these theories do not exist in binary opposition. In fact, there are some theories that acknowledge the importance of both transcendence and immanence. My aim in presenting these theoretical perspectives in this way is to highlight the ubiquity of transcendence in everyday thought and to demonstrate that ontologies of immanence can open up new ways of thinking that depart from this dominant structure of thought.

In other words, ontologies of transcendence create a dualistic hierarchy in which two modes of being exist–one of which is always superior to the other. Thus, a hierarchy exits with transcendent truth at the top, humans below truth, and the rest of the world beneath humans. From this perspective, "[t]he world itself remains 'dead' or passive and without agency…it is, basically, a 'tool' and something passive, 'out there' to construct knowledge about" (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 46). This ontological orientation is quite dominant, as it underpins liberal humanism, which has been operating for centuries and "is everywhere, overwhelming in its totality" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 478). Barad (2007) wrote that from this perspective, the human is "the center around which the world turns…the sun, the nucleus, the fulcrum, the unifying force, the glue that holds it all together…an individual apart from all the rest" (p. 134). This perspective has been dominant since Descartes (1637/1993) introduced his concept of the cogito (I think; therefore, I am) and it continues to operate in many contexts, including in education and for the purposes of this paper, teacher education specifically.

Although this perspective may seem natural to some people, the borders between human and nonhuman have not always been quite so distinct. Philosopher Susan Bordo (1986) notes that before the 17th century Enlightenment in Western thought, there was a sense of relatedness between human being and the rest of the world. At this time, "the categories of self and world, inner and outer, human and natural were not as rigorously opposed as they came to be during the Cartesian era" (Bordo, 1986, p. 446). British philosopher Owen Barfield (1965) also writes about the perceived interconnectedness between humans and the world before the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. He wrote,

> The background picture then [before the scientific revolution] was of man as a
> microcosm within the macrocosm. It is clear that he did not feel himself isolated by his

skin from the world outside to quite the same extent that we do. He was integrated or

mortised into it, each different part of him being united to a different part of it by some

invisible thread. In his relation to his environment, the man of the middle ages was rather

less like an island, rather more like an embryo. (pp. 442-443)

This sense of interconnectedness is also evident in indigenous thought. Educational

scholars Wu et al. (2018), point out that in Taoist philosophy, "Human and non-human are

considered indivisible and intricately connected…Humans are part of an enormously complex

system of exchange where the bodies and the distinct characters of the material world are

mutually dependent and constitutive" (p. 511). Similarly, in Ubuntu thought, "Human beings…

are formed in contemporaneous relationship not only with each other, but in a web of

interconnectedness with holonic agential power" (Wu et al, 2018, p. 514). Although these

ontological orientations that emphasize interconnectedness have been present throughout much

of history, today it is more common to understand our human selves and the world outside of

humans quite differently. That is, modern ontological orientations, especially in the West, tend to

be rooted in transcendence.

Ontologies of Immanence

On the other hand, ontologies of immanence are similar to many forms of indigenous

thought, such as the ones described above. Immanence is often associated with the philosophical

concept of "becoming," which simply put, is the idea that the universe is in a constant state of

change, as opposed to "being" which refers to stability and universal truth. Theories of

immanence are also often associated with the work of philosophers such as Foucault, Spinoza,

Nietzsche, and Deleuze, among others. These theories do not rely on hierarchy but are instead

based on the idea that only one mode of being exists. In these one-world ontological systems,

134

there is no distinction between different types of being because everything is of the same substance. As Lenz Taguchi, a feminist new materialist, writes,

> The hierarchal aspect of transcendence is thus 'flattened out'–nothing is considered to stand above or take a true or privileged position. There are no fixed or inherent borders between matter, organisms (human or non-human) and things. Instead, these are understood to be in a constant flow of mutual intra-action and diffractions with each other. (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 43)

> From this perspective, "[w]e are not outside observers of the world. Neither are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, p. 184). In other words, the human being is not understood as inherently agentic and separate from the rest of the world. Instead, humans, like everything else, are in a constant state of "becoming-with" (Haraway, 2008) the world.

Background and Approach to Inquiry

As mentioned above, I will use vignettes of encounters at an Italian preschool to demonstrate how thinking is reoriented when these moments are understood from theories of immanence. I approach my analysis of these encounters through the process of thinking with theory (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; St. Pierre, 2008; Ringrose & Renolds, 2014). In this approach, researchers "use theory to think *with* their data (or use data to think *with* theory)" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. vii), which means foregoing the practice of coding and instead looking for 'hot spots', where the data 'glow' and evoke wonder (MacLure, 2013). This approach is similar to Richardson's (2000) notion of writing as method. By 'putting theory to work,' the goal is to "gain deeper and multilayered understandings of social life" (Thiel, 2015, p. 118). In other words, the researcher uses theory and theoretical concepts to think and write through research

encounters ("data") that pique curiosity. Thinking with theory can be thought of as postqualitative inquiry (Lather, 2007; Rhedding-Jones, 1996; St. Pierre, 2011) since theory, rather than specific methods, guides the research.

The vignettes in this paper illustrate moments that I experienced in a preschool located in the Reggio Emilia region of Italy. As a doctoral candidate, I traveled to Italy with my university's study abroad program for pre-service teachers, where I co-taught the undergraduate study abroad course and observed in a preschool each day to gain a deeper understanding of the Reggio Emilia approach to early education. One of my goals for this trip was to generate data for my dissertation through the study abroad course with the pre-service teachers. I had planned to think with the concept of *thing power* (Bennett, 2010) in relation to the course by intentionally looking for moments in class when non-human actants "produce[d] effects and alter[ed] situations" (Bennett, 2004, p. 355). Although thing power certainly operated within the specific teacher education context, the most profound moments of thing power, the moments I replayed in my mind over and over again, occurred in the preschool. Below, I offer a brief vignette and then demonstrate how this encounter might be interpreted with the concepts of thing power and intra-action, which are drawn from an immanent theoretical perspective.

Day One at the Italian Preschool

It is my first day at the preschool in Italy where I have come to observe the Reggio Emilia approach to education. I am standing outside, behind the school building where the children play upon their arrival in the morning. Angelina[9], one of the two teachers, stands beside me and motions with her hands as she carefully enunciates a string of Italian words into my iPhone. Her hazel eyes are fixed on my phone as she squints to be sure that the translation

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[9] All names are pseudonyms, except the author's name.

application is correctly translating her words into English so I can read them. She is explaining the daily schedule for the class of three and four-year-olds.

As Angelina squints into my iPhone to be sure that the translation application is translating her words correctly, a high-pitched shriek makes us jump. Angelina hurries toward the crying child, moving through the tall grass littered with toys. As I watch Angelina comfort the child, a child in knee-length denim shorts and a pink t-shirt approaches me. Her short brown hair is ruffled as if she has just woken, and her eyes are cast downward to my right. As I glance over my shoulder to see what she is looking at, I feel her finger on my skin. She is tracing the edge of the elastic hair tie on my wrist and babbling excitedly. I have no idea what she is saying, so I squat down to her level and smile at her.

"Hello! I'm Christina," I chime.

She looks up at me, squints her eyes, and tilts her head dramatically, as if to say, "Huh?" I smile again and point at myself, "Christina." I give her a little wave of hello and point at her, indicating that I would like to know her name.

"Lucia!" she declares.

Her eyes move back to the hair tie on my wrist, and she continues chattering in Italian. Her voice seems confident and playful. I smile again and extend my arm, offering my wrist to her. She grows quiet and looks up at me briefly before moving her dark brown eyes back to the hair tie. She seems entranced, tracing the spiraled elastic with her finger. I use my other hand to pull the hair tie outward from my wrist, demonstrating its elasticity. She smiles widely and wraps both hands around the hair tie, still on my wrist, and gently pulls it outward.

"Do you like it?" I ask.

She looks up at me, bewildered. She does not speak English. I smile at her and pull the hair tie off my wrist, handing it to her. She giggles with excitement and pulls at it, stretching it in different directions. She moves it closer to her face, examining the shiny pink spiral and rotating it in her hand to look closely at the iridescent ombre colors. As she traces the section of the spiral that turns from pink to blue, another child approaches with her eyes fixed on the hair tie.

Figure 17

*The hair tie on my wrist at the Italian
preschool*

Thinking with Theory: Thing Power and Intra-Action

While this encounter may at first seem mundane, thinking about this moment using concepts from theories of immanence opens up a new perspective, and a "lively new ontology"

in which "the world's radical aliveness comes to light" (Barad, 2007, p. 33). For instance, the vignette above provides an example of what theorist Jane Bennett calls *thing power*, or "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" (Bennett, 2010, p. 6). The hair tie enticed Lucia to approach me. It drew her in, capturing her attention and wonder. She was compelled to touch it, pull on it, and examine it, which led to a multitude of effects. For example, Lucia and I established a relationship. We played games together. Other children became interested in the hair tie and in the games, and more relationships were formed. The grass where we played every day became worn. I learned some Italian. The children learned some English. The children created new games. The hair tie became stretched out. A child wore the hair tie home on her wrist, which sparked conversations in her home about where it came from, who it belongs to, and on

and on and on. The point is that this object, the hair tie, "produce[d] effects and alter[ed] situations" (Bennett, 2004, p. 355). From this theoretical perspective, the hair tie is not passive, nor inert. It is lively, agentic, and productive. This idea of thing power challenges the dominant view of the material world as passive and inert, waiting for humans to act on it. In other words, thing power disrupts the "habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)" (Bennett, 2010, p. vii).

In philosophy, this idea of parsing the world into categories or groups, such as humans/matter and living/nonliving is called individuation. French philosopher Michel Foucault (2005) addresses the idea of individuation in his book, *The Order of Things*. Here, he refers to a text by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges. Borges' passage quotes a Chinese encyclopedia that categorizes animals into the following groups:

139

(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (p. xv)

These categories of animals might sound strange to you as a reader, and that is exactly why Foucault includes this passage–it demonstrates the contingency of ontological assumptions. In other words, it shows us how the categories we assume to be true are in fact *made up*. These taken-for-granted categories allow other dividing practices (Foucault, 1982) among human beings that separate the normal from the abnormal, such as sane/insane, heterosexual/homosexual, man/woman, white/black, and on and on. The foundational ontological categories, such as living/non-living, that allow these further dividing practices among human beings can be difficult to see in our own context as they have become "natural" or "common sense". In fact, this ontological stance is actively taught beginning in early childhood classrooms through curriculum that asks children to engage in dividing practices, such as identifying living and non-living things (Cherniak, 2020). Bennett's (2010) concept of thing power works against the taken-for-granted assumptions about agency that are embedded in the categories of human being and object.

Intra-action

In addition to thing power, the vignette above also provides an example of what physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad (2007) calls *intra-action*. Barad (2007) describes intra-action as the ''mutual constitution of entangled agencies'' (p. 33). This concept of intra-action, also referred to as entanglement, is a concept from quantum physics and "assumes that humans are always-already in relation with non-human others" (Jones & Thiel, 2019, p. 152). These non-

human others include material and discursive forces, such as objects, bodies, the layout of a space, language, affect, emotion, ideologies, belief systems, and so on. When these types of material and discursive actants are recognized, we are able to interpret events in a very different way. For example, in the vignette above, Angelina and I stood outside the preschool in Italy my first morning there and we communicated via a translation application on my iPhone. This scenario is an entanglement of a multitude of material and discursive forces. For instance, my phone is a material actant here. The size of the phone itself, its translation software capability, the brightness of the screen, and the size of the text produced in the translation application, are all aspects of the materiality of this encounter that matter–these aspects of materiality produced the encounter in specific ways. A minor change to any of these aspects of materiality has the potential to produce alternative intra-actions. Similarly, there are various discourses operating within the entanglement, such as the idea that cross-linguistic communication is desirable and possible through technology. Had this discourse not been operating, we might not have used my phone for translation purposes. Perhaps I would have studied the Italian language more thoroughly before traveling to Italy, which might have allowed us to communicate verbally to some extent. If this were the case, this first encounter with the Italian teacher would have been quite different. Instead of focusing our attention on the translation application and its accuracy every time each one of us spoke, we might have been able to focus more on our exchange of ideas, which would have produced a different conversation, and thus a completely different encounter. Thinking about the moments described above from an immanent perspective decenters the human beings and illuminates the variety of actants that intra-act to produce the encounter.

An Encounter at the Italian Preschool

After the first day at the Italian preschool, I returned daily for several weeks and I wore that same hair tie on my wrist each day. As mentioned above, several of the students were drawn to the hair tie. This elastic spiral became a central part of my daily encounters with the children.

One day I walked through the propped-open back door and stepped outside as I scanned the shady schoolyard at the preschool. A group of children stand together near the sandbox chattering. Their Italian words are incomprehensible to me, but I sense that Cecilia is offering some sort of instruction to the others, who are chiming in with their opposition to her demands. Several feet away, Adriano sits at his usual spot at a picnic table under the pavilion, his head tilted as he carefully manipulates child-size scissors around an image from a magazine. To the left of the pavilion, Massimo and Giuseppe dart through the yard, their arms outstretched and their hands grasping toy cars. As I move my eyes across the yard, I spot Giulia running toward me. A giant smile is spread across her face, revealing a mouth full of bright white baby teeth. Her little legs and arms move quickly as she sprints in my direction. I squat down as she approaches and open my arms to hug her. She nearly knocks me over as she wraps her arms around me and simultaneously tries to climb into my lap as I hover over the worn grass. I move my feet out from under my body and sit on the ground just in time to feel two more arms wrap around the right side of my body. I look down and Lucia moves her hands to my wrist and wraps her fingers around my hair tie. Giulia follows Lucia's lead and reaches for the elastic spiral. They look from the hair tie, back to me, their tiny bodies bouncing with anticipation. I take the hint; they want to play the game. I pull the elastic tie off my wrist and place it in my hand, closing my fingers around it before hiding both of my hands behind my back. I move the hair tie from one hand to the other behind my back as Lucia leans to the left to try and catch a glimpse.

"No peeking!" I call.

They are enthralled. Their big, dark eyes rest intently on me and their bodies wiggle with excitement. Finally, I pull my closed fists out from behind my back and dramatically look back and forth at each of my hands, my signal for the children to guess which hand the hair tie is in. Giulia's hands move to her mouth, shielding her huge smile, and she rocks heel to toe in her sparkly pink sandals that shimmer in the sunlight. Lucia grins widely and juts her arms out, placing her hands on my right fist as if to say, "It's in this hand!"

Giulia sheepishly points at my right hand. I slowly wiggle both of my fists, building the anticipation as long as I can before I open my hands, then I slowly open my fingers and the hair tie becomes visible.

Lucia jumps and squeals. Giulia shuffles her feet and bounces up and down, a little giggle escaping from her. Lucia plops her body onto my right thigh as she fingers the iridescent spiral and Giulia vies for my other leg as she reaches for my wrist. Our bodies are literally entangled, as their arms and legs are wrapped around me, and I feel like a jungle gym. We cannot communicate with language, but we are becoming together, through an entanglement inspired by the thing power of a hair tie.

Figure 18

Giulia holding the hair tie

Figure 19

The schoolyard at the Italian preschool

Thinking with Theory: Intra-Action

Before interpreting this vignette with the concept of intra-action, which is drawn from an immanent perspective, let us first consider how this experience might be understood through the dominant structure of thought (i.e., transcendence). My intention in providing this interpretation

is to highlight how our understanding of this encounter shifts when an immanent view of the world is taken up.

Prior to studying theories of immanence, I might have interpreted this encounter as an interaction between myself and the children. I might have said that I played with the children, that we created games with the hair tie, that we enjoyed these games, and that we bonded through play. While this interpretation may seem to state the obvious, or the common sense, it is in fact infused with ideas rooted in an ontology of transcendence. From this perspective, the humans–myself and the children–are centered. We played with the hair tie. We created games with it. The hair tie is simply a passive object, an inert thing that we acted on, while we–the humans– are all separate entities, self-contained, autonomous, agentive. Certainly, we interacted with each other and the hair tie. But we are each distinct and separate from one another and from the hair tie, and from everything else around us. From this perspective, there is no acknowledgment of material or discursive forces at work.

On the other hand, reflecting on this vignette from an immanent perspective allows us to see, for example, the physical space where we were located mattered. We were outside, in the corner of the schoolyard of the preschool. This is a grassy area with no furniture, which is part of the reason why I sat on the ground when Giulia approached me. Had we been in a different physical space–even somewhere else in the schoolyard– I might not have sat on the ground. Perhaps I would have propped myself against a piece of playground equipment or sat on a bench. Each of these alternatives would have produced a different encounter. Another material actant, or performative agent (Barad, 2007) to consider here is our bodies. The size of my body in relation to the size of their bodies allowed them to climb onto me and to sit on me. Had their bodies been

larger, or mine substantially smaller, this particular entanglement would not have been possible, and a different encounter would have been produced.

The physical contact between our bodies is also connected to discourse. In this encounter, several discourses and ideas embedded in the Reggio Emilia approach to education are at work. For instance, the children and I knew that it was acceptable for the students to sit in my lap and for us to engage in play. In other words, the discourse that physical contact is acceptable and the philosophical stance that play is important were both operating here. Another discourse at work here is the idea that children have bodily autonomy because they are protagonists of their own learning (Malaguzzi,1994). In this setting-a Reggio Emilia preschool– the children were expected to play freely, to move around the schoolyard without instruction from the teachers. Had these discourses not been operating, if the children were expected to be working at a learning center or doing something else where their bodily autonomy was restricted, this encounter would not have been possible.

Another discursive actant to consider in this entanglement is affect, or "the more-than-human force that increases or diminishes a body's capacity to act" (Jones et al., 2019, p. 2). In the vignette above, "I spot Giulia running toward me. A giant smile is spread across her face, revealing a mouth full of bright white baby teeth. Her little legs and arms move quickly as she sprints in my direction." Here, Giulia's wide smile and her sprint toward me indicate that she was compelled or moved by a positive energy or affect. This affect is part of the entanglement. They intra-acted with other discursive and material forces, such as the ones I described above, to produce this encounter. In other words, this affect was an actant in this entanglement and made this encounter possible. This interpretation of the vignette above, as an entanglement of *hair tie-bodies-schoolyard-affect-Reggio Emilia philosophy* disrupts the ontological hierarchy of humans

147

above everything else. From this perspective, the humans in this encounter are not understood as Descartes' *cogito*, the exceptional human, "separate from, superior to, and master of everything else in the world" (St. Pierre et al., 2016, p. 102). Rather, human beings are understood as part of the entanglement.

Thus far in this paper, I have briefly discussed the difference between ontologies of transcendence and immanence, and I have provided vignettes to illustrate how concepts from theories of immanence can shift interpretations of everyday encounters. In what follows, I discuss how ontology is inextricably linked to ethics and epistemology. This discussion on the ethical and epistemological implications of ontologies of immanence is meant to answer the question of why a shift from transcendent to immanent ontology is needed.

Ethico-Onto-Epistemology

As mentioned above, ontology is "the philosophical study of the nature of existence, being, or reality" (Schwandt 2015, p. 221). It "considers the nature of being and the basic categories of existence (e.g., subject/object, essence/appearance, substance/quality, identity/difference) as well as the nature of human being" (St. Pierre, et al., 2016, p. 99). Ontology is often thought of as separate from epistemology, which is "the branch of philosophy concerned with what counts as knowledge and how knowledge claims are justified as true" (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 615). However, Barad (2007) argues that ontology and epistemology cannot be separated. She asserts that ethics, ontology, and epistemology are inseparable, and she uses the term ethico-onto-epistemology to signal this relationship.

If we follow Barad's notion of ethico-onto-epistemology, this means that an ontology of transcendence is linked to particular ideas about knowledge (epistemology) and ethics. The same is true for an ontology of immanence; it is also linked to specific ideas about epistemology

148

and ethics. So, what are the epistemological and ethical assumptions embedded in each of these ontological orientations? First, let us consider ontologies of transcendence.

Again, transcendent ontologies assume that two modes of being exist–universal truth and the rest of existence. This produces a hierarchy of God (or transcendent truth) at the top, humans below God/Truth, and the rest of the world beneath humans. This hierarchy positions the human being as the observer and interpreter of the world (May, 2005). In this onto-epistemological arrangement, "the conscious, thinking subject is the author of knowledge" and "true knowledge is produced through the rational observation and description of a reality detached from the observer" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 495). In other words, two-world ontologies of transcendence lead to epistemologies that center the human, that see the human as the seat of knowledge.

This description of the human being as observer and interpreter of the world has profound implications for ethics. If we understand human beings as separate from the rest of the world, as these onto-epistemological arrangements suggest, then we can "see ourselves as innocent bystanders, observing the world from a freestanding perspective" (Geerts, 2016, para. 2). This false viewpoint, the "god trick" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581), removes us from the responsibility of the here-and-now and places an emphasis on another world, or the transcendent. In other words, we are "off the hook" in terms of responsibilities to this world. This dominant ethico-onto-epistemology has allowed humans to see themselves as masters of the planet, which has led to environmental disasters and ushered in the Anthropocene, "an age when the earth's ecological balance is directly regulated by humanity." (Braidotti, 2013, p. 79). One way to disrupt this type of harmful binary thinking is to introduce new forms of thought that are not based on hierarchy and binaries. Theories of immanence offer this way of thinking.

Ontologies of immanence bring with them different assumptions about epistemology and ethics. As described earlier, in an immanent ontology, there is no assumption that two modes of being exist. Rather, it is assumed that everything is of the same substance. Thus, there is no hierarchy that positions human beings above the rest of existence. Instead, human beings are always entangled with the rest of the world. This positioning of humans entangled *within* the world, rather than above it means that we cannot step outside of the entanglement to observe and produce knowledge. We cannot "disconnect ourselves from the mangle somehow (Self) and then carefully disconnect some other small piece of the mangle (Other) long enough to study it" (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, p. 630). Barad (2007) emphasized this point when she wrote, "We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are a part of the world and its differential becoming" (p. 185). Thus, an ontology of immanence carries with it the idea that epistemological claims are always-already subjective, situated, "produced by and for particular interests, in particular circumstances, at particular times" (MacLure, 2013, p. 167) and there is no universal truth to be found.

An immanent ontology also has radical implications for ethics. Barad (2007) described the ethical implications of entanglement as follows:

> Just as the human subject is not the locus of knowing, neither is it the locus of ethicality. We (but not only "we humans") are always already responsible to the others with whom or which we are entangled, not through conscious intent but through the various ontological entanglements that materiality entails…Ethics is therefore not about right response to a radically exterior/ized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part' (Barad, 2007, p. 393).

In other words, Barad's theory of agential realism–a theory rooted in immanence–produces an ethics that is not concerned with how each individual human being should respond to other autonomous human beings. Rather, ethics is reconfigured to account for interconnectedness, entanglement, and intra-action. Ethics is critical here because the world is in a constant state of becoming. As Barad (2007) wrote, "each intra-action matters" and "the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again" (p. 185). Thus, humans cannot remove themselves from ethical responsibility, as is possible in ontologies of transcendence. Here, we are inextricably part of the "world's ongoing reconfiguring" (Barad, 2007, p. 184).

Moving Forward in Teacher Education

In recent years, educational scholars have turned to theories and philosophies of immanence, and many have highlighted the need for educators to reconsider pedagogy and ways of being with children based on this theoretical framework. (e.g., Davies, 2014; Jones & Spector, 2017; Kuby et al., 2015; Lenz Taguchi, 2010, 2011; Sherbine, 2020; Thiel, 2015; Thiel & Jones, 2017). However, this immanent way of thinking-living-being is a radical departure from the ways of thinking and being that are most dominant in our society. If teacher education hopes to reimagine the field, to "go against the dominant reductive and limiting forces in education" (Lenz Taguchi, 2011, p. 48), we must commit to offering teachers the time and space necessary to read and deeply study theories of immanence that are the foundation for this kind of educational transformation. We cannot expect pre-service and practicing teachers to overcome binary thinking rooted in liberal humanism if they have not studied theories that disrupt this structure of thought. This means we need to examine program and course content with an eye for ways to integrate and explicitly teach these texts. Though this call for teaching theories of

151

immanence in teacher education is not a cure-all solution for the myriad ethical failures facing us today, it can contribute to a greater awareness of the interconnectedness of existence. As Jane Bennett (2010) writes, theories like hers, with a focus on the vitality of matter "can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. Such an enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest is good for humans." (Bennett, 2010, p. 13).

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CHAPTER 5

THINKING-BEING-DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT

I was an elementary school teacher for 13 years before leaving the classroom for full-time

doctoral studies. Throughout those years of teaching, a question that constantly plagued me was,

"What are we doing?" It seemed that nearly every day, I would look around, exasperated and

confused, and ask myself this question.

I remember sitting in a school-wide awards ceremony for teachers in which all of the

awards were based on students' standardized test scores. As an administrator put it, the ceremony

was "a celebration of what we have been working toward all year." As a new teacher, I couldn't

help but wonder why this was such a big deal. Why were test scores so important? After sitting

through the ceremony and listening to all of the speeches and congratulatory remarks about our

students' scores, all I could think was, "What are we doing?"

I remember listening to my principal talk about the expectations for the school year in a

back-to-school meeting. She insisted that each teacher on the grade level teach the same lessons

at the same time every day. We were to teach in unison, no matter what. I looked around the

room, waiting for an uprising among my colleagues. Nobody said a word or even seemed to take

notice of what was being asked of us. I was outraged, and again, I thought, "What are we

doing?"

I remember watching the class down the hall, the "accelerated and gifted" class, file out

of their classroom and leave for a field trip, while my class and the others who did not have the

"academically advanced" students stayed behind. It struck me that most of the children in that class were from prominent, middle, and upper-middle-class families in the community. The demographics were starkly different from that of my "Early Intervention" class. I was livid that these students were given opportunities that the others were not. Again, I asked, "What are we doing?"

I often felt like the teacher that education scholars Ball and Olmedo (2013) described as "the teacher who stands alone in their classroom or staff common room, and sees something 'cracked', something that to their colleagues is no more than the steady drone of the mundane and the normal, and finds it intolerable" (p. 85). My questioning of the everyday practices in the schools where I worked, the things I found intolerable, is what brought me to doctoral studies. However, what began as an endeavor to better understand policies and practices that I found troubling in schools evolved into a much more expansive exploration, including an analysis of many previously *unquestioned* practices.

Much of this dissertation is related to my relationship with my classroom, which was one of those unquestioned practices that I did not put much thought into until I began reading theory and philosophy. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to highlight that the things I did in my classroom (i.e., classroom transformations and pursuing a Pinterest-perfect classroom) were tied to discursive power, which produced my subjectivity. In short, I tried to show that I took up dominant discourses and reproduced them in my classroom. For example, my Pinterest-perfect classroom was a product of several discursive formations, including neoliberalism, social class, and gender. Similarly, my cruelly optimistic attachments (Berlant, 2011) to classroom transformations and notions of education as a route to the good life were rooted in dominant discourses about social class, upward mobility, education, neoliberalism, and capitalism. By

analyzing and theorizing these experiences, I have aimed to demonstrate that discursive power animates us and produces our subjectivity, including how we approach teaching.

I have also tried to highlight that discursive power is not totalizing, locking us into particular forms of subjectivity. Rather, subjectivity is ongoing, a process of becoming. As St. Pierre (2011) wrote, "Subjectivity implies the ongoing construction of human being, human being in flux, in process—at every moment being disciplined, regulated, normalized, produced, and, at the same time, resisting, shifting, changing, producing" (p. 46). In other words, poststructural conceptualizations of subjectivity assume that we can refuse ways of thinking, being, and doing, and think-be-do something different. This idea of thinking-being-doing *something different* is at the heart of this dissertation, and what I hope to inspire among teachers and teacher educators.

Thinking and living something new, however, requires that we first understand what we are already thinking and living. It requires that we identify the discourses that envelop us, operate as common sense, and structure our subjectivity. I hope that by sharing my experiences and analyses of the discourses that shaped my thinking and being, others can begin to think about their own experiences within the discursive formations that operate in their lives. Once we can identify and analyze the power structures and discourses operating in our lives, then we can begin to refuse them. We can do something *different*.

Thinking-being-doing something different was my focus when writing Chapter 4, "Theories of Immanence as a Way Forward for Teacher Education," as these theories emphasize "what can not yet be thought and done" (St. Pierre, 2019, p. 4). By taking up theoretical concepts from feminist new materialism and theorizing everyday experiences with them, I aimed to illustrate that theories of immanence can push our thinking beyond the

Cartesian image of thought that we have inherited. In other words, the purpose here was to demonstrate that theories of immanence can denaturalize what is taken for granted or "common sense" and open up new forms of thinking-being-doing.

As my doctoral studies come to a close, I am no longer plagued by the question, "What are we doing?" For me, that question was saturated with feelings of despair and utter confusion. "What are we doing?" was an honest question that came from knowing that what we were doing in education did not feel right, that what we were doing was harmful and dehumanizing, but I did not have language or ways to think about what was happening. "What are we doing?" came from a place of feeling powerless, demoralized, and incapable of analyzing my experiences and the policies and practices in education and beyond. As I hope this dissertation has demonstrated, theory and philosophy have given me new ways to think about my experiences as a teacher and the world around me. They have reoriented my thinking-being-doing, or my ethico-onto-epistemology (Barad, 2007), in ways that are empowering and lifegiving and I hope this dissertation inspires others to engage with theory, particularly teachers who are haunted by the question, "What are we doing?"

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