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Being Nomadic in a Neo World

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Abstract

Teachers are often classified into groups based on performance, identity, and through the use of metaphors. This article utilizes a post structuralist lens to build on past research by posing the classification of teachers into three personas: the nematode, neo, and nomad. These personas are not always chosen by the teacher, but instead are reactions to environments, colleagues and administrators, and education mandates. Standardization and accountability, which are forced on education by neoliberal policies, affect teachers' identities in negative ways and often cause them to be the type of teacher they never desired to be to their students. Utilizing Deleuze's theory of the nomad, the article explores the nomad as the persona that teachers should assume and offers suggestions of how teachers can be exposed to discourses that are not hijacked by standardization and accountability.

Assuming the role of an educator requires an undertaking of a number or roles and responsibilities that are dynamic and shift based on environmental, social, and spatial factors. These unique demands result not only in teachers assuming physical roles and responsibilities, but also result in the development of a persona or image. These personas are constantly shaped and developed from the teacher's personality, ethics, world-view, background knowledge, perspectives, past experiences, and pedagogical methods. This persona may seem inconsequential, yet a careful examination indicates that these personas can affect every aspect of the classroom experience, from strategies employed, to feedback given, to interaction with parents and students.

Background

Classification of teachers is not a new or novel practice. Students, parents, administrators, and society in general tend to label types of teachers based on a variety of attributes or characteristics.

While some cases of these classifications are informal and anecdotal in nature, the practice has been quite common in research. Many researchers have developed classification systems that group teachers based on behavior, beliefs, and attitudes while other studies categorize the roles teachers assume in the classrooms when dealing with the everyday world of education. Eisenbach (2012) identified teachers as either "The Accommodator," "The Negotiator," or "The Rebel" in regards to how they worked within the constraints of a scripted curriculum. Similarly, Johnson, Yarrow, Rochkind, and Ott (2010) grouped teachers into three categories in their national study. Results from the study indicated 40% of participants could be categorized as Disheartened, 37% Contented, and 23% Idealistic.

Yet research regarding teacher classification has also been extended to include the utilization of metaphors. Oxford, Tomlinson, Bacos, Harrington, Lavine, Saleh, & Longhini (1998)

reviewed narratives of teachers, former students, and prior educational studies and theoretical pieces in an attempt to find commonality among metaphors that had been used describe teachers. They identified 14 metaphors and then classified them into four categories: social order, cultural transmission, learner-centered growth, and social reform. Two metaphors that were classified as social order are “teacher as hanging judge” and “teacher as mind-and-behavior control” while two that were classified as social reform are “teacher as acceptor” and “teacher as learning partner” (p. 14). These examples show the diversity in the identities/personalities of teachers as seen by others.

Alger (2009) conducted a study of high school teachers in the south-west in which participants were asked to utilize conceptual metaphors for three different times in their careers; when they became teachers, how they see themselves currently, and how they conceptualize the teacher they want to become. The metaphors were organized into two categories: teacher-centered and student-centered. The results of the study showed that at the beginning of their careers 80% chose metaphors that were teacher-centered, at their current stage 45% of teachers chose student-centered, and 53% chose student-centered as the teacher they want to become. Teachers were also prompted to construct their own metaphors for teaching which included “. . . an unmotivated dead end; beating a dead horse; seed-sower; making connections; sharing ideas” (Alger, 2009, p. 748).

Giroux (1998) and others have explored the concept of teacher identity, with Giroux putting forth the idea of the teacher as intellectual in a number of his

works. Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt (2000) reviewed previous studies on teacher identity and developed three identities for teachers: teacher as subject matter expert, teacher as a pedagogical expert, and teacher as a didactical expert. Utilizing these identities they conducted a study of 80 experienced secondary school teachers and they found that the majority of the research participants “. . . saw themselves as a combination of subject matter experts, didactical experts and pedagogical experts” (p. 761). Poom-Valickis, Oder, and Lepik (2012) conducted a survey in Estonia on metaphors teachers chose to describe themselves which were then analyzed utilizing the model developed by Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000). Over 50% of English teachers metaphors were categorized as pedagogical experts while didactics experts were the highest category for mathematics teachers. Lofstrom & Poom-Valickis (2013) conducted a study in Estonia on how future candidates in a teacher education program characterize teachers by asking them to finish the statement “A teacher is like. . .” Their results displayed that the participants chose metaphors that could be classified as teacher as pedagogue, which displays their focus on the act of teaching.

In addition to the research conducted regarding teachers in the actual classroom, Muchmore (2012) reviewed the types of teachers portrayed in literary works. In his study of 44 books, ranging from the *Harry Potter* series to *The Magic School Bus*, he found ten different types of teachers presented in the works: teacher as nurturer; teacher as subversive; teacher as conformist; teacher as hero; teacher as villain; teacher as victim; teacher as immutable force; teacher as eccentric; and teacher as economic survivor.

And while the studies above focus on the classification of behaviors, roles assumed, personality, and teaching, evaluation instruments further classify teachers into groups often labeled as “below expectations,” “meeting expectations,” and “exceeding expectations” based on their classroom instruction and student performance on standardized tests.

Three Personas

While the literature describes how teachers are labeled and classified based on performance, identity, and metaphors, we believe teachers can be identified according to the persona they take assume while in the classroom. According to Freire (2004) education is a human experience, which can shape teacher identify and the personas that teachers employ. We propose that practicing teachers take on one of the following personas: nematode, neo, and nomad.

Nematodes

From a scientific viewpoint, nematodes are one of the most abundant and adaptive organisms alive. Yet their adaptability and abundance are not without consequence. Of the 26,000 varieties more than 60% are parasitic. While there are some nematodes that are beneficial to the environment the overwhelming majority are not. Sadly, these organisms can easily be compared to some of the nation’s worst teachers in the classroom.

How many bad teachers are there? Incompetent teachers are estimated to comprise 5–10% of the teacher population (Bridges, 1986, 1993; Lavelly, Berger, & Follman, 1993; Tucker 1997; Yariv, 2004). Despite incompetence estimates of

5% and higher, the dismissal rate for the teaching profession is far less than one percent (Bridges 1992; Tucker 1997). Many times, these teachers possess a myriad of problems and incompetencies, not just one chronic issue. In fact, Wragg, Hayens, Wragg, & Chamberlin, (1999) explained that teachers who are dismissed often have multiple issues including:

Poor classroom organization, poor class control, low expectations, inability to deliver the curriculum through lack of planning, poor subject knowledge and failure to capture the children’s interest. Inability to communicate effectively with parents about children’s performance (p. 4).

In Hillsborough, FL the district administrators estimate that 1.5% of their teachers are rated as unsatisfactory and 2%-3% more are rated as needs improvement (Strauss, 2013). Former NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg believed that his city had an overwhelming number of incompetent teachers. At a speech to students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology he stated that he would like to fire half of the teachers in NYC and double the class sizes of the good teachers who were left (Strauss, 2013).

Poor performing teachers have prompted school districts to implement evaluation systems as a means to measure teacher performance and competency. While evaluation instruments have been put in place to assess teacher performance and instruction, Strauss (2013) argues that despite the effort to craft teacher evaluation systems that accurately assess teacher performance through fair and unbiased means, the question regarding

whether or not a teacher is effective is still a subjective.

How does the nematode teacher view teaching? The nematode teacher is one that is more interested in the monetary benefits of teaching than in the learning taking place in their classrooms. They look forward to holidays and summer breaks instead of stimulating their students' minds each day. They constantly blame everyone else for their own failures in the classroom. The nematode teacher is not interested in motivating the students and helping them develop a love of learning; rather, they are parasitic in nature, negatively affecting both students and colleagues. Teachers that fit this profile often have difficulty connecting in a meaningful way with their students. This can be attributed to their inability to be empathetic to the students' views and life experiences. Parents are usually at the top of the nematode teacher's blame chart.

What causes a teacher to assume the identity of a nematode? One possibility is the decline of teacher morale, which according to the 2012 *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher*, is at an all-time low. The implementation of the Common Core, student achievement, decreased budgets, and more demands placed on teachers are cited as the major reasons for declining teacher morale (Markow, Marcia, & Lee, 2013). Other studies have noted that teachers are frustrated with the pressures of standardized testing (Rubin & Kazanjian, 2001; Gardner, 2013; and Strauss, 2014). Teacher morale must be addressed in a meaningful way.

Neos

Another persona that some teachers assume is that of the neo. In this case, neo is used to represent those who

prescribe neoliberal and neoconservative ideals and principles in education. In the political sense, neoliberals are proponents of free markets and freedom of choice while neoconservatives want to return to the past and stress the importance of tradition (Apple, 2001). While they are completely different entities, in the world of education, they can meet and find common ground and, as Apple (2001) states, be utilized by the managerial class:

Thus, while neoliberals call for a weak state and neoconservatives demand a strong state, these very evident contradictory impulses can come together in creative ways. The emerging focus on centralized standards, content, and tighter control paradoxically can be the first and most essential step on the path to marketization through voucher and choice programs (p. 59).

The impact of neoliberalism on education can be found in many countries around the world. Great Britain introduced the Education Reform Act in 1988 which sought greater accountability of students, teachers, and schools while also emphasizing the importance of traditional knowledge (Lobascher, 2011). In the United States, Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Obama's Race to the Top (RTTT), political party affiliation does not matter, because both Democrats and Republicans view education in a similar manner. Both are supportive of alternative certification routes, pay for performance, charter schools, standardized assessments and a common curriculum. Examples of this are the Common Core and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) "...which will oddly lead both to privatization on the one hand and

increasing centralization of control over official knowledge on the other” (Apple, 2009, p. 197). Australia has also implemented high-stakes accountability with the publication of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests results which are viewable by school on the Internet (Lobascher, 2011).

Hursh (2005) compared No Child Left Behind Act with Great Britain’s Education Reform Act of 1988 and found similarities and the influence of neoliberal policies such as school choice, privatization, accountability and privatization. One area of difference was a national curriculum. At the time of his article, Common Core was not introduced in the U.S. Hursh(2005) surmised that the reforms: “. . . have negatively affected teachers, students, parents, and schools” (p. 13). As Ambrosio (2013) believes, there is an uneasy alliance between neoliberals who promote choice for consumers and neoconservatives who want to control the morality of society. “The new power bloc also includes members of a professional technical-managerial class, comprised of academics and others, who benefit from the obsession with test-driven accountability” (p. 324). By engulfing education with programs such as NCLB, RTTT, Common Core, and PARCC, neoliberalism and neo-conservatism are able to force the dominant-class hegemony onto public schools which forces teachers to focus on a narrow view of curriculum and teach to the test (Ambrosio, 2013; Love, 2012). This turns the teaching profession into a managerial-class job, with teachers who have to keep mountains of paperwork, administer benchmarks, disaggregate scores, teach scripted lessons and worry if their pay will be cut for poor performance.

Neos sometimes can be identified as the cheerleaders of whatever new initiative is being implemented by the administration. However, many neos simply will not question or fight against policies that put emphasis on standardization and test scores. Neos also subscribe to the idea that standardized test scores are the most important aspect of education. These teachers may resort to drill-and-kill exercises in order to get students to score higher on the standardized tests. Neos become obsessed with their test scores and believe that their success as a teacher is dependent on how high their students can score on the tests. However, as many know and accept, teaching to the test is damaging to students and education. “Teaching to the test and excessive test preparation invalidates inferences that can be drawn from the scores – yet they are the inevitable response to pressure to produce good test scores” (Bower, 2013, p. 26). The scores on standardized tests are nothing more than a snapshot of what a student knows and do not account for anything other than what is explicitly asked. “Teaching for tests, instead of cultivating one’s intrinsic interest is, from a humanistic point of view, just inconceivable, considering that students are being trained instead of encouraged in a creative and individual way” (Chomsky & Robichaud, 2014, p.).

Neos can easily be identified because they are usually the ones who are selected by the school’s administration to lead committees. These teachers can also be ones that feel as though it is their job to help produce so called “productive citizens” in our capitalist jingoistic society. They believe that our world needs workers and their students will need a set of skills to perform the jobs of tomorrow. By not questioning the neoliberal and

neoconservative policies they are allowing a dominant culture hegemony spread. In doing this, they are not accepting and recognizing the diverse cultures and socio-economic backgrounds their students bring into the classrooms (Bartolome, 2004).

Teachers often become neos without consent and through coercion. When the scores on standardized tests are used to measure the performance of students and schools and teacher effectiveness, this causes teachers to become concerned about the scores. When programs such as pay for performance are added on top of the pressure to have high test scores, teachers often feel they are left with little to no option than to “teach to the test”.

Nomads

The last persona that a teacher can assume is that of the nomad. This is not to imply they may move schools or districts often. The nomad in this instance is based on the theory of the nomad as presented by Deleuze and Guattari (1987). This nomad travels along paths from point to point, but the beginning and ending are not what is of the utmost importance to the nomad. The most important part of the journey is the *intermezzo*, what happens in the middle. Nomads do come in contact and interact with civilization which is done along borders. Ensuring they stay on the border is what allows the nomad to work outside of the system and not be changed by it. Parnet (1987) posited that history is not as important as geography to nomads. The trek the nomads take is the important part of the journey, and while long-used paths might change, the nomad is still able to move between points by creating new paths. If nomads were brought into a civilization and controlled

they would no longer be nomads. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) nomads come into contact with civilizations and modern society in short bursts to ensure they are not changed by the civilization. By living outside the system of domination the nomad is able to have original thoughts that are not controlled by dominate forces.

Teachers must develop the mind of the nomad; they must be free thinkers and problem solvers. The nomad comes in contact with society but they are not controlled by it. The same is true for the nomadic teacher, who has contact with the controlling forces of school-level and district-level administrators, the pressures of standardization, and the ranting's of politicians. However, they take this information and realize the desperate need for them to continue on their mission. “After talking to thousands of teachers, The Gallup Organization (2006) found that the best ones don't always do the right thing: that is, teachers sometimes break the rules because they know doing so is the most appropriate way to behave in a situation” (p. 172). The nomadic teacher will break the rules in regards to review time for standardized tests. They will break the rules when they “get off topic” and talk about a current event the students are interested in. They will break the rules when they hold their expectations high and refuse to just give passing grades. They will break the rules when they refuse to make review booklets for the students to complete at home to get them ready for tests. The nomadic teacher has to walk a thin line between keeping their jobs and doing what is right.

The nomadic teacher's starting point is meeting the students where they are academically, emotionally, culturally, and socially. The end is not the end of the

year, but rather the impact they will have on their students' lives. This teacher is concerned with discovering knowledge with the students. They do not view themselves as a fountain of knowledge and they do not utilize banking education, but rather they work with their students (Freire, 2004). The nomadic teacher uses Freire's (2004) problem-posing education to work with students in the pursuit of knowledge.

The nomadic teacher is flexible and adaptable to their ever-changing environment. As we know, a classroom is a space where dramatic changes can occur in a matter of seconds, just as a dust storm can develop in the desert and engulf the nomad who has nowhere to go. The nomad is prepared and can survive the storm on limited supplies in a barren wasteland. Teachers are able to survive and overcome difficulties with limited resources as well. In our current economic times, teachers have to do more with less. Class sizes are becoming larger and teachers have fewer resources in the classroom for the students. It is during times like these that great teachers rise and meet the challenges before them and let the conditions change their path.

When they approach the standards, the teacher as nomad does not see a list of learning objectives; rather they see how the curriculum can relate to the lives of their students. The nomadic teacher knows how to relate the standards to their students; they do not depend on a curriculum map that was developed in a central office. They know the terrain of their content and they see where their students are. From there, they begin the intellectual journey with their students. They are not the leader of the caravan of knowledge; rather they help guide the

caravan even though it may take a different path every year.

The nomadic teacher comes in contact with the nematodes and neos who have chosen to place the importance of a test before the needs of the student and society, but they do not allow these teachers to influence their journey and their goal. The nomadic teacher will communicate with the nematodes and neos and attempt to influence them to try a new path and see their students in a different light. But the nomadic teacher is not negatively influenced by the nematode and neo; rather they are reminded why their journey is the most important and most needed. Without the nomadic teacher, students will never be impacted positively.

Fostering Nomadic Beliefs

According to the National Center for Education Statistics 56.4% of teachers in the U.S. have a graduate degree. While there are many reasons that teachers with undergraduate degrees enroll in graduate programs, one reason is the salary increase they will receive once they complete their degree. The differences in salaries for beginning teachers with a Bachelor's or Master's degree varies from a low of \$600 in Idaho to \$6,700 in Washington state. After ten years of experience, the difference in the salaries of teachers with advanced degrees varies from a low of \$900 in Texas to \$9,100 in Washington state. The average pay differences in the U.S. is \$3,200 and \$4,600 respectively (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

While monetary benefits influence a student's decision to enroll in a graduate program, Starrett and Casey (2013) analyzed applicants' letters of intent for two master's degree programs,

Administration and Curriculum, and found applicants wanted to "... keep learning about their profession and improve their craft" and also a "focus on students" (p. 19). In some cases, the reasoning for enrollment was due to the potential career opportunities a graduate degree could offer, as was the case in several who were enrolled in Administration degree programs.

Curriculum for graduate programs in education usually have a primary purpose to advance the knowledge of the classroom teacher. Due to the sheer number of graduate programs in the U.S. it is hard to find two that are alike. Since graduate programs in education lead to higher certification levels, most states have a set of guidelines that programs must meet. However, we would like to propose some basic foundational principles that can be utilized in various courses in an effort to promote the ideas embraced by the nomadic teacher. To do so, we recommend expanding critical pedagogy in all courses to show that hegemony, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as local, state, and national policies have a tremendous impact on what students are taught and what they learn.

Critical pedagogy requires that we question what knowledge is of value, whose knowledge is actually being taught, and what future do we hope to achieve with current pedagogical methods (Giroux, 2012). Graduate students must understand that by following a narrow curriculum and pacing guides created in a top down system, and worrying only about what will be on a standardized test is nothing more than the banking education that Freire (2004) described. "Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the

students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits, which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of the action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling, and storing deposits" (Freire, 2004, p. 72). The current pedagogical methods that are being employed in order to raise test scores are doing nothing for the students except treating them as vessels where knowledge is deposited; it is completely taking out the human experience that education should be based upon. By utilizing critical pedagogy as a basis in graduate programs we can hope that nematodes and neos begin to question their own personas and begin the life of the nomad.

While graduate programs can be infused with curricula that promote nomadic ideals, the question becomes how do teachers' become nomadic? We propose that graduate programs in education are the place where this can be accomplished. A teacher pursuing an advanced degree needs to be exposed to content, theory, and pedagogy that they can take back to their classrooms and schools that can positively impact their students. The three types of teachers described above can be found in graduate-level classes across the country. It is then the responsibility of the teacher education professor to challenge these teachers to expand their views of education. We are not implying that teacher educators are the "all knowing sages", but rather guides for students during their educational trek.

The nematode teacher will be in graduate programs; we have all had a few in our courses. We can only hope to

create a spark that will remind them of the important profession they have chosen, to foster the growth of future generations. Through their studies and conversations with graduate colleagues they can be encouraged to take on a new persona.

Teacher Educator: Advocate for Wide-Spread Change

If more teachers become nomadic in their thinking then this could spread through their contacts daily within a school. As Giroux (2012) states: “Consequently, schools are viewed as a crucial resource in a developing democracy, and teachers are valued as the front line of academic labor responsible for educating young people in the ideals, goals, and practices of a sustainable democracy” (p. 69). The nomadic teacher has a tremendous responsibility to empower students to look critically at their world and seek alternatives.

Does being nomadic mean a teacher needs to be revolutionary? Yes! If a teacher does not agree to follow a narrow scripted curriculum and teach to the test then they are being subversive and through this subversion with students they “... can create a classroom space where democracy is truly an educational possibility” (Portelli & Konecny, 2013, p. 89). We need teachers who will revolt against top-down approaches and utilize critical pedagogy.

Rubin and Kazanjian (2011) acknowledge the fact that if the current emphasis on assessment and standardization is to be challenged then it must be the teachers to organize and work to teach one another about the lasting impact of these on education. “The bottom line is this: there is more at risk here than

just unhappy teachers and over-programmed children. There is a battle looming on the horizon as to what type of society we want to live in and what type of citizens will comprise that society” (Rubin and Kazanjian, 2011, p. 103).

If we want a better future with a society that has true equality, then students and schools are where change needs to start. As Love (2012) states: “Schools can be sites for explorations and investigations of hegemony, indoctrination of ideologies of the dominant elites, and practices that perpetuate social and ecological injustices. With those learning experiences present in the classroom, enlightenment of the masses becomes more possible” (p. 64). In order to have students become engaged in the lessons they need to be part of the creation of ideas and they need to be allowed to critique, to question, to search for new possibilities, an imagine a better world.

Education is about providing students with an instruction that will help them change and shape our future. We propose the competency of a great teacher should no longer be quantified by the score on a rubric or standardized tests. Teacher educators must instill in our students the importance of choice and help them understand there are several paths they can take in this profession. We must present theory and philosophy to our students because it is through these that they will expand their own thoughts and ideas. As teacher educators, we should spend more time dealing with the human aspect of education and help our students understand that while teaching is difficult, they are teaching people and not robots. Although our students will experience many satisfying moments, some will become discouraged and may take on the

persona of a nematode or neo. However, we must ensure they have the theoretical background and understanding to become a nomad. In order for this to occur professors in colleges of education need to live the life of the nomad. They must be examples for their students and show them that it is ok to question dominant discourses, it is ok to rebel, and it is ok to challenge authority. If we want an equal society where your future is not determined by your zip code then we must live in the intermezzo.

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