

Exploring teacher identity using poststructural tools

Suzanne O' Keeffe & Craig Skerritt

To cite this article: Suzanne O' Keeffe & Craig Skerritt (2021) Exploring teacher identity using poststructural tools, International Journal of Research & Method in Education, 44:2, 179-192, DOI: [10.1080/1743727X.2020.1753691](https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2020.1753691)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2020.1753691>



Published online: 23 Apr 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 790



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 4 View citing articles [↗](#)



Exploring teacher identity using poststructural tools

Suzanne O' Keeffe ^a and Craig Skerritt ^b

^aFroebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, National University of Ireland Maynooth, Maynooth, Ireland; ^bCentre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This paper explores poststructural tools as a particularly helpful ontological stance in advancing the concerns of marginalized groups in educational research. Although largely academic in nature, poststructuralism has had real and tangible effects as it interrogates everyday binaries, categories and hierarchies that oppress so many. This paper draws on the experiences of two separate studies of teacher identity in Ireland to explore how poststructural approaches to methodology allow for new understandings of teacher identity formation. The first study focuses on the daily lived experiences of 11 Irish male primary school teachers. The second study looks at the increasing neoliberal tone of Irish education and the potential implications for teacher identity. Both studies are united by their interest in the relationship between self and other. Specific emphasis is placed on the following critical concerns: difference and how it is understood in academic realms; the social nature of language, and the importance of reflexivity in the research process. Two key questions are explored. First, how do we produce research that goes beyond the experiences of the researched? Second, is there value in moving beyond the reality-rhetoric binary? This paper intends to launch a fresh conversation on ontology within the current educational climate.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 15 March 2019
Accepted 7 February 2020

KEYWORDS

Difference; critical inquiry; identity; poststructuralism; reflexivity

Introduction

There has never been a greater need for a critical qualitative inquiry that matters in the public sphere (Denzin 2017, 8). Recent attempts by powerful political leaders to discard political accountability and evidence in favour of emotional leanings have located research in situations 'we no longer understand' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, vii), or what Deleuze (1989) describes as 'situations which we no longer know how to react to' and in spaces 'we no longer know how to describe' (xi). As a response to what philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler (1990, x) terms 'cultural appropriations' and methodologist and feminist Patti Lather (2014, 2) declares 'New times indeed', the relationship between philosophical positions and research practice is once again on the agenda. Rather than framing this (re)turn in the social sciences with nostalgia for a lost world of certain knowledge, it is useful to embrace this idea of loss; loss of knowledge, of certainty and of absolute truth, as a methodologically useful tool. Many opportunities and alternatives reveal themselves in the loss of certain truths. The problematic of loss as 'an experience of mourning and promise' (Derrida 2001, 67) suggests that we are neither at the end nor the beginning. It simply suggests that we must 'make room for ... a concept which no longer allows itself to be understood in terms of the previous regime' (Spivak 1976, 1xxvii). It requires a shift in methodological focus from the product to the process; not so much the nature of science but its effects. It also suggests reframing social science as a social practice whereby questions of accountability and responsibility are ethical and social,

which raises considerably 'the stakes of critical practice' (Lather 2007). It challenges qualitative researchers to produce new practices whereby theoretical complexities are 'used as tools to make a material difference' (Lather 2010, 14). The task at hand is to re-work the quest for power by reconceptualising the very notion of power. Such a move encourages, in psychoanalyst Deborah Britzman's (2009) terms, a thought that can think against itself, or, what Lather (2010) considers to be 'ontological stammerings' that allow power in research to be used as a capacity for change.

Studying the experiences of teachers through poststructural lens

We draw on the results of two studies in this paper. The first study, based on three phases of interviews with Irish male teachers, seeks to discover what it is like to be a male in a predominantly female environment working with children (O'Keeffe 2016), while the second study examines the increasing neoliberal tone of Irish education and the potential implications for Irish teacher identity (Skerritt 2019a). We use the data and the findings emanating from these two studies to understand more about the personal and professional experiences of teachers in order to reconsider how research can allow teachers to be central participants in shaping and informing understandings of teacher identity. Both studies, conducted separately but allied in the shared goal to investigate the concept of teacher identity through an alternative lens, have invested in poststructural ontological approaches. Ontology, when 'put to work' in practical terms, offers fresh insights into the complexities and challenges that bring together historical and recent perspectives of identities. This paper identifies ontology in relation to poststructuralist concerns: researcher-participant relationships and the co-construction of knowledge.

Contemporary debates

Merging methodology with philosophy

To transform theory and practice into something new, philosophical concepts must be used from within rather than forced upon thinking. In other words, these concepts must extend thought beyond what feels comfortable. Derrida (1976) and Deleuze and Guattari (1977), and namely their specific concepts of trace and desire respectively, assist in accounting for, stretching, and distorting previous ways of knowing. Derrida aids the representation of silence as a useful way to think about what was not being said. The term trace is used to signify this. Trace is that which dwells in our language before we inhabit and use it. It 'contributes to our being and doing in a tug-of-war' with meanings that we both 'resist and accept' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, 21). Alongside 'unlearning our privilege' (Lather 2007, 75), Deleuze helps shift the main focus from epistemology to ontology. Deleuzian thinking seeks new understandings of life that do not tie to recognizable forms and representations. Instead, Deleuze considers forces of desire that are generative and seeking and best understood as an ongoing tendency to actualize its own virtual. Whilst, Deleuze and Guattari (1977) seeks an understanding of life through the continuities and connections that run between the living and non-living; Derrida (1976) allows for the absent presence that resides within thought and experience. This requires a shift in thinking from the individual to the collective, which raises questions about collective arrangements of power/force/concentration. Such questions underpin the transformative potential of empowering approaches to generating knowledge. They not only allow for an understanding of the maldistribution of power and resources underlying various societies, they also encourage researchers to address how this maldistribution might be addressed in research and what implications this might have on methodological approaches.

Ontological possibilities

Neither words nor things pre-exist one another but emerge through intra-actions with the world. Just as reality does not consist of 'things' but 'phenomena', Barad (2007) states that language does not

consist of 'words' but of 'material-discursive practices' (141). This complex relationship between subject and object is a question of ontology and power. Discursive practices are not human-based activities but 'specific material (re)configurings of the world' through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted (Barad 2007). If the 'ethical charge of our work as inquirers' is to question our attachments that keep us from thinking and living differently (Lather 2013, 631), this new approach requires a reading of data that moves beyond a material reading to one that relies on a re-insertion of ontology into the task of knowing.

Teacher identity

In response to today's fast-paced and interconnected worlds, teacher identity is understood as an important analytic tool for understanding the relationship between teachers, schools, and society. Although the term 'identity' has a time-honoured tradition within public and scholarly discourse, it has taken on varied meanings within the social and humanistic sciences, including within educational research. Defining teacher identity is one of the main challenges in arriving at an understanding of the term and how it influences teachers' learning and their work. This is further problematized through the concept of gender. Teaching, particularly primary teaching, has traditionally been framed by assumptions about gender. These commonly held, but seldom voiced, assumptions have a strong impact on male teacher identity. For example, as teaching is considered an essentially feminine occupation rather than a masculine one, male teachers are constantly aware of others' attention to their gender and sexual identities. Male teacher identity is placed within various social, cultural and global contexts. These contexts are not static and are part of larger cultural, economic and social networks. This paper takes the lack of a fixed definition as ontologically useful and, instead, arrives at an understanding of teacher identity through its several recurring characterizations, of which the most commonly seen are related to the multiplicity of identity; the discontinuity of identity, and the social nature of identity (Akkerman and Meijer 2011; Varghese et al. 2005). De-centring understandings of identity in this manner is significant as it offers a fresh ontological approach to learning. Not only is the individual seen in the context of the social environment of which he or she is a part of, this approach allows for personal and professional views of how teachers view themselves and how they are recognized by others to be taken into account.

Identity shifts are likely to occur throughout a teacher's career because of interactions within schools and in broader communities (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). Social groups constantly construct their identity in ongoing social interaction, creating a shared story about the group and what it means to be a member (Ruelle and Peverelli 2017) and a teachers' professional identity and their sense of competence and worth are achieved and mediated through interactions with others (Skinner, Leavey, and Rothi 2019). If teachers do not agree with what it means to be a teacher within a particular context, they are likely to experience somewhat of an identity clash. Many teachers are now working in contexts where neoliberal discourses and policies have not only led to increased top-down vertical monitoring, but horizontal monitoring from colleagues (Page 2018), declining social relations (Ball 2017), and depersonalized relationships with students (Chatelier and Rudolph 2018). The reality for many teachers in these neoliberal contexts is that they will experience several of these elements over the course of a career, and some simultaneously. Identity can, therefore, be understood as a process that is dynamic and continually ongoing, entailing the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences (Flores and Day 2006). Over the course of a career, identity can be expected to be challenged in various ways and on multiple occasions.

Methods

Poststructuralism: towards an understanding

Poststructuralism is a philosophical position that attempts to decentre many of the traps of humanistic thinking, such as truth, meaning-making and wholeness. It makes you 'suspicious', Lather claims

(2007, 27), 'of voices as some innocent uncomplicated story'. As an ontological approach it understands the partiality of language and the shifting relationship that exists between the reader, the writer and the text. It acknowledges the omissions that occur when speaking, reading and writing a life. From this belief emerges stories that 'are playful, open-ended, and incomplete' (Denzin 1989, 46; Van Maanen 2011). Poststructural tools help researchers avoid 'being seduced' by a desire to create interesting and concise narratives bound by the limitations of themes and patterns in research (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, viii). These tools do not offer a corrective to the oppression offered by Humanism's binaries of right and wrong; man and woman; reason and emotion. They do, however, trouble the foundations of Humanism, which suggests a stable, unified and knowing individual, and in its place suggests methods of permanent possibilities.

Study 1

Research design: generating problematics

Male teachers were invited to participate in this research through an open call placed in Ireland's largest teachers' union monthly magazine, *InTouch* (2014). Numerous techniques were employed to avoid the representational trap of trying to understand what the participants in the study 'meant' and to attempt to resist the seduction of forming a clear and linear narrative. For example, the research design consisted of three interconnected yet distinct phases of individual interviews. Whilst, there was no formal methodological connection across these three interrelated phases other than to deepen knowledge acquisition, the categorization of data collection into three phases was methodologically useful as it enabled methodological self-reflection and interactive relationships to develop between researcher and researched (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011; Rapley 2011). Interviews were carried out sequentially, which facilitated collaboration and was an important move toward reciprocity. Each interview lasted from one to two and a half hours and was conducted face-to-face. Participants were invited to choose the location and the time/ day of the interview. Permission was sought to audio-record the interview and send it to an outside vendor for transcription. Each interview transcript was offered to participants for review. The entire process of interview, analysis, and discussing themes with participants was repeated during each phase. This enabled both the researcher and the participants to identify and understand participants perceptions of their most significant problems. Each participant shared as much as they wished about their lives and their experiences. Problem-posing continued as a dialogue over time with each phase inviting the researcher and the participants into a deeper and more critical understanding of reality as perceived and experienced. It also assisted in discussing the broader causes of their problems. At the end of each phase, the researcher and the participants compiled the questions and themes which were to be investigated. Participants organically became more involved in controlling decision making in the project, strengthening the participants' awareness of their own resources and abilities for action.

Ethical approval

Approval for the study with Irish male primary teachers was sought from, and granted by, the Research Ethics Committee at Mary Immaculate College, Ireland. The ethics committee had one major concern in relation to this study. It sought to ensure that this group of participants were recognized as vulnerable due to their minority status within the teaching profession. Participants were advised of:

- The voluntary nature of participation.
- Confidentiality and anonymity.
- The purpose of the research.

Data collection

Data sources generated for the research with Irish male primary teachers were as follows:

- In-depth interviews;
- Fieldnotes;
- Governmental reports;
- Transcripts

Data analysis

Interviews were analysed using a voice-centred relational method of data analysis (Mauthner and Doucet 1998). A voice-centred relational method involves four readings of each interview text. Each reading unsettles the data in a different way. In Study 1, the interviewer carried out each reading, but this does not always have to be the case. A voice-centred relational method is adaptable, flexible and can be used with a range of theoretical perspectives. It incorporates the researcher's background and history into the analysis process and places participants' voices above the researcher's. Using four different coloured highlighter pens, each transcript is read four different times following a four-step reading process. Reading One consists of dual-readings; reading for the plot and reading for reader-responses to what the participant has said. This first reading is an attempt to become aware of our assumptions and how they may influence our interpretation of the data. Reading Two reads for 'I', 'You' and 'We'. This allows for a reading of difficult subject matters or topics that were challenging to address. It also creates a space between how the participant and the interviewer perceive events. Reading Three reads specifically for interpersonal relationships with colleagues, pupils and broader social networks. Reading Four reads for cultural, political, social and structural issues, attempting to link participants' individual perceptions to the broader context of social reality.

Reading one: reconstructing for plot

The first step of the voice-centred relational method, Reading for Plot, is common to many methods of qualitative data analysis and seeks to establish the main story being told and who the protagonists are. It is attentive to recurrent images, words, metaphors and contradictions in the narrative as the subplots are established. Reading for my personal response to the participants' interpretations of stories facilitated the reflexive concerns of this study as I read for my own particular background, history and experiences in relation to the person being interviewed. For example, when Tim, a participant in the study, and I arrived at the topic of gender stereotyping in education, I revealed my own personal bias in this area that I was previously unaware of.

Suzanne: 'Yeah, if any of the kids get in big trouble, I send them up to the male teacher for a good giving out.'

Tim: 'It's the same with us in our school, I get my fair share in to me as well.'

Until I engaged with Reading One, I was unaware of my inbuilt biases and how I acted on them in my professional life. While reading specifically for my personal response to participant stories my attention was drawn to this off-the-cuff remark. In that moment, Reading One revealed in such a clear manner that my own inherent beliefs about the connection of men with authority, among other biases, would impact on my interpretation of their stories. Reading for my personal response was more difficult than I had anticipated as I became aware of my personal opinions slipping into interviews.

Reading One produces a different encounter with data as it emphasizes how the reader is implicit in shaping and presenting the text. It highlights emotional and personal responses to various interpretations of readings. It draws attention to places of agreement and disagreement and to places where I was clearly surprised by what I heard. For example, Tim and I began discussing whether a teacher adapts their teaching style depending on the gender of the pupil.

- Tim: '... with the older classes, you have to be very careful what way you approach a pupil, what way you are positioning yourself in the class.'
- Suzanne: 'Isn't that strange? I don't feel that.'
- Tim: 'Um, see, there is more stigma involved with an adult male teacher especially when teaching girls. No offence, but girls get wiser as they get older so they are more in-tune; like, you can't be this close to me, you can't be leaning over me like that to show me my work, do you know that kind of thing?'

While I did not always agree with what was being suggested, Reading One drew me into the world of a male teacher. It was particularly useful in highlighting beliefs and situations that I would not have known otherwise mainly because they are not openly discussed. This step, reading for my personal response, made me more conscious of how I read and interpreted the data and formed an essential part of this entire process.

Reading two: self-knowing

Reading Two consists of reading for the voice of 'I'. In this reading, attention is drawn to 'I', 'You' and 'We'. This allows for a reading of difficult subject matters or topics that were challenging to address. Reading for the 'I' was particularly valuable in highlighting a central theme of this study, namely that male entry into teaching is a difficult choice for many men. For example, Patrick, a participant in this study, recalls the time he made the choice to become a primary school teacher.

- Patrick: '... I knew I wanted to do something with people, or, you know, children. I didn't necessarily know whether I wanted to do teaching, or primary school teaching, so I did some work experience ... I still, I didn't really know if I wanted to go down the health route or teaching route. And then I think, I think I just decided then I would do primary teaching. So that was it.'

Patrick's answer suggests that he reluctantly entered teaching. Patrick begins with 'I knew I wanted.' He follows this with a chain of recurring words such as 'I didn't necessarily know', 'I didn't really know', 'I think I just decided.' His answer is an abstract of the whole story: male teachers are often caught between their desire to become a teacher and cultural perceptions about men who work with young children. Similarly, Neil, another participant, outlines his fears about allegations that may be made against him because of his gender.

- Neil: 'I feel you have to make sure that the place is visible at all times and that people can see in, you know? You should be very conscious of that. You have to be very conscious of trips away and making sure that you are not isolated and particularly that you are not isolated with vulnerable children.'

Neil's account suggests that he is detailing a difficult subject matter. He begins with 'I feel' and then continues to use phrases such as 'you should', 'you have to' and 'you are not.' The use of 'you' may suggest that a topic is even more upsetting for the participant as they create a distance between themselves and the event.

Tracing the 'I' in the interview transcripts broadened my insights into daily school life that I believe I would have otherwise missed. Reading for 'I' often highlighted mixed sentiments, such as in the case in Patrick's account above, which became important to me as I explored how male teachers navigated daily experiences of masculinities.

Reading three: the enactment of agency

Reading Three reads specifically for relationships. In the analysis employed in this study, Reading Three consists of readings for relationships with colleagues and with the workplace. This reading allows the reader to place the participants' stories within the broader cultural and societal landscape. For example, Eoin, a participant in this study, clearly illustrates that the cultural climate of schools in 'disadvantaged' areas is having a direct physical and emotional effect on teachers' daily lives.

- Eoin: 'Every day she'd [Class teacher] actually stagger out of the room. It was like she had run a marathon and it was physically punishing, physically draining and absolutely unbelievable.'

It facilitates further in-depth analysis of cultural and societal factors that may impact on the daily teaching lives of participants and their colleagues. This reading moves the data beyond the personal and places it in a context that has material consequences. This stage shakes up 'the privileging of the discursive in postmodern thought' (Jackson and Mazzei 2012, 119). Reading Three, reading for relationships, facilitates a reading of trends that are otherwise invisible. For instance, Eoin alludes to a common material trend that schools endure as teachers are continuously faced with daily pressures.

Eoin: 'I suppose it was a no-brainer that she [Class teacher] went to another school ... She was magnificent in terms of her commitment and her work but how do you attract and retain people of that calibre?'

This reading allows the data to go beyond the traditional limits of research practice and to celebrate uncertainty. It encourages thinking that avoids focusing on our research subjects as the site of agency and therefore the focus of our inquiry but rather it centres on the consideration of the enactment of agency and the co-production of these enactments (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). Listening for how the respondents spoke about their interpersonal relationships within broader social networks is particularly valuable in revealing the theoretical framework which quietly and pervasively underlines research (Mauthner and Doucet 1998).

Reading four: entering the world

Reading Four places respondents' accounts and experiences within broader cultural, political, social and structural contexts. Reading Four is given the least detailed description of all readings in Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) description of the voice-centred relational method. This observation resonates with Hekman's (2010, 3) claim about the postmodern position, '... in practice most postmoderns ... have moved to the language side to the exclusion of reality.' Of particular interest in Reading Four was how the participants described the structural and ideological forces as constraining and/ or enabling. For example, David, a research participant, alludes to the correlation between economic structures impinging on his career.

David: 'If I was from Dublin, I wouldn't be a teacher basically because the cost of living is so high. My rent is around a third of what I'd earn in a month. Even to buy a house, you couldn't. You actually couldn't afford to do that ... It's a real country thing to become a teacher.'

In this study, Reading Three and Reading Four were often used together as relationships with colleagues and relationships with the wider world often depend on and intra-act with one another.

When the four readings process were complete, notes were made of each reading on separate sheets of paper, which were slowly organized around various categories. These category sheets provided the starting point for analysis of numerous topics. As this is quite a detailed and time-consuming process, several cases were selected in phase two and phase three to do all four readings. Data was used as a filter, facilitating an ongoing process of idea reformulation and validity. Participants became collaborators in the research process and partners in the production of knowledge. The holistic strategy employed in this research design allows participants to be informed about the researcher's interpretation of results concerning themselves.

Study 2

Research design

Study 2 set out to look at Irish teacher identity and the potential impact of neoliberal, business-like education on Irish teachers. The design involved extensive reading of the literature on teacher identity, neoliberal discourses and their impact on teacher identity, and Irish teacher identity. Poststructuralism was the most appropriate framework to use as it would help to accentuate how discourses can affect teacher identity, and subsequently, Irish teacher identity. This research was undertaken in response to the increasingly neoliberal tone of Irish education. Neoliberalism is a problematic

concept used variously (Fuller 2019) but is understood here, in terms of education, as an institutional or policy logic that champions free-market economic principles (Garver 2019) and emphasizes accountability and measurable performance standards (Braun and Maguire 2018). In other words, neoliberalism involves schools becoming more corporate and competitive in their thinking and in their actions, and enterprising, individualistic, career-focused workers delivering themselves up to arduous audit and accountability regimes. Specifically, this study was concerned with school autonomy potentially being advanced in Ireland and the possibility of Irish schools becoming more corporate and business-like. Around the world school autonomy is linked with marketised, corporate, business-like education (Holloway and Keddie 2019; Gobby and Niesche 2019; Keddie and Holloway 2019). This has very much been the case in England, Ireland's influential neighbour, with schools there being modelled on and driven to behave like businesses (Olmedo and Wilkins 2017; Keddie and Mills 2019; Mills and Hextall 2019). Of particular concern was how the official discourse around school autonomy in Ireland bears strong resemblance to England's autonomous academy schools (see Skerritt 2019b, 2019c).

Throughout this study, a critical friend offered constructive and supportive feedback on the research. The use of a critical friend not only helped me to take a more balanced position, but it also challenged my thinking, my reading, and my writing. Stimulating and stretching conversations were had, both in person and via email, specific literature was recommended to me, as well as directed at me, and many sections of texts were revisited and rewritten, and at times inserted or discarded. Working alongside a critical friend supported the alleviation of researcher bias. For example, Study 2 assures readers that the paper is 'not an attempt at idealizing Irish teachers by any means, but an acknowledgement of how Irish teacher identity is constructed and characterized in the literature' (Skerritt 2019a, 161). Indeed, in recent years the general public have become more sceptical and critical of the teaching profession, and particularly during times of economic upheaval (Skerritt 2019a). Quotes from participants in other studies in Ireland are also offered as a way of providing a balanced account.

Ethical approval

Not applicable to this study as it did not involve collecting primary data.

Data collection

Data was gathered via an extensive three-part exploration of the literature on neoliberal discourses, particularly in education, and on teacher identity and Irish teacher identity. Indexed publications were searched for in databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, SCOPUS, and ProQuest. Keywords used in the search included 'identity', 'teacher identity', 'discourse', 'neoliberal' and 'Ireland'. Multiple combinations were used during the search and variations of terms were also used e.g. searching for both 'Ireland' and 'Irish', 'neoliberal' and 'neo-liberal', and 'neoliberalism' and 'neo-liberalism'. In the first stage of the search, the inclusion of documents was limited to scholarly work focusing on primary and post-primary level education that was written in English and published between 1998 and 2018. The second phase of the search involved sourcing literature solely on neoliberalism, discourse, and identity, and so the search was extended to include literature that was not necessarily confined to the field of education. Here, it was also decided to incorporate some notable scholarly works and some works by notable scholars that were published outside of the initial twenty-year period for literature that was being explored in both of the first two stages. In phase three, some grey literature was identified as being valuable. While a doctoral dissertation and a conference publication were located from online databases during the first stage of searching and recovered and retrieved later, based on my own knowledge of the policy context several national policy papers were identified as being useful resources. Throughout this exploration of the literature additional texts were also sent to me directly by the aforementioned critical friend i.e. two unpublished manuscripts and several peer-reviewed journal articles. The total 144 texts that were used in Study 2 consisted of:

- 113 journal articles;
- 10 Books;
- 10 Book chapters;
- 5 policy papers;
- 2 reports;
- 1 doctoral dissertation;
- 1 conference publication;
- 2 unpublished manuscripts.

Data analysis

Upon assembling a large body of literature on neoliberal education discourses, teacher identity and Irish teacher identity, it was apparent that tensions existed between what neoliberal discourses expect and require from teachers, and what it currently means to be a teacher in Ireland. A poststructural approach to exploring identity was taken in that identity was viewed as being fluid and dynamic, and socially constructed through discourse. Through this lens, a poststructural analysis of the literature on Irish teacher identity suggested that these discourses would have a negative impact on teachers' identities. After discussing the power of neoliberal discourses and outlining Irish teacher identity, the polarities between the two were mapped out to accentuate how and why market discourses in education are problematic for Irish teacher identity. The manner in which Irish teacher identity is presented in Study 2 is a reflection of how Irish teachers are portrayed in the literature. Indicative of the credibility of this analysis is the reaction Study 2 received when presented at the Educational Studies Association of Ireland's annual conference in 2019- the research was well received and complemented by a multitude of conferencegoers.

Learning from the research: our findings

One of the major criticisms of a poststructural approach is the superficial relationship that it has to the sweeping emancipatory claims it makes on behalf of those at the heart of each study. However, as will be illustrated in this section, poststructuralism allowed these two studies to examine issues that educational research has attempted to explain up to now in other terms. Poststructuralism was considered a generative force allowing for seasoned issues to be pushed into new limits of understanding. Poststructuralism as method puts forward alternative ways of knowing, which allow for new understandings to emerge. It unsettles institutions such as education and schooling as well as unsettling texts. This section provides a reading of participants' words as an example of how poststructuralist thought can be used in educational research. These readings aim to show how old issues within educational discourse can be revitalized through new understandings of the inseparable connections of the human and non-human worlds.

Refiguring bodies: inside and outside the margins

Culture is both embodied and challenged through corporeal performance. The body that performs the routine makes a conscious decision to resist or to conform to the dominant culture. Here Michael, a participant in Study 1, had just secured the position of mainstream class teacher, temporary capacity, and was the first male teacher to ever work in this school.

Michael: 'I was the first male appointed in that school in 1987 ... no man had worked in that school up to that and that continued on for years afterwards until a number of years ago, a new Principal was appointed and it was a male Principal. For whatever reason, I don't know, but he is the only male in the school.'

Michael's response clearly illustrates Barad's (2007, 183) claim that 'discursive practices are not human-based activities but specific material (re)configurings of the world through which boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted'. In Michael's story, female teachers appear to exert considerable influence over the hiring possibilities of male teachers. This interpretation resonates with Barad's theory of performativity (2007, 184), which claims to be 'iterative intra-activity'. The influence of female staff members over male teachers is not uncommon among the participants. For example, Eoin, another male participant in Study 1, recalls the time he gained, by chance, a position in an all-girls school. That is to say, he secured a teaching post in a school due to what he believes to be an error of the Principal.

Eoin: 'The school I am in at the moment ... I went there via the panel. It was a Nun who [p] I was the only person on the panel and she made the mistake of applying for a teacher and then when she realized I was a man, she made frantic efforts to back-peddle. Some of the other teachers told me she used to refer to me as the man (Laughter).'

Here we see that bodies have agency *and* are socially constructed. Eoin's account illustrates the inseparable connections between the linguistic, social, political, and biological. Bodies are drawn into history. Gender as a system of relations is created in this historical process and so, can never be fixed, nor exactly reproduced (Connell and Pearse 2015). The idea of gender embodiment allows for a paradoxical reading of gender. It is understood that men in general benefit from the inequalities of the gender order. Yet, the story Eoin recalls above illustrates that when the male body merges with the history of care and children, female teachers hold significant power to include and exclude. The body is not a blank slate. The body 'says' something, and those who encounter it 'say' something about the body in that encounter (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). Eoin's account reminds us that gender emerges from a set of linkages with other bodies; human and more-than-human.

Study 2 argues that a school environment where competing for promotions and being subjected to surveillance are the norm would be highly problematic for Irish teacher identity. According to this study, in order to be a success in business-like education, teachers need to undergo constant monitoring, meet set targets, and prove themselves to be worthy of promotion (Skerritt 2019a). Neoliberal subjects are constantly encouraged to invest in, work on, and improve themselves, and doing so often means shifting the focus of care away from students and onto teachers' own needs for professional recognition and advancement (Chatelier and Rudolph 2018). Based on how Irish teachers are predominantly depicted in the scholarship, Study 2 reports that Irish teacher identity is not compatible with such a corporate culture:

Irish teachers ... are disinterested in promotions that will take them away from the classroom. A business-like culture of formal hierarchies encouraging internal competitions for promotions will therefore be alien to Irish teachers, and perhaps problematic for their values. (Skerritt 2019a, 163)

Feelings of isolation that teachers experience in conditions where collegiality is minimal are likely to intensify further when surveillance and accountability are maximal. Study 2 also contends that a move towards business-like education in Ireland would mean that the 'pedagogical and professional autonomy' that Irish teachers are used to would no longer be accommodated (Skerritt 2019a, 165). The literature, utilized by Study 2 (see Skerritt 2019a, 163) succinctly conveys how Irish teachers view evaluation:

In Ireland, there is 'immense sensitivity' to 'evaluation in any form' in the education system (McNamara and O'Hara 2012, 84) and teachers are known to be negative about 'anything that smacks of appraisal, planning, target-setting, benchmarking and so on' (O'Hara and McNamara in McNamara et al. 2002, 201), and especially towards the evaluation system in England. (McNamara and O'Hara 2005, 2006, 2008; McNamara et al. 2009; O'Hara et al. 2007)

An excellent indication of how Irish teachers would struggle in an evaluation-intense setting, and how isolating of an experience this can be for teachers, comes in the form of quotes from two teachers from Ireland in subsequent research (see Skerritt 2019d, 582). Reflecting on the negative

experiences they had of inspections of their teaching in schools in England, and how they felt in the aftermath, it is clear that these teachers felt, or were made to feel, isolated:

- Maeve: 'They made me feel like I had let them down ... Just by the lack of support.'
- Bronagh: 'Any observations I've had ... have all been for judgemental and seeing what I've been doing wrong more so than what I've been doing right ... it makes you feel like you're not good enough to do your job, like you're doing something wrong. But then they'll do that and they won't tell you how to make it better.'

Agency, performativity and materiality

Learning and further developing teacher identity emanates from ways in which 'agency' and 'structure' are related and interact. Actively exercising personal and professional agency is an important and necessary underpinning factor of teacher identity. Michael reveals that as Principal he tends not to initiate staffroom conversations as he is 'conscious about imposing on their time and their free time'. Additionally, Michael describes the 'dynamic' of the staffroom as something that he 'would never choose to involve myself in ... but I had to like obviously'. Michael's explanations of both linguistic and bodily performances such as being present in the staffroom and being 'very friendly with maybe two or three' staff members to keep up social relations are citational and bodily practices that take up the norms of the culture and produce Michael as an effect of the performance. Michael's agency is mutually constituted, produced materially and discursively, by himself and by the other teachers. Attention can be drawn to the how the material of gender, in this case the body, and the discursive constructions of gender, what our ideas are regarding gender that come to us through language, are entangled to produce something other than would be produced singularly (Jackson and Mazzei 2012). Through Michael's experience, the reader gains knowledge of the world. There is an interruption between the corporeal and the linguistic that signifies social meaning. The intra-actions between Michael and the school environment are entangled with his subjectivity. Taking up poststructuralism as method, theories that are put to work as tools, and more specifically employing Reading Three, The Enactment of Agency, and Reading Four, Entering the World, of a voice-centred relational method as outlined in Data Analysis above, priority is given to both rhetoric and reality. This in turn offers new interpretations of teacher identity.

Study 2 provides a very specific example of how teacher agency is becoming restricted as teachers in Ireland are now being directed towards certain teaching styles that are considered to be 'good teaching'. As the study (see Skerritt 2019a, 162) explains,

The minister behind these reforms wanted 'learning experiences more student centred', and used reforms to 'promote active learning, creativity and innovation, and to 'address rote learning' (Quinn 2012, 130). Similarly, teacher education programmes have since been reformed to place a greater emphasis on skills in pedagogy and assessment (DES 2015a, 2015b) and the Teaching Council wants student teachers encouraged to use a variety of teaching methodologies (2013) so that upon graduating they will understand 'pupils as active agents in their own learning'. (2013, 25)

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the new official discourse of 'good teaching' in Ireland, which is greatly promoting progressive, student-centred pedagogy, is at odds with the dominant culture of the transmission of knowledge in Irish classrooms. In addition to a new discourse of good practice, standards and standardization are also coming into play in Ireland as forms of quality assurance (Ball 2016). For example, there are now statements of practice that act as standards against which teachers and schools can evaluate classroom practice, ensuring that everyone is on the same page, with access to the discussion around what teachers should, and should not, be doing in the classroom (Brady 2019). Thus, teacher autonomy in Ireland is coming to be severely restricted by imposed standards to which there is tightly policed adherence (Mooney Simmie and Moles 2019). Being instructed how to teach, and having this teaching monitored, is again likely to be difficult

for Irish teachers given their once autonomous past. As Skinner, Leavey, and Rothi (2019) show with teachers in England and Wales, for example, standard setting can undermine teachers' professional identity.

The politics of ontology

Approaching knowledge as knowing-in-being requires a different approach to thinking theory with data. It necessitates a fundamental break in discursive privilege of knowledge as the sole domain of epistemology towards what Barad would term 'onto-epistem-ology'. It requires a strong commitment, Barad (2007) cautions, to accounting for the material nature of practices and how they come to matter. We obtain knowledge from being part of the world. To encounter what is simultaneously materially and discursively produced requires not just a material reading of the data but a reading that relies on a re-insertion of ontology into the task of knowing. Barad (2007, 177) claims, 'matter plays an agentive role in its iterative materialization'. This is what Butler (1993, 10) terms construction as 'neither a single act nor a casual process initiated by a subject'. It is itself 'a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms' (Butler 1993, 10). Just as human practices are 'not the only practices that come to matter, but neither is the world ... independent of human practices (Barad, 2007, 206). Similarly, Barad (2007, 206) claims, we do not make the world 'simply in our image'. Shifting our ontological understanding to a combination of discursive practices and abstract practices, this 'opens up space for a new formulation of realism (and truth)' (Barad 2007, 207). The goal is to neither privilege the discursive nor the material but to better understand reality through the dynamic relationship between language and reality.

Concluding remarks

A return to ontology in educational research is an acknowledgement that knowledge emerges through and from engagement with one another. Knowledge emerges through intra-actions. Intra-actions are enactments that 'become' through further materialisations. Barad (2007, 49) claims that knowing 'does not come from standing at a distance representing' but rather it comes from 'a direct material engagement with the world'. Similarly, Lather (2010, 94) considers the merger of knower and known to be the 'grok', an informal verb meaning intuitive understanding, that makes 'an entangled understanding' that goes 'beyond language'. This merger that absorbs and blends 'comes from being immersed in a context', going 'beyond what numbers can capture' toward deeper understanding'. Lather (2010, 94) considers the practice 'knowing through engagement' to be the biggest success stories in 'fostering educational change'. One important remark that this paper would like to end on is that ontology is about taking account of the entangled materialisations of which we are a part, including new configurations, new subjectivities and new possibilities. This paper is a fresh offering as educational researchers for the part we play in the entangled web we weave.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Suzanne O' Keeffe  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4344-2488>

Craig Skerritt  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3695-758X>

References

- Akkerman, S. F., and P. C. Meijer. 2011. "A Dialogical Approach to Conceptualizing Teacher Identity." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 27: 308–319.
- Ball, S. J. 2016. "Neoliberal Education? Confronting the Slouching Beast." *Policy Futures in Education* 14 (8): 1046–1059.
- Ball, S. J. 2017. *The Education Debate*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Barad, K. 2007. *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Beauchamp, C., and L. Thomas. 2009. "Understanding Teacher Identity: An Overview of Issues in the Literature and Implications for Teacher Education." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 39 (2): 175–189.
- Brady, A. M. 2019. "Anxiety of Performativity and Anxiety of Performance: Self-Evaluation as Bad Faith." *Oxford Review of Education* 45 (5): 605–618.
- Braun, A., and M. Maguire. 2018. "Doing Without Believing—Enacting Policy in the English Primary School." *Critical Studies in Education*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17508487.2018.1500384>.
- Britzman, D. P. 2009. *The Very Thought of Education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London: Routledge.
- Chatelier, S., and S. Rudolph. 2018. "Teacher Responsibility: Shifting Care from Student to (Professional) Self?" *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39 (1): 1–15.
- Connell, R. W., and R. Pearse. 2015. *Gender: In World Perspective*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Deleuze, G. 1989. *Cinema II*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G., and F. Guattari. 1977. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated and edited by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Denzin, N. K. 1989. *Interpretive Biography: Qualitative Research Methods. Volume 17*. London and New Delhi: SAGE.
- Denzin, N. K. 2017. "Critical Qualitative Inquiry." *Qualitative Inquiry* 23 (1): 8–16.
- Derrida, J. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Derrida, J. 2001. "A Certain 'Madness' Must Watch Over Thinking: Interview with Francois Ewald." In *Derrida and Education*, edited by Gert Biesta and Denise Eghea-Kuehne, 55–76. London: Routledge.
- DES (Department of Education and Skills). 2015a. *Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System*. Research Paper. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.
- DES (Department of Education and Skills). 2015b. *Advancing School Autonomy in the Irish School System*. Consultation Paper. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.
- Flores, M. A., and C. Day. 2006. "Contexts Which Shape and Reshape New Teachers' Identities: A Multi-Perspective Study." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 22 (2): 219–232.
- Fuller, K. 2019. "'That Would Be My Red Line': An Analysis of Headteachers' Resistance of Neoliberal Education Reforms." *Educational Review* 71 (1): 31–50.
- Garver, R. 2019. "Evaluative Relationships: Teacher Accountability and Professional Culture." *Journal of Education Policy*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02680939.2019.1566972>.
- Gobby, B., and R. Niesche. 2019. "Community Empowerment? School Autonomy, School Boards and Depoliticising Governance." *The Australian Educational Researcher* 46 (3): 565–582.
- Hekman, S. 2010. *The Material of Knowledge: Feminist Disclosures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., and P. Leavy. 2011. *The Practice of Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Holloway, J., and A. Keddie. 2019. "'Make Money, Get Money': How Two Autonomous Schools Have Commercialised Their Services." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 40 (6): 889–901.
- InTouch. 2014. "Why the Decline in Male Primary School Teachers?" *InTouch Magazine, INTO* 148: 52–53.
- Jackson, A. Y., and L. A. Mazzei. 2012. *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research. Viewing Data Across Multiple Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Keddie, A., and J. Holloway. 2019. "School Autonomy, School Accountability and Social Justice: Stories from Two Australian School Principals." *School Leadership and Management*. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13632434.2019.1643309>.
- Keddie, A., and M. Mills. 2019. *Autonomy, Accountability and Social Justice: Stories of English Schooling*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Lather, P. 2007. *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lather, P. 2010. *Engaging Science Policy: From the Side of the Messy*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Lather, P. 2013. "Methodology -21: What Do We Do in the Afterward?" *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 26 (6): 634–645.
- Lather, P. 2014. "To Give Good Science: Doing Qualitative Research in the Afterward." *Education Policy Analysis Archives, EPAA/AAPE's Special Issue on Qualitative Inquiry*. doi:10.14507/epaa.v22n10.2014.
- Mauthner, N. S., and A. Doucet. 1998. "Reflections on a Voice Centred Relational Method of Data Analysis: Analysing Maternal and Domestic Voices." In *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research: Private Lives and Public Texts*, edited by Jane Ribbens, and Rosalind Edwards, 119–144. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

- McNamara, G., and J. O'Hara. 2005. "Internal Review and Self-Evaluation—the Chosen Route to School Improvement in Ireland?" *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 31 (4): 267–282.
- McNamara, G., and J. O'Hara. 2006. "Workable Compromise or Pointless Exercise? School-Based Evaluation in the Irish Context." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 34 (4): 564–582.
- McNamara, G., and J. O'Hara. 2008. *Trusting Schools and Teachers: Developing Educational Professionalism Through Self-Evaluation*. New York: Peter Lang.
- McNamara, G., and J. O'Hara. 2012. "From Looking at our Schools (LAOS) to Whole School Evaluation-Management, Leadership and Learning (WSE-MLL): The Evolution of Inspection in Irish Schools over the Past Decade." *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 24 (2): 79–97.
- McNamara, G., J. O'Hara, and B. N. Aingléis. 2002. "Whole-School Evaluation and Development Planning: An Analysis of Recent Initiatives in Ireland". *Educational Management & Administration* 30 (2): 201–211. doi:10.1177/02611X02030002510
- McNamara, G., J. O'Hara, R. Boyle, and C. Sullivan. 2009. "Developing a Culture of Evaluation in the Irish Public Sector: the Case of Education." *Evaluation* 15 (1): 101–112.
- Mills, M., and I. Hextall. 2019. "The co-Operative Schools Movement in England: Who, Where and Why." *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 23 (11): 1116–1133.
- Mooney Simmie, G., and J. Moles. 2019. "Teachers' Changing Subjectivities: Putting the Soul to Work for the Principle of the Market or for Facilitating Risk?" *Studies in Philosophy and Education*. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11217-019-09686-9>.
- O'Hara, J., G. McNamara, R. Boyle, and C. Sullivan. 2007. "Contexts and Constraints: an Analysis of the Evolution of Evaluation in Ireland with Particular Reference to the Education System." *Journal of MultiDisciplinary Evaluation* 4 (7): 75–83.
- O'Keeffe, S. 2016. "What are Male Teachers' Understandings of Masculinities?—An Exploration of Sex, Gender and Bodies in Irish Primary Schools." *Palgrave Communications* 2: 16007. doi:10.1057/palcomms.2016.7.
- Olmedo, A., and A. Wilkins. 2017. "Governing Through Parents: A Genealogical Enquiry of Education Policy and the Construction of Neoliberal Subjectivities in England." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 38 (4): 573–589.
- Page, D. 2018. "Conspicuous Practice: Self-Surveillance and Commodification in English Education." *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 27 (4): 375–390.
- Quinn, R. 2012. "The Future Development of Education in Ireland." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 101 (402): 123–138.
- Rapley, T. 2011. "Some Pragmatics of Data Analysis." In *Qualitative Research: Issues of Theory, Method and Practice*. 3rd ed, edited by David Silverman, 273–290. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- Ruelle, O., and P. Peverelli. 2017. "The Discursive Construction of Identity Through Interaction on Social Media in a Chinese NGO." *Chinese Journal of Communication* 10 (1): 12–37.
- Skerritt, C. 2019a. "Discourse and Teacher Identity in Business-Like Education." *Policy Futures in Education* 17 (2): 153–171.
- Skerritt, C. 2019b. "Privatization and 'Destatization': School Autonomy as the 'Anglo Neoliberalization' of Irish Education Policy." *Irish Educational Studies* 38 (2): 263–279.
- Skerritt, C. 2019c. "I Think Irish Schools Need to Keep Doing What They're Doing': Irish Teachers' Views on School Autonomy After Working in English Academies." *Improving Schools* 22 (3): 267–287.
- Skerritt, C. 2019d. "Irish Migrant Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of Autonomy and Accountability in the English Education System." *Research Papers in Education* 34 (5): 569–596.
- Skinner, B., G. Leavey, and D. Rothi. 2019. "Managerialism and Teacher Professional Identity: Impact on Well-Being among Teachers in the UK." *Educational Review*. doi:10.1080/00131911.2018.1556205.
- Spivak, G. S. 1976. "Translator's Preface." In *Of Grammatology*, edited by J. Derrida, xxvii–cxii. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press. Translated and edited by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.
- Teaching Council. 2013. *Guidelines on School Placement*. Maynooth: Teaching Council.
- Van Maanen, J. 2011. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. 2nd ed. Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Varghese, M., B. Morgan, B. Johnston, and K. A. Johnson. 2005. "Theorizing Language Teacher Identity: Three Perspectives and Beyond." *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 4 (1): 21–44.