# Teacher Education and the Political
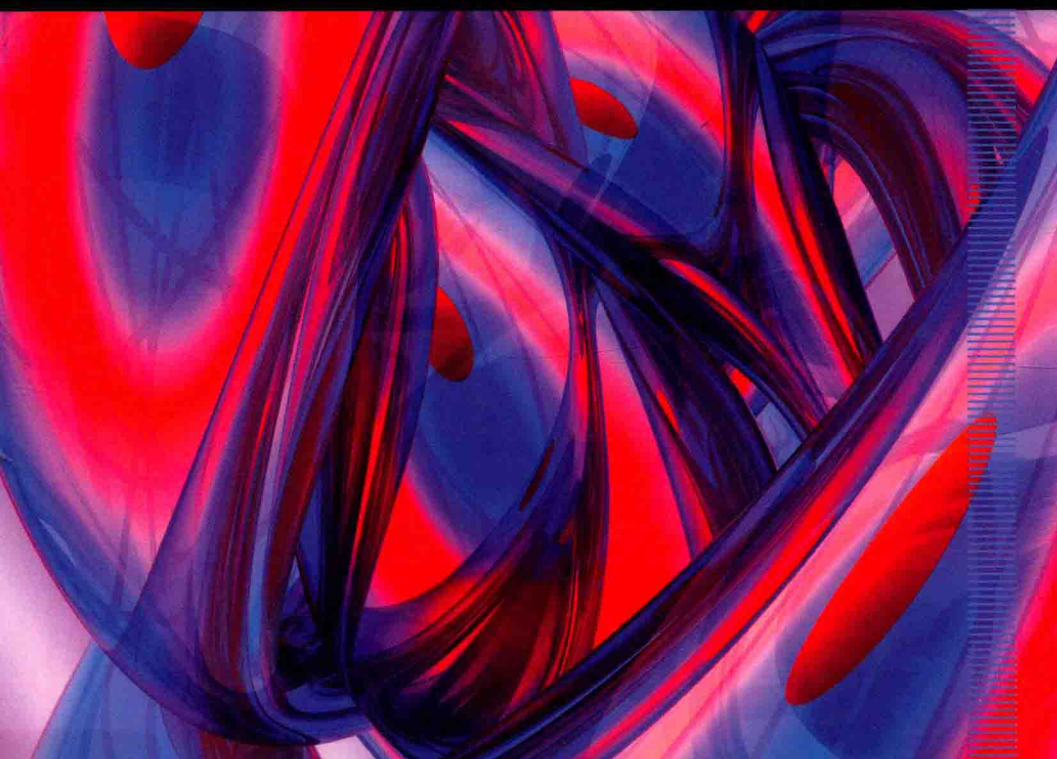
## THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING

MATTHEW CLARKE and ANNE M. PHELAN

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# TEACHER EDUCATION AND THE POLITICAL

The power of negative thinking

*Matthew Clarke and Anne M. Phelan*

# TEACHER EDUCATION AND THE POLITICAL

*Teacher Education and the Political* is a striking book which addresses the nature and purpose of teacher education in a global context characterised by economic and political anxieties around declining productivity and social inclusion. These anxieties are manifested in recent policy developments such as the promotion of professional standards, the deregulation and marketisation of teacher education and the imposition of performance-related regimes that tie teachers' pay to outcomes in high-stakes testing.

The book assesses the implications of such policies for the work of teachers as well as for teacher educators and those undertaking initial teacher education. It is argued that these policy moves can be read as a depoliticising and de-intellectualising of teacher education. In this context, they illustrate how contemporary theory can provide a language for critiquing recent developments and imagining new trajectories for policy and practice in teacher education.

Drawing on the work of theorists from Derrida and Mouffe to Agamben and Lacan, this book argues for the need to maintain a space for intellectual autonomy as a critical dimension of the ethico-political work of teachers. Together these ideas and analyses provide examples of the power of negative thinking, illustrating its capacity to unsettle comfortable truths and foreground the political nature of teacher education.

Current teachers, teacher educators and school leaders will be particularly interested readers, alongside those concerned with policy in the wider educational landscape.

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For the ways in which they unsettle us daily with their 'negative thinking', we are forever thankful to our respective children, Ella and Darragh; we dedicate this book to them.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# CONTENTS

# 1

# ON THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING IN AND FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

## An introduction

> The most beautiful day
> lacks something;
> its dark side.
> Only to a near-sighted god
> could light by itself
> appear beautiful.
>
> Beside any *Let there be light!*,
> *Let there be darkness!*
> should also be said.
>
> We don't arrive
> at necessary night by omission only.
>
> Roberto Juarozz, *Vertical Poetry: Last Poems*

As we began working on this book, an article was published on the front page of *The Australian* newspaper (Ferrari, 2014), entitled 'Toughen up on teacher training, university heads warned'. The piece opened with an announcement that 'Universities will have to prove their teaching graduates improve student learning under tougher accreditation standards for education degrees envisaged by the new chairman of the national teachers institute'. It then went on to identify this newly created institute's research priorities as 'assessing the capabilities of graduates, measuring the outcomes of initial teacher education, and how to roll out the most effective models of teacher education'. In a similar vein, the article noted that teacher education degrees would be evaluated against three criteria: 'the impact of the teacher on the student, the magnitude of that impact, and how pervasive it was across students'.

From the perspective of this book, this news item is symptomatic of the contemporary moment in teacher education in many international contexts,

reflecting global trends that have powerful implications far beyond the country in which the article was published. Specifically, the article reflects neo-liberal emphases on economics and productivity, which encourage us to see education as a form of input, providing human capital to meet the needs of the economy. As such, teacher education, and indeed education more broadly, is now subject to the same managerial norms as those that dominate in the business sector. This, in turn, entails amenability to evaluation through the specification and measurement of quantifiable data in the form of impact, output, standards and targets.

The news article, and the policy shift it announces in relation to the preparation of teachers, is also symptomatic of some of the contemporary discourses circulating around teacher education that we identify and challenge in this book. Specifically, it is premised on the threat posed to effective teacher education by a deficit (or 'lack', to foreshadow our subsequent discussion) – hence the need for a 'tougher stance' – that threatens to become a crisis unless addressed. For, just as capitalism is characterised by recurring crises (Harvey, 2010; Mirowski, 2013; Vadolas, 2012), teaching and teacher education have been subjected to an ongoing series of manufactured crises involving persistent questioning on the part of policymakers and the media, often driven by political factors, about whether teachers are meeting (or undermining) the nation's expectations in relation to such criteria as the adequate preparation of a globally competitive workforce, the achievement of sufficiently high academic standards, the transmission of appropriate curricular content and the instillation of the right values in students (Adey and Dillon, 2012; Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting and Whitty, 2000; Smyth, 2006; Whitty, 2002).

One response to education's induced sense of crisis has been an increasing degree of policy hyperactivism (Levin, 1998; Vidovich, 2009), reflecting a belief that the creation of policy in and of itself suggests order, authority and expertise (Colebatch, 2009). A further response on the part of governments, seeking to alleviate social anxieties and enhance political legitimacy, has been to depoliticise particular policy domains, reframing them as matters of merely technical concern (Clarke and Newman, 1997). Such depoliticisation, by 'removing a political phenomenon from comprehension of its *historical* emergence and from recognition of the *powers* that produce and contour it' (Brown, 2006, p. 15, emphasis in original), places practices and events in a timeless present in order to project them as merely the natural order of things, thus removing them from ideological and political debate. By contrast, our position is 'that teaching and teacher education are inherently and unavoidably political' (Cochran-Smith, 2005, p. 3).

In the case of education, depoliticisation has been achieved through the deployment of a 'discursive duopoly' of instrumentalism and consensualism (Clarke, 2012). Instrumentalism involves the pervasive view that the main purpose of education is to serve the needs of the economy, while consensualism, which works hand in hand with instrumentalism, involves the demonisation of disagreement and dissensus and the valorisation of agreement and consensus in relation to the instrumentalist view regarding the economic purposes of education. Disagreement

thus becomes limited to varying views as to the best means by which instrumental goals can be achieved; dissent regarding the *purposes* of education becomes off-limits. This instrumentalism is reflected in the infusing of teacher education with the language of competition and the market. Specifically, notions of best returns on 'investment' (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2006, p. 9) position teacher education as the source of increased productivity in the form of improved standardised national (e.g. SATs in England; NAPLAN in Australia) and international (e.g. TIMMS, PISA) test results. Evidence of consensualism includes the unchallengeable orthodoxy that 'quality' teaching assures 'quality' learning for all students (Alberta Education, 1995; OECD, 2005), the dominance of 'evidence-based' understandings of teaching and the push to identify effective and efficient interventions that might be generalised across a range of programme contexts in order to bring about predetermined outcomes. A key consequence of this instrumental–consensual duopoly is that improving practice (teaching) in order to enhance productivity (learning) becomes the dominant goal that all stakeholders must unquestioningly endorse, or forfeit recognition as legitimate voices.

Meanwhile, determined to argue that teaching is a profession with a complete, impartial and defensible knowledge base, education scholars have been drawn into arguments about justification and legitimation, providing compilations of research to make the case for professional relevance of knowledge and skills to be provided in teacher education (Crocker and Dibbon, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2005). Yet, ironically, such work only fuels the anxieties of teacher educators and pre-service teachers with the need to meet certification requirements outlined in the teaching standards supplanting concern with the political and ethical dilemmas of teaching. In these and other ways, an impoverishing instrumentalism and a comforting consensualism haunt teacher education and teaching, representing an unwitting retreat into the unequivocal, systematic, amnesic and, perhaps above all, *depoliticised* world of modernity (Hartley, 2000). It is this progressive depoliticisation of teacher education – a phenomenon that we believe has eviscerated the ethical and moral core of teaching and the preparation of teachers – that is the focus of our book.

## The haunting of teacher education

In the current policy climate, teacher education, as both field of study and programmatic structure, has been severely impacted upon, as 'governments around the world [are] intent on systemic reform of education to improve their country's global competitiveness [and] see the reform and progressive management of teacher education as a key component in that systemic reform process' (Furlong, 2013b, p. 46). In this introductory chapter, we identify four particular 'phantoms' that have haunted teacher education in recent decades, each linked to this systemic reform process. These phantoms are a) the continual conjuring of crises that serve to stoke social anxiety about the effectiveness and efficiency of teacher education, provoking alienation among teachers and teacher educators; b) the imposition of

a false consensus about the fundamental aims of teaching and education that deadens debate about the practice and purpose of teacher education; c) the increasing standardisation of curriculum and pedagogy that undermines teachers' intellectual autonomy; and d) the reduction of teaching to the application of policies and protocols tailored to predetermined ends, thereby sidelining teachers' moral judgement and disavowing the ethico-political dimensions of teaching. Below, we examine each of these four phantoms in more detail but each returns to be echoed and amplified in later chapters.

Before doing so, however, it is important to note that we are working with an expanded notion of teacher education in this book that embraces but expands beyond the institutional structures of initial teacher education (ITE) to include teachers' continuous professional development (CPD). Underlying this view is a perspective on teaching as a form of sustained engagement with education, where the latter is concerned with a continual journey of 'becoming', rather than the end-state of 'being' educated, and with a notion of singularity, rather than uni-formity or standardisation, that reflects a particular and distinctive mode of existence:

> Singularity is less a nameable quality than an inscrutable intensity of being that urges the subject to persist in its unending task of fashioning or reiterating a self that feels viscerally 'real' (meaningful, compelling or appropriate). From this perspective, singularity can never be fixed into a steady configuration of attributes, but rather communicates something about the volatility of the constant process of composing and recomposing a self that, by definition, characterizes the human predicament. That is, singularity is never something that the subject achieves once and for all, but an ongoing, ever-renewed, and always-precarious exploration of potentialities that is undertaken in relation to rapidly shape-shifting and capricious external influences as well as in relation to the equally unpredictable drive energies and unconscious directives that galvanise the subject's psychic 'destiny'.
>
> (Ruti, 2012, p. 9)

Of course, such a perspective infuses life, including education and teacher education, with a restlessness and volatility that is resistant to formulation and codification and is hence discomforting for policymakers, for whom teacher education has long been a site for both provoking and seeking to allay social anxiety. This tension between settled being and emergent becoming has been particularly salient in recent decades, as wider economic anxieties about competitiveness in the global market-place (Connell, 2009) combined with, particularly in the post-9/11 world, political anxieties about the fabric of the nation and the perceived threat to its integrity from alien forces or 'strangers' lurking outside or within (Apple, 2011; Kostogriz, 2006) 'have induced educators to embrace the language and business practices associated with neoliberalism' (Taubman, 2009, p. 98).

Neo-liberalism is a commonly used, if less often defined, term in education, and one that is key to understanding the argument of our book. Hence we will

discuss it, as both a political development and as a discourse, in greater detail in subsequent chapters. For now, we would note that, while recognising that it is not a unified doctrine, neo-liberalism is perhaps best understood as 'the pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics' (Davies, 2014, p. 4). As a consequence of the neo-liberal embrace, it can be argued that in many global contexts 'there has been a subordination of teacher education as intellectual, moral and ethical endeavor to the production of locally relevant job skills' (Mayer *et al.*, 2008, p. 80), with consequences for teachers and teacher education in terms of alienation and loss of voice. Specifically, in the face of various forms of social anxiety and the resulting doubts as to whether teacher education is up to the challenges of the twenty-first century (e.g. Levine, 2006), policymakers and teacher educators alike have tended to reach out for what Britzman (2011) refers to as a 'manual' that has replaced and silenced teachers' critical, creative voices. Such a manual can be seen as 'signifying a profession's unconscious wish for absolute knowledge, and as a defence against crisis. Demands for a manual seem to be one solution to a profession's anxiety' (2011, p. 81). In response, we ask how are *the conjuring of crisis, the pervasive presence of social anxiety and the subsequent alienation experienced by many teachers* related to the proliferation of policy that seeks to manage teacher education?

Crises demand efficient management if they are not to get out of hand. The quest for efficiency begets standardisation, 'curbing variety so as to facilitate the generation of objective measures of performance' (Hartley, 2000, p. 119). In teacher education policy and practice, stabilising the social and operational meaning of both the 'teacher' and what is 'professional' thus becomes desirable. As a result, and with the active involvement of their professional bodies, teachers in countries such as Australia, Canada, England and the USA have consented to developments that amount to impoverishments in practice. These include the elevation of the pseudo-scientificity of standards, at the expense of such subsequently devalued factors as affect and intuition, as the price for purportedly accruing greater regard from politicians, policymakers, the media and society. In this sense, increased teacher professionalism, reflected in perceived improvements in standing and status, has been something of a Faustian pact. Specifically, teacher professionalisation has been harnessed to government education reform agendas (Furlong, 2013a), with teachers being positioned 'on the frontline of national economic defence and in the centre of educational reform, thus justifying the detailed mapping and scrutiny of their work' (Clarke and Moore, 2013, p. 488). To this end, teaching standards are offered as *descriptions* of the kinds of knowledge, skills and attributes of *any* competent teacher. Masking their underlying political commitments (education as epiphenomenal to the economy), officially sanctioned representations of the teacher and teaching are presented as natural and irrefutable. Teachers are thus deprived of debate in which they can make their voices heard, while teacher educators are simply left to the management of policy implications at the programmatic level. We witness this, for example, in the arrival of the standards-driven portfolio as a prominent feature of assessment in teacher education (Sanford and Strong-Wilson, 2013) and in the explicit linking of course syllabi to various teaching standards.

Understandably, teacher education students are keen to present themselves as 'fitting' with the standards, thereby adopting 'a stable and positive identity obtained through identification with an existing socio-political order' (Biesta, 2011, p. 145). As a result, there is little room for any reality other than the one established by the standards policy (Phelan and Vratulis, 2013). Such consensus signifies the end of the political. As a result, we ask *how might teacher educators confront the contemporary depoliticising policy consensus and advocate for a properly political view of education based on genuine alternatives?*

Reimagining teacher education as a site of dissensus is immensely challenging in light of discourses of standardised teacher identities. Strewn across the span of a teacher's career, otherwise known as the 'professional learning continuum' (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), teacher learning is framed in terms of, and justified as, a highly positive disposition for all teachers. Quality teachers are those who want to achieve their 'full potential through relentless and never-ending self-development, out of which [they] can self-regulate in the interests of students and colleagues' (McWilliam, 2008, p. 33). Potential here takes the form of a stylised identity ever keen on developing itself as an excellent classroom manager, team builder, literacy instructor or emotionally intelligent leader. A proliferation of webinars, workshops, seminars and graduate programmes attests to this preoccupation, as lifelong learning becomes a life sentence for teachers (Falk, 1999). Much of this talk of professional learning, however, is less about expanding the subjectivity of the teacher and more about delimiting it (Falk, 1999); and even though there has been a growing interest in non-formal professional learning and sharing through social media outlets, much of this material remains tied to, rather than challenging, existing imaginaries of teaching as the implementation of 'best practice'. As with more formal professional development, 'teacher profiles' as statements of teacher competencies and performance standards lurk beneath the surface (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005, p. 10), including the usual array of subject matter knowledge and pedagogical skills but, significantly, 'the capacity to continue developing' (p. 7). Against the background of such developments, we wonder, if the current understanding of teacher potential serves to restrict rather than enlarge the subjectivity of the teacher, then *what might a rearticulation of potential as '(im)potential' offer teacher education?*

The turn to teaching standards and the articulation of a knowledge base for teaching constitutes a retreat, in our view, into a firmly modernist worldview. This is a world in which knowledge is power, in which scientific research evidence is able to provide a basis for policy and practice and in which experts hold out the promise, by submitting them to rational analysis, of rendering complex and semi-opaque processes like curriculum, teaching and learning visible and hence more controllable (e.g. Hattie, 2009). It is a world in which the intolerable and uncontrollable are redeemed by being made palatable and predictable in order to provide 'the specious clarity demanded and enforced by audit cultures' (MacLure, 2010, p. 278); the cost of such assimilation is that we are invited to enter into 'the regime of the cliché' (MacLure, 2010, p. 278). In such a climate, it is all too easy

for research to be positioned as an exact science, capable of making clear and unambivalent predictions about practice, ignoring the key notion 'that in the design, enactment and justification of education we have to engage with normative questions' (Biesta, 2015, p. 80). Such instrumentalism sidelines the teacher, disembeds knowledge from the idiosyncrasy of particular teaching situations and from the everyday experience and knowledge of teachers and ignores the moral complexities inherent in teaching (Dunne and Pendlebury, 2002). In this context, we ask *what does it mean to cultivate ethical decision-making in and through teacher education in a climate that is hostile to uncertainty in, and unpredictability of, practice?*

The issues and questions that we identify do not deny that important decisions regarding teachers' knowledge, skills or dispositions must be made. To think solely in these terms, however, is to neglect teaching and teacher education as forms of praxis – where means and ends are always entangled (Biesta, 2015), where ethical action is the central concern and where human relationships are particular and fragile. It is to limit ourselves to

> bloodless categories, narrow notions of the visible and the empirical, professional standards of indifference, institutional rules of distance and control, barely speakable fears of losing the footing that enables us to speak authoritatively and with greater value than anyone else who might. . .
>
> (Gordon, 2007, p. 21)

Rather than accept such limitations, we seek 'to represent the structure of feeling that is something akin to what it feels like to be the object of social totality vexed by the phantoms of modernity's violence' (Gordon, 2007, p. 19). In short, we seek to engage in a nuanced rather than a reductive conversation about teacher education, while acknowledging that such complication may require vocabularies heretofore disavowed in teacher education (Taubman, 2012).

## Unsettling phantoms: the role of contemporary theorising in teacher education

In what follows, we illustrate, via a series of short vignettes that are each expanded to form subsequent chapters, how contemporary theory can provide a language for rethinking recent developments and imagining new trajectories for policy and practice. Importantly, we write from the position of educational researchers and teacher educators who actively and enthusiastically engage with theory in our own work, though we are aware of alternative perspectives that question the value of theory for education (e.g. Kitching, 2008) or that see it as an essentially conservative force (e.g. Thomas, 2007). In this respect, our view is closer to that of Ball (1995) and Dimitriadis and Kamberelis (2006), for whom theory comprises concepts and tools for understanding and explaining experiences and processes in critical and creative ways, potentially providing an alternative language to that inscribed in the dominant discourses of current policy and practice.

Specifically, in the following discussion we draw on notions of alienation and sublimation from political (Jaeggi, 2014) and psychoanalytic (Oliver, 2004; Ruti, 2012) theory to provide insights into the alienating effects of the politics of crises in teacher education and argue the case for teachers and teacher educators to infuse their work with singular and sublime meanings that resist the tyranny of the reality principle reflected in the reduction of teachers and teaching to transposable methods, routines and technique (Chapter 2); on the idea of impotentiality from philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1999) to highlight the importance of maintaining a degree of openness in relation to what and who the figure of the teacher can be (Chapter 3); on the notion of undecidability from the work of Jacques Derrida (Derrida, 1988, 1992), putting this to work alongside a reading of ethics as the assumption of a singular subjectivity from the work of Jacques Lacan (1992), in order to draw attention to the need to maintain space for genuine decision-making as a critical dimension of the ethico-political work of teachers (Chapter 4); and on ideas of agonism, pluralism and dissensus from the work of political theorists Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2005, 2013), William Connolly (1991, 2008), and Bonnie Honig (1993) to argue against the hegemony of consensus in teacher education (Chapter 5).

## Policy's excess and professional alienation

The anxiety that teachers and other professionals experience in response to bureaucratic cultures of accountability and performativity can be viewed not just as one of the consequences of neo-liberal policies but also as something more deep-seated and fundamental to human existence. In trying to understand anxiety, we draw on the notion of alienation. In particular, we draw on a distinction between a primary alienation, which is an inevitable element of the human condition and its separation from the immediacy of reality as a result of language and cognition, and a social alienation, which can be conceived as a relation of relationlessness (Jaeggi, 2014), whereby we cease to find meaning in, and a sense of connection to, our daily lives and activities. For teachers and teacher educators, whose activities are mapped and prescribed by mandated curricula, standards, assessments and audits, the latter's intrusive presence is one of the key sources of anxiety and social alienation. According to this perspective, we experience alienation when 'social authority appears nonlacking and ubiquitous, never allowing the subject space to desire' (McGowan, 2013, p. 113). In this reading, the welter of neo-liberal policy and reform to which teaching and teacher education have been subjected is, on the one hand, a consequence of wider social anxieties about social change and economic uncertainty. But it is also, on the other hand, a driving cause of social alienation in the form of a loss of meaning, connectedness and agency in teachers and teacher educators. Such alienation reflects the wider crisis of voice brought about by the authoritarian expertise of neo-liberal politics and policy (Couldry, 2010).

Here we would argue that, in contrast to the debilitating (non)politics of perpetual crisis management, the recognition of social alienation, and the loss of capacity to

appropriate oneself and the world in meaningful ways that it entails, provides the basis for constructing what we refer to as 'aversive identities' that are characterised by resistance to compliance, conformity and uncritical acceptance of authority. Such identities are based on a politics of articulation (in the dual sense of making connections and voicing thoughts and feelings) and agonism – a politics that recognises that the alternative to political speech is not private speech but silence (Cavell, 1979) and that recognises the value of dissent and contestation (Wenman, 2013). They are also based on an ethics of singularity that sees the infusion of primary desire and passion as offering potential openings to the sublime and remarkable, as opposed to the standard and routine, in teacher education (Clarke and Moore, 2013). Such an ethics is inherently and necessarily open-ended. It is 'not dictated by the instrumentalist imperatives of utility, but rather assesses the value of things . . . on the basis of their proximity (or loyalty) to the Thing' (Ruti, 2012, p. 152), where the latter is understood as a paradoxically common, yet singularly experienced, site of melancholy yearning for an unattainable plenitude (Ruti, 2015, p. 136), a locus of indeterminacy asociated with 'the power of language to articulate a pure potentiality-for-meaning' (Boothby, 1991, p. 241). Teacher education that embraces aversive identities, grounded in a politics of articulation and agonism and located in an ethics of singularity, makes more 'productive' use of anxiety and alienation by nurturing resistance to crisis-driven reforms and promoting a willingness to entertain 'real' educational options, in contrast to the economically instrumentalist blackmail of what we might describe, adapting Edelman (2004), as the 'reproductive futurism' 6f neo-liberal education policy.

## After-effects: knowledge and impotentiality

The imperative that teachers 'reach their potential' and yet retain 'the capacity to continue developing' in the direction outlined by policy constitutes a condition of unfreedom for teachers. Teachers' professional development becomes the realisation of some predetermined object of policy – the teacher (profile) – that must be actualised. What is lost in this increasing normalisation is 'the open potentiality from which the speaking, self-constituting [subject] will emerge' (Colebrook, 2008, p. 111). The more definitive the language of standardisation, in terms of policy clarity and consensus, the more the teachers' freedom to deviate from the script is curtailed (Phelan, 2015). Nonconforming teachers find themselves excluded, disqualified and removed. Caught in both a politics and an ontology of substance – what (already) is – teachers and teaching are denied 'a politics of potentiality: a future of open, unimpeded becoming' (Colebrook, 2008, p. 112), a future of speech and action.

Georgio Agamben's theorisation of 'existing potentiality' enables us to understand what is at stake in the politics of contemporary policy for teachers (1999, p. 179). 'Existing potentiality' refers to the potential of those who have knowledge or ability of some kind; as such, they do not have to undergo some change in order to fulfil their potential. Consider, for example, 'the experience of not-writing