The tempered radical's quiet resistance

How trainee and new teachers disturb the dominance of neoliberal policy in mainstream English schools

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> Resistance is first of all a matter of principle and a way to live, to make yourself one small republic of unconquered spirit. You hope for results, but you don't depend on them.
>
> Rebecca Solnit[1]

Abstract

This article considers the experiences of two teacher educators working with undergraduate and postgraduate trainee teachers in the School of Education at the University of Brighton. It foregrounds reflections shared within education studies seminars and on conversations with early career teachers on how trainees and new teachers negotiate their professional obligations whilst remaining true to their values and ideals.[2] Education studies modules are curated to provide a space for trainee teachers to examine and consider the complexities relating to equality, diversity and social justice, and are underpinned by a desire to instil a 'commitment to acting as change agents in schools and advocates for students'.[3] In this article, we consider how teacher trainees and early career teachers experience neoliberal reform and a policy context that seeks to silence any sceptics.[4] It offers examples of how trainee teachers and new teachers engage in quiet resistance as 'tempered radicals', finding ways to address inequalities and offer moments of hope to young people from marginalised groups. [5]

Keywords: initial teacher education; teacher education; diversity; inequalities; tempered radicals; resistance; neoliberal discourses; teacher agency

Context

In recent years, England has continued to endure a swathe of neoliberal educational policy reforms that have succeeded in weaving their way into the fabric of mainstream schools.[6] These policies, intent on instilling a marketised culture of managerialism, accountability and standardisation, have permeated into all facets of the school community.[7] Such permeations require teachers and teacher educators to adopt a 'performative' pedagogy that may result in them discarding their ideals and values and adopting a practice of compliance.[8] Tett and Hamilton argue that such a culture sits at odds with 'more holistic and inclusive approaches to education', but also present a note

of optimism by acknowledging that where there is power, there will also be resistance.[9]

In February 2022, schools in England were introduced to the new governmental 'Political impartiality in schools' guidance.[10] In his foreword, education secretary Nadhim Zahawi suggests that the guidance is a response to schools and teachers and their struggle with the negotiation of 'political issues or movements'; he offers the document as a tool to support teachers in how they 'handle and teach about these complex issues sensitively and appropriately'. The guidance forefronts the requirement for schools to present balanced views when examining areas of the curriculum that are deemed to be political and steers teachers away from 'contentious' associations with partisan groups. The paper highlights that discussion in relation to political movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) or particular climate change solutions could be considered to be teaching young people about 'partisan political views'. As teacher educators who have lived through and experienced at first hand the impact of Section 28, this guidance has echoes of that era of uncertainty and silencing.[11] Whilst the receptivity of this guidance may vary from school to school, there is an overarching sense that we may be embarking on a new period of surveillance that, in turn, will produce layers of apprehension and unease about questioning the status quo.[12]

Our experience of trainee teachers

As teacher educators, we are sometimes challenged by trainees fresh from placement who are struggling to negotiate the liminal space that experience suggests they must encounter to become an agent of change. In school, they have experienced the safety of guidelines, engaging with the 'Initial teacher training: core content framework' with expert mentors and feeling comfort in the ability to comply with a particular kind of professionalism that values instrumentalised knowledge and practices.[13] Some will have experienced a sense of belonging in schools where pedagogy and curriculum are clearly prescribed, conforming easily to particular behaviours and norms. This can seem preferable to a university seminar where different perspectives are aired, complex issues are explored and critical questions are asked, which may disrupt the superficial comfort of compliance. An example of this perspective can be found in anonymous student feedback where trainees express their discontent at the emphasis on critical discussion and deep reflection at the expense of prescriptive teaching formulas. A dilemma for tutors, who value a relational pedagogy, is to try to understand both the knowledge base and emotional perspective of trainees and remain sensitive to their experiences.

We have both, however, also worked with trainees who have experienced dissonance on placement and have a sense that the practices they witnessed were only masquerading as being informed by social justice and, in reality, were not concerned with equity and

inclusion.[14] Such trainees are indeed on the threshold of being change agents, and their integrity, enquiry and imagination will on occasions have led them to practice acts of quiet resistance in school. Often these individuals have resisted compliance at a potential risk to their own acceptance within the school community, consciously disturbing the accepted norm without any certainty as to how colleagues will respond. As our examples show, these acts have the potential to lead to ripples across time and space, unsettling established practice and culture.

One example of this, that fuelled our interest in writing this article, was a small act of resistance undertaken on placement by secondary trainees in a religious school setting. This reflection on practice was shared by one of the secondary trainees during a seminar session at the end of his first placement. The summary below is shared with his permission.

> On commencement of the placement, one of the trainees noticed that the school offered limited recognition of, or support for, pupils exploring their gender and sexuality. They understood that there was a need for all pupils to have visible LGBTQ role models, members of staff who understood the challenges they were facing. One of the trainees bought each trainee teacher a LGBTQ badge to wear whilst on placement. Over the period of a few weeks, pupils started to notice the badges, they began to ask questions and some even bought their own badges to wear on their blazers. As the trainees were nearing the end of the placement, they became inundated by pupils coming to them for support, to share experiences and seek advice. The trainees were really pleased that the badges had identified the need for the pupils to have a safe space within the school environment where they could share their experiences and questions. A few days before the trainees finished their placement, the school imposed a 'no badge' rule for pupils, preventing any pupil from wearing a badge that represented their identity or anything else.

This example offers insight into how trainee teachers have the capacity to disrupt entrenched school practices where policies fail to understand or respond to the nuances of children's lives. Despite the brevity of their time on placement, this simple act reveals how trainee teachers can use their agency to have a powerful and positive impact on marginalised groups within school communities.[15]

Beacons of hope: practitioner narratives

In this next section we present the narratives of trainees and early career teachers (ECTs) who have shared experiences with us as part of discussions in education studies

seminars and in incidental conversations. We consider the narratives to be examples of quiet resistance.

Katie is in their final year of a three-year undergraduate degree in primary education. Katie shared this reflection on their experiences of school placement in an email exchange after their final placement in year three (seven- to eight-year-olds). Katie identifies as queer in relation to both gender and sexuality and, alongside their training, works for a national organisation that provides training on supporting young LGBTQ pupils. This reflection is shared with Katie's permission.

> On placement it was my hope (and something that I advocate for) to wear a pronoun pin on my lanyard. However, my pronouns changed from she/her to she/they with preference for using 'they' pronouns, so I still did not have the confidence to wear the lanyard on placement, let alone explain to people how to use two sets of pronouns. I hope this is something that in the future I feel comfortable enough to do.
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> Talking about my own family construct in school has previously been uncomfortable. After speaking with other queer people, I decided that I would not just nod my head and let them misgender my partner or not listen or acknowledge my family structure. People would often correct my use of they/them pronouns for my partner and respond using he/him pronouns when referring to them.
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> On this final placement, the two reception teachers (four- to five-year-olds) were incredibly supportive and always used they/them pronouns for my partner. I even had the opportunity to talk about my partner being nonbinary with one teacher, as her child had recently come out as transgender and she was asking for advice. This moment was emotional and full circle for me in the workplace, as it was not something I was expecting but something that I feel I really needed in terms of feeling accepted.

Katie's reflection on their school-based training experiences highlights the tension that exists between the very transient, and sometimes unprotected, nature of the trainee teacher's status and the importance of upholding individual values. An individual's position and confidence within the hierarchical arrangement of the school structure can play a significant role in determining their agency and capacity to disrupt the cis/heteronormative school cultures. On Katie's final placement, they were able to find their voice and challenge the misgendering of their partner. Here, Pantić's framework of teacher agency – a 'sense of purpose' and 'scope for autonomy' – helps us to understand their actions and recognise that for Katie, misgendering their partner was a compromise that they were no longer willing to make.[16] The solidarity they find through the acceptance and support of the reception class teachers demonstrates

that staying true to your values and ideals can offer a multilayered reward; a sense of belonging, greater visibility for diverse identities and a shift towards the 'unlearning of cisheteronormativity at the intersections of difference'.[17]

Rebecca completed her primary (three- to seven-year-olds) postgraduate teacher apprenticeship (PGTA) last September and is currently an ECT working in a reception class. Prior to undertaking her PGTA, Rebecca completed a four-year part-time work-based learning degree while working as a teaching assistant. She now has an additional role as pupil premium deputy at her school.[18] Rebecca shared this reflection in an email conversation and it is quoted here with her permission.

> My setting was recognised as 'requiring improvement' with regard to improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils.
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> During my time at university and as a trainee teacher, I felt that as part of my role, I need to be a voice, an ally and a support for marginalised groups. As a white, heterosexual, working female, I am aware of my privileges regarding race, sexuality and socioeconomic status. I have challenged my setting regarding texts in reception, and representation for different ethnic groups.
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> In terms of supporting disadvantaged pupils, I was made pupil premium deputy in my first year of teaching. This was partly due to setting up a foodbank during 2020, whilst finishing my degree. Originally, the foodbank was designed to support the families of my setting but I expanded it to serve Brighton and Hove. The foodbank operated on a 'no referral, no forms, no questions, no judgement basis', and is still operating.
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> During the last winter, I set up a 'coats for kids' scheme, where any family in need of a coat for their child could come and collect one. Again, I started this for my school but widened it out to the local community.
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> I currently have the most disadvantaged pupils in my class, allegedly because of my ability to build relationships with parents and carers. I have helped all of these families fill out forms to access free half-term activities and food, so their children can attend half-term clubs and receive a hot meal. All of these children are accessing an extracurricular sports activity paid for with pupil premium money. I met with each parent and asked what their child would like to do. I researched this for them and arranged for them to attend.
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> I have received many emails from my disadvantaged families thanking me for 'going the extra mile'.

Rebecca's narrative, which draws on both her experiences whilst training to teach and as a class teacher, offers insight into how teachers can negotiate the neoliberal context and still ensure that they address the needs of all of their learners. Rebecca's values, sense

of autonomy and purpose drive her commitment to advocate for children and families from marginalised groups. She acknowledges her own privilege and cultural capital, and this further fuels her agency in addressing the systemic inequalities in her setting. An interesting aspect of Rebecca's activities is that she uses current policy as a tool to support her endeavours rather than seeing it as a potential obstacle. Biesta and Tedder assert that agency 'will always result from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural "factors"'.[19] Rebecca uses each of these factors to exceed the expectations of her role as a class teacher and offers a beacon of hope to families through her navigation of the many bureaucratic processes and gatekeepers. Yet, a core value system that demands a high regard for the promotion of equality and diversity can be a challenging position to maintain in isolation; there may well be a need for Rebecca's setting to provide additional commitment and resourcing to ensure that this level of advocacy can be sustained.

Aisha finished her undergraduate training as a primary teacher last summer and is working as an ECT. During her final year at university, she was part of the wider university's Inclusive Practice Partners scheme where students worked together with tutors to consider how particular modules could be decolonised. She is of Zimbabwean heritage, although has lived in the UK since she was six. She has talked of how she did not feel represented in the curriculum.

Her narrative here is lifted, after discussion and with permission, from an education studies session that she delivered to final-year undergraduates to discuss her experiences as an ECT.

> It [university experience] made me realise we have so much power in these schools, more than we think and, in spite of being ECTs, we can make more difference than we know. I used my uni experiences – I was able to bring that into my school here. I remember starting in autumn and thinking no way will I get a chance to – I said I was going to do that but I will do it later – the school's too big – I can't do it. I had lots of emotions but in my first term I managed to create a medium-term plan about enslavement, teaching year four children about the transatlantic slave trade. It was so challenging because I was the first one to plan it. The majority of the children are white so I felt like I was having to start from scratch. The experience was amazing. The children were so eager to learn about it and hadn't been taught about it before because, as much as the topic is so sad, the children gained so much knowledge and felt that they wanted to make a difference – they wanted to become agents of change.
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> It's really important to provide opportunities for children to talk about real-life experiences. And this is so relevant because of modern-day enslavement and

because of BLM. We often feel it's taboo or we feel we can't have those experiences in the classroom or because we're ECTs, we don't have the time, we're scared or parents will complain. But children feel so empowered, they are so taken by that experience. Children want to make a difference. It's important to immerse yourself in these experiences. It's important to push those boundaries and take those risks. They are going to pay off in the end. I was able to feel better as well. I was using my values and not just sticking by the book. Sometimes you do have to bend those rules. You need to think about curriculum but you realise there are gaps and you do have to criticise a bit.

I used my experiences at uni to talk about my experience and do a staff meeting. I had responses from colleagues who said that was amazing – I had no idea it was like that for you or for children from different backgrounds. It gave them an insight into what it was like for those children. It's important to take those opportunities to make a difference in the school. It was mind-blowing. The school is now diversifying the curriculum as a result of the staff meeting. They are starting with art and music. They are asking if all children are represented. Even with white majority children. We're working on it and the school realised it was something that was missing.

Aisha suggests a deep commitment to being an agent of change, acting as a 'tempered radical'.[20] This appears to have been motivated by her experiences at university and the opportunities she has had to explore her values and reflect on her own personal experiences of being part of a marginalised group. While she initially expresses reticence at implementing innovative practice as an ECT, seemingly because she is unsure of how others, including parents, will react, she nevertheless forges ahead driven by the positive responses of the children, a need to remain aligned to her own values and, perhaps most importantly, because it 'will make a difference in the world'. Against a backdrop of national education policy which seeks to manage 'sensitive, challenging, and controversial political issues', this ECT is designing radical curriculum opportunities and stimulating wider school discussion and practices which begin to address issues of social justice.[21] While a crucial factor in creating the ripples across time and space is no doubt the receptivity of the school and its seeming commitment to collaborating with Aisha, it is her act of radicalism which has initiated this transformation.

Conclusions

The most common thread across the narratives would seem to be the tenacity of these teachers' values, particularly in relation to social justice and human flourishing.[22] Their

commitment to equality, inclusion and opening a reflective space for the young people they teach moves these teachers beyond the 'functionalist fulfilment' of their roles, and the neoliberal constraints which seek to silence sceptics.[23] In doing so, they offer themselves as 'beacons of hope', engaging in quiet resistance, thereby becoming agents of change for marginalised learners. A question for us is how these ripples of resistance might sustain across time and space. The narratives suggest that the ripples are fortified by positive responses from the school community and a willingness to collaborate. This approach also nourishes trainees and teachers by allowing them to move from an experience of dissonance to a sense of belonging. This is perhaps crystalised in Mike's words below. Mike is currently a part-time postgraduate student studying to become a specialist dyslexia teacher. He has worked for many years as a headteacher in both deprived and more affluent schools across London and Sussex, and brings stories of his 'small acts of defiance' to our seminars.

> As a head, you become interested in small acts of defiance from a structural perspective. There is a certain amount you can do to organise your school to promote good teaching and learning, but you soon realise that you can't do it on your own. Rather, you need to foster within each individual member of staff the self-confidence and reflective practice that are the hallmarks of small acts of defiance. Developing this staffing mindset becomes ever more important as younger teachers are trained, increasingly, simply to deliver content rather than consider pedagogy.

Sustained acts of resistance would seem to be a collective endeavour, however, as Mike also identifies, and as our trainees' and former trainees' narratives demonstrate, fostering a mindset which results in trainees being confident enough to engage in resistance and practices that reflect their values is crucial. This understanding strengthens our resolve as education studies tutors to continue to cultivate critical discussion, enquiry and deep reflection, however much it disrupts the comfort of compliance. It is too early to understand the impact that the guidance on political impartiality in schools may have in relation to teacher agency. However, as Solnit suggests, social and political change works in complex and unpredictable ways, and we can at least begin by planting the seeds of resistance during our seminars, hoping for germination and growth, but without depending on it.[24]

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Notes

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16. Quotation from N. Pantić, 'An exploratory study of teacher agency for social justice', *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 66, 2017, pp219-230 (p220).

17. Quotation from B. LeMaster, D. Shultz, J. McNeill, G. Bowers and R. Rust, 'Unlearning cisheteronormativity at the intersections of difference: performing queer worldmaking through collaged relational autoethnography', *Text and performance quarterly*, 39(4), 2019, pp341-370 (p341).

18. Pupil premium is government funding to improve education outcomes for disadvantaged pupils in schools in England. A pupil premium deputy is a member of the school staff team who works with pupils, their families, teachers, support staff and external agencies in raising aspirations and achievement, to attain excellent outcomes.

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22. D. T. Hansen, 2000, *op. cit*.

23. D. T. Hansen, 2000, *op. cit.*, p47; C. Lough, 2022, *op. cit.*

24. Rebecca Solnit, 2016, *op. cit.*