

# Pedagogies of difference: Unknowing immigrant teachers as subjects forever in process

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*Abstract:* Immersed in the bicultural, increasingly globalized, yet uniquely local, Aotearoa New Zealand early childhood landscape, immigrant teacher subjects are shaped in complicated, entangled ways. This paper attempts to open fresh spaces for re-thinking knowable teacher identities by drawing on Julia Kristeva's work on the foreigner and the subject-in-process. It explores the immigrant teacher subject as "infinitely in construction, de-constructible, open and evolving" (Kristeva, 2008, p. 2). In a sector that is grappling with the complexities of outcomes driven expectations of productivity, mass participation and often homogenized indicators of 'quality', this paper elevates insights into the subject formation of the Other, to expose cracks in this veneer, through the notions of the semiotic and revolt. In this critical philosophical examination, I reconceptualise the idea of knowing immigrant teacher subjects, and their confrontation and (re)negotiation of social, political and professional expectations and unknowable foreignness.

*Key words:* teachers, Kristeva, immigrants, the semiotic, New Zealand.

"I do what *they* want *me* to, but it is not "me" – "me" is elsewhere, "me" belongs to no one, "me" does not belong to "me", ... does "me" exist? (Kristeva, 1991, p. 8, emphasis in the original).

## Introduction

The ‘me’ that is ‘elsewhere’, in the opening quote, might easily be any one of us. This paper positions that ‘me’ as an immigrant early childhood teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand. The paper is concerned with teacher identity negotiations in complex professional realities in early childhood environments. It is a critical engagement with the identity and subjectivity formations of immigrant teachers located in the multi-layered landscapes of their new life in the early childhood education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this entangled bi- and multicultural, globalised yet uniquely local context, immigrant teachers form and are formed by their situational, relational and discursive realities.

In this paper I draw on Julia Kristeva’s (1984, 1991) notions of the foreigner and the subject-in-process (Stone, 2004; Prud’homme & Légaré, 2006), in an attempt to open fresh spaces for re-thinking teacher identity. Rather than aiming for truths and solutions, this paper argues for increased disturbances and for troubling truths, tensions and normalizing discourses emanating from neoliberal, outcomes-driven tensions that play out in the reverence of knowledge and business driven outcomes (Codd, 2008). The paper uses philosophy as a method (Peters, 2007; Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2015) to question early childhood discourses, and culminates in an argument for unknowing teacher identity, in the spirit of heightened attitudes and practices of revolt.

Teacher subjectivities in Aotearoa are complicated. In this paper I foreground and elevate the relatively under-researched subjectivities of immigrant teachers (Cherrington & Shuker, 2012). Embedded in holistic, reflective, culturally relevant and locally premised pedagogies and practices, that aspirationally live out *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), the early childhood curriculum framework, these teachers are, at the same time, implicated by the short term goals and commitments of a globalized, neoliberal social and economic dominant paradigm (Bauman, 2009; Thrupp, 2015). Bauman (2009) describes liquid modernity as the condition where society has become unpredictable and unreliable, where future citizens are prepared for a state that, already oversaturated with unprocessed information, is in constant competition with itself and with its often-changing variations and seductions. In such a liquid modern condition, one concern with/for teacher foreigners arises in Kristeva’s (1991) question, of whether we will ever be able to “intimately and subjectively” live with and as others, “without

ostracism and leveling” (p. 2) - not only in the way that we might expect children to ‘play nicely’ because ‘we don’t hurt our friends’. Rather, it implicates teachers in a deep and critical commitment to confront their orientations towards the Other and Otherness, to recognize both the Other foreigner *and* the foreigner that is within each of us. As Kristeva (1991) asserts, it is only when we recognize ourselves as foreigners, that we will be “spared detesting [the Other foreigner] in himself” (p. 1). Thus, the paper disturbs the homogenous simplicity of what is often promoted as ‘rich and beautiful’ diversity, by introducing into the complexity of teacher subjectivities the idea of the subject-in-process, through Kristeva’s notions of the semiotic, and through her related concept, revolt.

## **Aotearoa’s early childhood landscape**

The presence of immigrant teachers in early childhood settings in Aotearoa is not a new phenomenon. Aotearoa is a land of immigrants, and there are many teachers in early childhood settings, whose histories are linked to other places, and who grapple on various levels with the confrontations and (re-)negotiations explored here (Arndt, 2014a, 2014b). This paper highlights relatively recent concerns in the sector, arising out of the neoliberal educational reforms (Codd, 2008), of a rapid increase in the marketization and privatization of early childhood education (Mitchell, 2011, 2014; Mitchell & Brooking, 2007) and the unsettling and multiple professionalisms to which this public/private tension leads (Duhn, 2010). These pressures are further fuelled by an expectation that, more than ever before, early childhood education is seen as a key determinant of children’s, and society’s, future success (OECD, 2012). To fill teaching positions in this rapidly growing sector, in the late 2000s, the New Zealand government offered a number of initiatives, including granting overseas early childhood teachers, and their families, favourable status and conditions to immigrate (Arndt, 2015; Immigration New Zealand, 2011). Their arrival in the early childhood landscape dealt, on a surface level, with the problem of a teacher shortage – it filled the gaps in terms of numbers. Below that surface level, however, neoliberal forces wove a complicated web of deeply personal, often conflicting and painful, pangs of excitement and suffering, that also created new gaps – a “demented whirl” (Kristeva, 1991, p. 6) of emotions, realities and associations with language use, conceptions of home, dominant knowledges, and the professional expectations of being and becoming a teacher (Arndt, 2012).

Teaching teams continue to grapple with liquid modern practices of surreptitious marginalization and alienation of teacher foreignness. Mar-

ginalising practices become submerged within the dominant paradigm of 'celebratory' richness and diversity (Ministry of Education, 1996), further perpetuating ongoing societal biases (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). The opportunities offered by the gap filling 'solution' to the early childhood teacher 'problem' have become clouded by marginalizing practices, for example, by disapproval of immigrant teachers' use of their home language, rituals and customs (Arndt, 2012). Such personal practices are well researched to represent a person's selfhood, to form and characterise identity, and to connect cultures and histories (Mohanty, 2003; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2010; Walsh, 2007). They are significant parts of an immigrant teacher's subjectivity, and their suppression risks serious consequences, potentially silencing not only the teacher's teaching self, but muting her sense of her very being, in a despondent "nonexistent eternity" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 16). Similarly, other aspects of teachers' lived, localized and historicized realities, recognized in Kristeva's philosophical, feminist work, and in other postcolonial, critical multicultural and intercultural research (Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier, & Sheller, 2003; May & Sleeter, 2010; Rhedding-Jones, 2001, 2010), have become subjugated for immigrant teachers, within the dominant ideological 'welcoming diversity'. 'Welcoming diversity' becomes secondary to maintaining the veneer of a smoothly liquid – often pressured, outcomes focused – status quo. Such a condition leaves little space for critical problematizing and thought, about meaningful knowing, foreignness and encounters with the Other.

### *Teacher foreigners*

Immigrant teacher identities are constantly evolving, and this critical analysis begins from Kristeva's premise that "there does exist an identity ... mine, yours, but it is infinitely in construction, de-constructible, open and evolving" (Kristeva, 2008, p. 2). In other words, whatever we know about an Other remains always incomplete, and furthermore, it becomes obsolete the very moment that it becomes 'known'. In a liquidly modern, heavily privatized early childhood landscape, dominated by expectations of productivity, participation, and homogenised indicators of quality (Mitchell, 2014), this analysis examines understandings of 'open and evolving' immigrant teacher subjectivities, through the notion of the subject-in-process.

The subject-in-process has been referred to as a 'mystery'. It points to the possibility that teacher-subjects are never completely products only of their own experiences, but instead are always 'split subjects' that must "call [them]selves (continually) into question" (Stone, 2004, p. 124). This ques-

tioning of our split selves and mysteries plays out the Freudian/Lacanian roots of Kristeva's theory, implicating both conscious and unconscious ongoing constructions. It points in particular to Kristeva's use of Lacan's theory, in which the evolving subject is related to a language, and where the "real body and the textual body are of a similar nature ... as they are embodied in language" (Prud'homme & Légaré, 2006, p. 2). However, it demonstrates also her move beyond Lacanian psychoanalysis, as she develops the notion of the subject escaping from a logical structure and speech, through its concern with disruptive forces in its narratives, for example in 'tonality, rhythms, contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, and silence' (Widawsky, 2014, p. 62). This is the element that she terms the semiotic (Kristeva, 1984; Ffrench, 1995), a central aspect of the subject-in-process, and of this re-imagining of knowing and unknowing immigrant teacher subjectivities.

### *The semiotic*

The semiotic arises in Kristeva's connection between the meaning of life and language, through her psychoanalytic theory of the signification of the subject-in-process. Thinking further through Kristeva, the semiotic also challenges stagnating or fixed language, and develops instead a dynamic theory that "destroys logic" (Prud'homme & Légaré, 2006, p. 4), reflecting Kristeva's deliberate intention to negate unitary conceptions of life/language relationships, and to 'open pathways', where others saw a pessimistic impasse (Lechte, 1990; Oliver, 2002). The semiotic creates meaning in the signifying process, and in the construction of the self. It is a difficult notion to conceptualise, without first considering what is meant by the symbolic. The symbolic co-exists with the semiotic, and, following Kristeva (1984), is that which gives a process of signification its structure – it is the structural government of symbols, such as grammatical rules, for example, in language. The symbolic creates the structuring rules of a theory, and of a subject, and the semiotic exists alongside the symbolic, to demonstrate "the heterogeneity of meaning" (Prud'homme & Légaré, 2006, p. 4). The semiotic allows for the nuances, rhythm, tone, the poetic, and what Kristeva calls the musicality, that arise in the drives and energy that shift and collide between the semiotic and the symbolic order. It is through the semiotic that the rhythms, tones and drives are discharged (Oliver, 2002).

For immigrant early childhood teachers, the notion of the symbolic might apply to such governing/structuring bodies as education ministries, both in their home country and in Aotearoa, or licensing authorities such as

the Education Council (which sets the professional standards of teachers, and, crucially, for immigrant teachers it is responsible for the recognition of their overseas qualifications for teacher registration in Aotearoa (TeachNZ, 2015)). It can be seen as the governing authorities, policies and prescriptions, by which teachers are regulated, and regulate themselves. If we allow ourselves to take this view, the semiotic then, has to do with how teachers feel, experience, interpret, read, and engage with such symbolic governance. In short, “the semiotic element makes symbols matter” (Oliver, 2002, p. xv). The semiotic then makes a space for the meaning that comes to exist in response to the governing structure, rules and regulations. It is through the semiotic that the emotions, memories, and desires that the governance evokes are formed. These drives then underpin how teachers carry out the required tasks to meet the regulations. Through this lens, the symbolic and the semiotic are inseparable – the individual subject is always both semiotic and symbolic (Oliver, 2002). The immigrant teacher’s on-going process of signification and subjectification can be seen as occurring through the semiotic in a number of ways: it links the subject to its context; it counters the homogeneity of the symbolic structure; it pre-exists the subject; and it energises the subject. A further exploration of each of these elements illustrates the non-unitary way in which immigrant teacher foreigners as subjects-in-process are continually called into question.

## **The semiotic links the subject-in-process to its context**

The semiotic plays out in the immigrant teacher’s new early childhood context by recognising the ‘signifying, communicative aspect’ of her social and cultural life (Lechte, 1990). This includes her new community, her beliefs, and the new challenges that she encounters in her teaching. Semiotic meaning making, driven by her rhythms, tones and energy – emerge in her pleasure, or desire, as well as in her abjection, fear, disgust, or hatred in her new situation. It connects her to her context, but not in an event, feeling or identifiable ‘thing’ that can be captured. The semiotic lies mostly in the unconscious, and it ‘speaks’ – that is it gives meaning, or signifies - in ways that the teacher can’t hold on to or necessarily describe. The semiotic can be seen as that which is often repressed or marginalised in society. In teaching, it can be seen as the complex factors that make it difficult to generalize practices into universal quality prescriptions, or into simplified processes, or ways of thinking (Sadehi, 2012). In connecting the immigrant teacher to her surroundings, the semiotic element thus explains that understandings of, or responses to, the symbolic environment are formed in a far deeper inner self of each individual, in the unconscious, than what could be either mold-

able or predictable, by the immigrant teacher herself or by others around her. It has been described as the “uncanny strangeness” (Kristeva, 1991, p. 83) of meaning, and is crucial for the immigrant teacher’s forming subjectivity, even when it is felt as a frightening, unnamable sense, as without it she risks slipping into a homogenous lack of meaning and emptiness.

## **The semiotic counters the homogeneity of the symbolic structure**

The symbolic structure of a context thus represents the regulatory rules that govern the way that the context operates. Following this thinking, the symbolic structure of the subject can be seen as the written or unwritten rules by which the subject is governed, including dominant norms, orientations and paradigms, that shape ways of being and becoming within society – or within a new teaching team. This symbolic structure of the subject is related in psychoanalysis to the ego, to what is knowable, the stasis, its stability (Oliver, 2002). Kristeva’s semiotic ‘attacks’ this stasis (Prud’homme & Légaré, 2006) – it is the unknown that underlies the behaviours, actions, and ways of being: the ways in which they are performed. The semiotic ‘attack’ adds complexity to the known, conscious, symbolic structure, whereby such meaning “is not the unified product of a unified subject; rather, meaning is Other and as such makes the subject other to itself” (Oliver, 2002, p. xviii).

Seen through Kristeva’s linguistic lens, the semiotic is the poetic “trans-linguistic” (Kristeva, 1984, p 90) disruption to the symbolic linguistic structures (of grammar, or syntax, for example), it breaks the mould, transgresses rules, as it conveys meaning and significance, as it goes beyond language. By othering the subject, it heterogenises expectations and rules, through the fluid, unknown energies that “move through the body of the subject” (Kristeva, 1984, p, 93). The semiotic thus constantly re-constructs the teacher foreigner subject unconsciously, and unpredictably. Seen within a teaching team, the semiotic might be that which motivates individual teachers’ energies and drives to interrupt normalized, homogenous ways of being and working. It might be that drive emanating from discomfort – or excitement – ‘gut’ feelings, the difficult to pin down sensations that nevertheless cause teachers to avert, distort, pursue and elevate, or abandon, actions, practices or beliefs. It could thus also be the unconsciously arising sensation that leads to rejection, of what is intolerable, inexplicable, but essentially impacting on teachers, teaching and relationships. Fitting with immigrant teachers’ ontological and epistemological in-betweenness, the semiotic enables the passage between symbolic systems – between the old and the new

place/space. It complicates these intertextual processes (Kristeva, 1986), where teacher subjectivities are always inscribed with previous realities, as well as with those that are current. Its intertextuality once more alludes to the unpredictability and on-going nature of subjects in process.

## The semiotic pre-exists the subject

If we follow Kristeva's view on the occurrence of the semiotic, it can be seen as similar to the maternal body, in that it exists before the subject itself. Its elements and drives are a pre-existing environment in which the subject comes about and continues to be formed. In this sense the semiotic reaffirms the subject-in-process as irreducible to a particular theory of understanding (Kristeva, 1984), and opens up the idea of the subject to "this other scene of pre-symbolic functions" (p. 95), that transgresses knowing. In this sense it is also known as "a space of mobility" (Prud'homme & Légaré, 2006, p. 2), that introduces movement in the subject, away from the static unitary subject, to one in process: this state of ongoing renewal emanates from a semiotic *chora*, in the realm of the unconscious. The notion that the semiotic pre-exists the subject, and moves it beyond the ego, stasis, and the symbolic, underlies the uncertainty arising in swings between, for example, foreigners' elevations and misery, stability and instability, or what Kristeva (1991) describes as being in love with absence, ...[and] exquisitely depressed," torn between being "always elsewhere, ...[that] belong nowhere" (p. 10).

For immigrant teacher subjects such an uncertainty alerts us to a fresh possibility: that a semiotic element exists within the unconscious, that creates, forms, responds to and drives unseen, unrepresentable, untouchable signifying and subjectification. In its pre-existence of the subject, the semiotic involves an ethics of love, imaginable through Kristeva in a similar way to a pre-existing maternal love, that underpins our drive to believe, and to care. Love is also the very "aim and method" of psychoanalysis (Stone, 2004, p. 129), and, in channeling such 'love' towards the individual, and towards society, could be seen as similar to teachers' moral, ethical commitments, to children, and their families and communities. This semiotic element of love plays out as we confront the "possibility or not of *being an other*" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 13), for example, in response to Kristeva's question of this intimate and subjective possibility. The semiotic thus implicates teachers in a team in their responses to and interactions with the immigrant teachers in their midst. Differences, transgressions of norms, the non-banality of subjectivities and ways of being become meaningfully interwoven, through this semi-



otic ethic of love, for all others in the early childhood setting, rather than remaining an individual, isolating, labeled foreignness burdening immigrant teachers alone. Through such unplannable and unknowable notions, the semiotic also energises the subject.

## **The semiotic energises the subject-in-process**

The heterogeneous forces that the semiotic represents, and their unknowability, form and perform the affective, emotional, sensual drives and impulses in developing subjectivities (Sadehi, 2012; Widawsky, 2014). The semiotic realm allows ‘music’, or poetry, to complicate the forming subject, and its ongoing negotiation (Kristeva, 1984). Reaffirming its ‘translinguistic’ nature, it “expresses the unspeakable and the frightening ... the things that language leaves out” (Iannetta, as cited in Sadehi, 2012, p. 1492). It allows the processing of what we ‘sense’ about a situation, group or person. Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic can be seen as energizing in its potentiality, in the subject’s being and becoming, through the expulsions and rejections that drive its constant renewal (Prud’homme & Légaré, 2006). For the immigrant teacher, recognizing the semiotic validates her often uncategorisable, indescribable bodily and mind reactions to situations, individuals or ideas.

## **A crisis in confidence**

These insights into the semiotic open new possibilities for immigrant teachers, as subjects-in-process in their new Aotearoa physical and educational place. In the global knowledge exchange/educational milieu, opportunities abound for teachers to travel, migrate and explore diverse teaching situations that are geographically removed, and often very different from, their home teaching environments. For Kristeva (1991) foreignness is “a separation from one’s origins – from the mother(land) – and the assumption of an orphan status. The foreigner becomes rootless, a wanderer in exile, living different guises, taking on different personas in a life of the mask” (p. 81). Such conceptions disturb the expectations in the educational discourse, for example, that diversity needs to be managed and ought unquestionably to be known and celebrated (Baldock, 2010; Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2004).

This disturbance plays out for early childhood teachers, for example, in the perceived need to know themselves, and those around them, to inform their teaching and their colleagues. Particular models of reflective practice are promoted as useful strategies to do so. Teachers are urged by governing bodies, supervisors, teacher educators and practicum guidelines to engage

with their practice in a reflective way, to theoretically inform and position their teaching. Some time ago, Schön (1983) worried that there is a serious error in assuming that effective practice must be grounded in scientific theory, and he questioned attempts to fit teaching within scientific paradigms, claiming that this leads to a professional ‘crisis of confidence’ (Schön, 1983). Later, Brookfield (1995) echoed this concern with justifying and knowing practice, since “teaching can never be innocent” (p. 1), and “we can never have full awareness of our motives and intentions” (p. 1). He challenges teachers to better understand and critically reflect, pointing out that teaching is not always as straight-forward as it seems.

These authors challenge teachers to interrogate taken for granted assumptions, and highlight the uncertainty inherent in this complex relational thing called teaching. Their ideas align with the notion of the semiotic, in recognizing the unknowability of the subject, and the unconscious nature of some influences on subjectivities and on teaching. At the same time however, contradictory suggestions for yet more ‘how to’ models are promoted to solve the vexed problem of knowing the ‘authentic’ teaching self (O’Connor & Diggins, 2002). While such suggestions offer practical techniques and strategies for engaging with teaching colleagues, including ways to know and understand teachers and their pedagogies, the relevance and effectiveness of models, suggesting ‘what works’, as appropriate and valid remains questionable (Biesta, 2010), and, in light of the semiotic heterogeneous ongoing renewal, even risky and dangerous. Reflective practice models that are applied across teaching contexts and realities may exacerbate the ‘masking’ of the teacher, by inadvertently silencing that which the teacher is unable to ‘recall’ from an unconscious semiotic realm, which she herself does not know. They could thus lead to a deepening of the crisis of confidence, and as such, threaten the fresh insights and possibilities raised in an increased recognition of semiotic, poetic energies in the subject-in-process.

## Revolt

In a climate saturated with the rhetoric – and crisis – of teacher professionalism, authenticity, and knowing/knowable teacher identity, confronting immigrant teacher subjectivities offers an opportunity to re-think orientations towards their professional identity. A Kristevan semiotic lens affirms that we should not only resist attempts to fit teacher subjectivities into scientific theories or models, but further, that teacher subjectivities are so unknowably and ongoingly formed by unconscious energies, that they elude conscious knowing. Furthermore, conscious reflective attempts to know the

subject re-emphasise the opposite, as teacher subjectivities can be known only within the stasis of the status quo, and the already known symbolic written or unwritten rules and structures. Kristeva's final semiotic element: the notion of revolt offers a further perspective.

An attitude and practice of revolt commits teachers to the critical engagements necessary to live well with and *as* the Other (Kristeva, 1991). Revolt requires puzzlement, an understanding of non-knowledge, through "a state of permanent questioning, of transformation, change, an endless probing of appearances" (Kristeva, as cited in Stone, 2004, p. 133). As a vital and transformative process of re-negotiation, revolt involves all teacher subjects 'infinitely in construction', entangled within conflicting ideals and settings, in critical, deep, confronting thought. A 'need to know' is emblematic of what Kristeva (2000) sees as a contemporary lack of revolt, which she too sees as a crisis. Revolt therefore opens a space for immigrant teacher Otherness, and demands a practice of not only living with and supporting the current system, but of active rebellion (Tesar, 2015). It insists on a questioning stance, towards dominant expectations and unitary understandings, to recognize the complex intricacies that arise in the semiotic, and the subject-in-process.

## Concluding comments

Immigrant teachers' 'infinitely in construction' subjectivities reveal insights as well as a crisis within the Aotearoa early childhood landscape. In a space and place where unpredictable, unstable short-term goals and expectations override long term commitments, perseverance and aspirations, measurable, superficial knowledges tend to become elevated. Uneasiness, hard work and holistic, creative knowledges that may not lead to immediate results can very often become side-lined. This paper has elevated a focus on immigrant teachers in this neoliberal Aotearoa early childhood landscape. Aspects of Kristeva's theory on the subject-in-process and the semiotic, have opened up some critical questions that expose the unknowability of immigrant teacher subjectivities.

Perhaps immigrant teachers' grapplings with their ongoing subjectifications, in their new location and teaching team, reveal more than their own pedagogical and cultural struggles? Through the unconscious and the semiotic, Kristeva's thinking points to the impossibility of certain knowledges, answers, plannable practices, or celebrations, that 'showcase' immigrant teachers' cultures, for example. This analysis has revealed a certain crisis

of quick-fix reflective habits, and short-term solutions aimed at knowing teacher subjectivities, and the notion of revolt to challenge this dominant need to know. In emphasising teacher identities as on-going in construction, this paper has shed fresh light on ways of *unknowing* not only immigrant teachers, but all teacher subjectivities in Aotearoa early childhood education.

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