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**Abstract:** Language in the form of texts is one of the main tools used in teaching. Texts thus contribute much to the construction of a conscious teaching self, especially through the ways teachers come to assume certain reading positions in relation to these texts. Importantly, learners tend to perceive themselves through the teachers' assumed reading positions of the texts. As a social practice, language has the ability to construct identities for teaching and learning through curriculum expectations of what classrooms texts will produce or not produce from the readers. Through teaching the texts, teachers construct meanings about self, "others" and the social contexts within which they can position themselves. One way to understand some of these realms of meaning-making in classrooms through set-books is to explore both the psychic and the discursive social practices of teachers (Appel 1996). In this paper the reading practices of teachers are examined in relation to Kenya's prescribed secondary curriculum. In particular, I am interested in examining the role of language in mediating between the prescribed books and curriculum objectives as a form of teacher consciousness. Further I ask in what ways do the subconscious fantasies of the readers and the conflicts in the relationship between conscious and subconscious fears and desires play out in teaching practices and reflective conversations about practice?

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**Constructing teachers' reading positions**

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***Abstract***

Language in the form of texts is one of the main tools used in teaching. Texts thus contribute much to the construction of a conscious teaching self, especially through the ways teachers come to assume certain reading positions in relation to these texts. Importantly, learners tend to perceive themselves through the teachers' assumed reading positions of the texts. As a social practice, language has the ability to construct identities for teaching and learning through curriculum expectations of what classrooms texts will produce or not produce from the readers. Through teaching the texts, teachers construct meanings about self, "others" and the social contexts within which they can position themselves. One way to understand some of these realms of meaning-making in classrooms through set-books is to explore both the psychic and the discursive social practices of teachers (Appel 1996). In this paper the reading practices of teachers are examined in relation to Kenya's prescribed secondary curriculum. In particular, I am interested in examining the role of language in mediating between the prescribed books and curriculum objectives as a form of teacher consciousness. Further I ask in what ways do the subconscious fantasies of the readers and the conflicts in the relationship between conscious and subconscious fears and desires play out in teaching practices and reflective conversations about practice?

***Introduction***

Cognisant of the power or force of English usage in Kenya, this paper seeks to explore teachers' self-knowledge of their internal (psychic) and external (social) conflicts and how such conflicts in their reading practices affect their reading positions (perceptions, desires, and perspectives). It is argued that this self-awareness is paramount to recreating 'an active and critical citizenry' (Kanpol 1997), and that unless Kenyan teachers move beyond the prescribed curriculum canons that are often restrictive, schools and schooling practices will continue to reproduce what Kanpol (1997:9) calls 'sterile thinking' or... "a one-dimensional man". Leaving aside the sexism of his terminology, according to Kanpol, merely following the prescribed practices 'means the structure of repressed personalities is dominated by social and ideological forces in which man has little or no control' (p. 9). Kanpol suggests we need to find the 'possibility to move away from sterile forms of thought' (p. 9). To him, this will require teachers to adopt a "critical" stance. Critical is used here in the sense of critical theory as espoused by the Frankfurt School of philosophy. A critical stance is a call to support 'the notion of understanding, reflecting, and acting on "experience" as fundamental to shifting consciousness to a higher level, to challenge various forms of oppression, alienation, and subordination' (p. 9). This ideology of pushing the borders and challenging the government's rigidly controlled curriculum in public schools is not new. Indeed it is a central idea in the works of the likes of John Dewey. This position takes the view that development of 'an active and critical citizenry' requires a situation where schools are 'sites of democratic possibilities, where children, using their experience and where schools, basing curriculum on experiences, [become] the continuing democratic experience' (Kanpol 1997: 7). If the idea has some historical currency in North America, the idea of teachers as active citizenry for schooling is a contested notion in Kenya.

Secondary English teachers in Kenya face many challenges, including their ambivalent relationship to the English language. Postcolonial studies of education have contributed greatly to an understanding of this ambivalence and its consequences (Bhabha 1994). Said's (1978) analysis of English fiction as a tool of colonial othering helps to explain the complex positioning of colonised subjects in English texts (see also Luke 2004; Pennycook 2004; Willinsky 1998). This colonial othering was felt in my classroom in 1997, when teaching Karen Blixen's (Isak Dinesen) (1954) *Out of Africa*, one of my

Kenyan students exclaimed, 'Is this how they really see us?' English fiction, argued Said, has more to say about the fantasies of the author than about the other who often constitutes the focus of the text. Psychoanalytic studies have further contributed to our understanding of the complex web of desire and anxiety that fuels both the author's and reader's fantasies. Following Britzman (1998), as readers of English texts, Kenyan teachers and their students bring complex histories of learning and reading to the texts. Complicating this relationship of Kenyan reader to English text are government mandated syllabus requirements and prescriptions regarding the reading of set texts.

### ***Researching reading subjects***

Research on the teaching of reading has benefited from the development of research and analysis on teaching in general. Teaching and learning, it would seem, are complex phenomena. The writers and critics informing recent insights into the complexity embodied in reading practices include Britzman (1998, 2003), Felman (1993, 1997), McConaghy and Bloomfield (2004), and Robertson (1997). These authors are using a number of theoretical frameworks, including critical and psychoanalytical, to broaden an understanding of how teachers position themselves vis-à-vis the teaching of prescribed classroom-texts. Britzman and Felman, in particular, evoke a psychoanalytic view of 'teaching as a literary genre', that is, as an artistic practice of passions or desires to be learned and interpreted within a social context (Felman 1997: 36). They see teaching (especially as it relates to reading) as embedded in a struggle between the conscious and unconscious desires of a teacher wanting to produce in the students certain subjectivities. As it was revealed in this study, these so-called subjectivities in Kenyan secondary schools are the students who are envisaged as "campus/university material", the community elites, the self-reliant and global citizens. From a psychoanalytic position, that is, from the position of viewing reading practices as produced through the conflicts between conscious and unconscious desires, it can be argued that classrooms in Kenya are institutions of social construction and control (Green & Dixon 1994), albeit control that is imperfectly executed.

The paper argues that what are considered in the Kenyan secondary education syllabus as both the general and the specific objectives of the integrated (combining both language and written/oral literature) English curriculum are limited in their interrogation of current socio-economic issues in Kenya. Among the most urgent are disease, impoverishment and unproductive policies. For instance, 'an estimated 27,000 Kenyan teachers will die from HIV/AIDS related illness in the next five years.... Over the same period, the scourge will also leave 2.2 million orphaned children, most of whom will not attend school' (*People's Daily Online* 2004). The report continues to say, 'the epidemic may disrupt Kenya's free primary education program if urgent interventions are not developed' (*People's Daily Online* 2004). These statistics are disturbing considering that the 'official figures released in January 2001 put the Kenyan population at 28.7mn in 1999. The growth rate had slowed to 2.9% in 1999 from 3.4% in 1989' (Institute for Security Studies 2005 online). Furthermore, and in relation to the state of social justice and governance in Kenya and Africa in general, the 2005 Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai, who at that time was also an assistant minister in the present Kenyan government, said, 'we cannot afford to have a region where a few people are filthy rich and a huge number of people are in dehumanizing poverty.... we cannot use our resources to fight each other and kill each other, to the extent that we are now engaging our children to go to the forefront' (*Africa Renewal, United Nations* 2004 online). It is apparent from the above statements that resource imbalances and disparities in policies, be they regarding human health, development, or education in Kenya call for more awareness of these problematic issues. More than awareness though, this paper argues that reforms of teaching in Kenya, including the teaching of English texts, have important and urgent social imperatives. Here teaching is posited as both social and personal action.

### ***Researching the text: The things to look at in a text***

The wording of the Kenyan prescriptive integrated English curriculum syllabus (MEST 2002), and in particular the guidelines governing prescribed English literature for secondary schools in Kenya, has

an influence on how teachers read what the education authorities, the students and the community want from the teaching of these literary texts. These texts include novels, short stories, oral narratives, drama and poetry. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said outlined what he called 'the things to look at' in a text. These are, according to Said, the 'styles, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, *not* the correctness of representation nor its fidelity to some great original.' (p. 21). That is, Said is directing us to look beyond representation issues, whether the text is true to some original authenticity, but rather to the qualities of the text. Willinsky (1998: 222) adds that what is needed in a re-imagined literary education 'is a return to our ideas about the value of literature'. The recent politics regarding prescribed texts in Kenya, however, seem to have been centred on the moral 'correctness' of some literary texts rather than the texts' structural contexts and contents. In a newspaper article entitled 'Caucus not justified in attacking these books', Kithure (2003 online) reported that 'a parents' outfit operating under the wing of the ... church is collecting signatures from the public. Their mission? To eventually pressure the Government to drop the three set-books from the school syllabus. They feel that the books encourage moral decadence'. Criticising the same caucus that wants some set-books dropped from the curriculum, Evan Mwangi, a professor of literature, called this sort of lobbying, 'a continuation of a powerful behind-the-scenes campaign that, over the years, has seen the silencing of books... on ideological and religious grounds' (Mwangi, 2003 online). Mwangi goes on to say in relation to *A Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe:

The arguments against the novel are what might be called hypo(-)critical, both insincere and not critical enough. One of these arguments is that in [one of the prescribed set-books, the author] promotes immorality in [the] presentation of casual sex among its characters. But contrary to the accusation, the book is one of the African novels that criticises casual sex among the youth quite vehemently....  
(online)

Following Said and Mwangi, in developing forms of literary criticism beyond the representational or the moral, we may ask what narrative devices are used to create certain effects in the text, and what are the historical and social circumstances of the texts' production? What are the politics of authorship of the text? Why was it written? If these questions provide clues as to what it is the text wants from its readers, what remains then to be investigated is what the readers may want from the text.

### ***Researching readers' interpretative stances***

In what appears to support Said's (1978) assertion of 'the things to look at' in the text, Mwangi argues that 'the place of morality in literature cannot be negotiated. But we usually forget the place of the reader's morality in the analysis of literature [readers' interpretative stances], concentrating exclusively on the behaviour of the characters, social norms presented in the text, and the author's ethical position' (online). In their conclusions, both Kithure (2003) and Mwangi (2003) argue that literary texts, like the set-books, are not religious sermons needing to follow certain 'religious doctrine and preachments' and nor are schools 'theological institutions' (online). What one wonders is whether there is any relationship between the same religious faction's members' refusal of particular literary set-books, and opposition to the introduction of sex education in Kenyan schools on the grounds of its inappropriateness (*Daily Nation* Editorial 10 October 1999). In questioning the notion of (in)appropriateness, Britzman (1998) merges psychoanalysis and critical pedagogy to deconstruct the issue of when and what to teach regarding sex education in schools. Britzman asks, 'should sex education be coupled with appropriateness of any kind? Can a notion of appropriateness ever be uncoupled from development theory? What if sex education became a lifetime study of the vicissitudes of knowledge, power, and pleasure?' (p. 74). In relation to dismantling cultural dogmas, and on reading texts such as the prescribed English texts, Britzman (2003: 243) says that 'readers are advised when encountering the texts of culture to consider both the structure of the narration and what it is that structures its modes of intelligibility. They are invited to question their interpretative glance'. Here Britzman presents a structural relationship between the narrative and what makes it intelligible.

Further, she suggests that our interpretation of texts is not a natural thing. Hence we are drawn to consider what influences, guides or provokes certain interpretative stances in relation to certain texts.

Using the psychoanalytical insights of writers like Britzman and Felman, this paper explores through semi-structured open-ended interviews, the teachers' emerging reading positions and their discursive practices in response to the Kenyan government's prescribed English texts in a national context. Such explorations are able to contribute to ongoing debates about teacher agency and schooling democracy (see, for example, Gale & Densmore 2003; Giroux 1988). What is at stake is teachers' freedom to be their own masters within prescribed curriculum policies and structures (Danielewicz 1995). The analysis seeks to assist further understanding of, or otherwise problematise, the various positions – political, ethical and psychological – of teachers when it comes to teaching the government prescribed texts.

As a participant in the research and an English teacher in Kenya, there is a need to reinterpret what I (as an embodied member of a professional teaching community) want from the prescribed curriculum. I became aware of this as an important focus of analysis from the day students contested the meaning(s) of a literature extract in one of my reading classes in Kenya. I will briefly describe this pedagogical moment.

While teaching an English comprehension extract from Karen Blixen's (Isak Dinesen) (1954) colonialist text, *Out of Africa*, to a form two (year 10) class in September 1997, a student posed the question, 'What right did the author [Blixen] have to describe her servant as a savage cannibal? Whom do *they* [the outsider/white person/former colonizer] think *we* [black person/colonized/insider] are?' Before I answered, another student asked, 'Is this how *they* describe *us* [her kinship]? I'm a descendant of that clan [the one described in the "memoire"] yet I have never heard nor known my grandparents as eaters of dead human flesh. How come these misleading [colonial] stories were published?' This was followed by more questions from two students that contributed to the objective of this current study. The student asked, 'Why must we be taught *misleading literature* that has *no meaning* at all [for us]? How come this extract was *included* in our [prescribed] English text?' I was put to task by the second student who asked, 'Why must you teach us this kind of literature anyway?' (Emphases are mine) (Lang'at 1997, pers. diary, Thursday, September 11).

This incident and other moments of insight from my high school teaching experiences, together with my own childhood schooling memories, have continued to frighten me at times. As a teacher education student on teaching practice with fresh "knowledge" of John Dewey's experience and education, John Locke's educational philosophy, and well equipped with Bloom's Taxonomy, namely cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains in teaching (Musvosvi 1998; Omulando & Shiundu 1992), I had expected my students to engage with but not contest the kind of "knowledge" I was supposed to teach. In the first instance, my lesson plans were constructed in a manner that was unlikely to accommodate the kind of socio-analytical challenges that my students had raised. We (student teachers) were taught that a lesson plan must first begin with cognitive domain concepts to help students think and to organise their learning process from a lower level of achievement (knowledge) to a higher level (evaluation). Second, the lesson must indicate how the concepts of the affective domain (that includes feelings, appreciation, attitudes, valuing and many more) would be taught. The last domain, psychomotor, seen as embodying more of "practical" skills, was not often given much attention, at least not in English language and literature classes, (Krathwohl *et al.* 1964).

Under such a strictly rigid and prescriptive form of teaching, I could not immediately see how and where the students' thoughtful questions fitted in my lesson plan. Worst of all, practice teachers had been warned 'the syllabus is prescribed by the Ministry of Education in conjunction with the external examinations. The job of the student teacher... is to follow the syllabus.... [You] may not approve of the syllabus as given but it has been *prescribed* and *must* be taught' (emphasis added) (Igaga 1993: 11). I was and still am in a dilemma as to how, as a teacher, one is supposed to reconcile what the various education stakeholders (students, government, parents and the teachers themselves) want, be they in Kenya or elsewhere (see, for example, Ellsworth 2007; Foucault 1991; McGrail 2005). The



encounter with the students constituted what Britzman and Dipbo (2000) call ‘little emergencies’ in practice teaching.

With the above background in mind, the following section identifies and discusses the dominant narratives of four of my research participants—Ben, CJ, Sue and Demo. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect the identity of the participants. The four participants were English teachers from two secondary schools in Nandi District, Rift Valley Province, Kenya. The data was collected between February 2003 and January 2004 as part of my doctoral research project (Lang’at 2005).

### *Rethinking teaching/reading positions*

During my conversation with the four participants, the English subject teachers echoed, similar sentiments to those of Kanpol (1997), namely, that the Kenyan education curriculum is not only restrictive and limiting but has also condemned lives to misery and impoverishment rather than making them key to ‘critical citizenry’. The teachers interviewed mourned how the prescribed curriculum has robbed the students of their self-identity and what they desire to be in a globalising world. The teachers argued that although some of the prescribed English literature texts are rich in both content as well as context, the quality of engagement with these texts seems to have been reduced to answering and passing “standardised” tests. Some of the set-books, a teacher argued, present rich historical contexts (dating precolonial, colonial, and neocolonial eras), socio-geographical locatedness (including land marks, tribal rites, language lost and rituals, environmental issues, religion and survival technologies), and contemporary social practices (focussing on issues of power, gender, discrimination, diseases and moral dogmas) that provide substantial subject matter for rich inquiry. Such richness is not necessarily tapped through formal tests and common/national examinations. As Ben argued:

we [literature teachers] are not only under societal pressure to produce university material students, but we are also constantly facing enormous internal struggles to stay alert in our [teaching] positions .... We should know what we want from the teaching of the [prescribed] literature set-books then project it with what the society wants.

Here Ben is suggesting teachers should rethink their teaching positions, what they want from the texts, and what society wants from them. Teachers conversations like the above, mirror what may be termed the untouched and/or unexplored inner struggles and tensions of teachers whose work is under government surveillance via students examinations performances and other measures at all times.

CJ (one of the four research participants) said, ‘teachers as well as students need to find critical meanings of their positions or what they do beyond the horizon... outside of the politics of teaching... from another angle [be able] to access the problematic stuff so as find their own internal satisfaction’. Apart from CJ’s text reinforcing the discourse of teaching as political, he also seems to be calling for teachers to rethink their ‘internal satisfaction’ or the inner contentment and pleasure they derive from the teaching profession.

Moreover, CJ’s use of the expressions to ‘find critical meanings’ and ‘access the problematic stuff’ appear to underpin Britzman’s attempts to seek a psychological engagement in critical pedagogy, that is, the psychoanalytic exploration of the study of ‘difficult knowledge’ (Britzman 2003). According to Kincheloe (2004):

Britzman explored the role of critical pedagogy in encouraging teachers and students to critique their everyday world and the resistance this often elicited.... Employing psychoanalysis... she explored what she labeled “difficult knowledge” in teaching and learning as part of a larger process of dealing with traumatic history. (p. 90)

One may argue from CJ's perspective that he, just like Britzman, is advocating studies that go beyond the 'critical' to unearth the 'problematic' objects of teaching or researching (Kincheloe and Pinar 1991: 19) exterior to an arguably controlled and politicised profession like teaching in Kenya. At issue here are the limits of politics in meaning making about teaching.

### *Engaging teachers*

Sue and Demo, who were interviewed together, shed more light on the notion that teachers need to explore more their 'outward' and 'inward' teaching positions. Sue said, 'it is no longer simply enough for teachers to be the lead in facilitating students' learning.... What is becoming more important is the ability for teachers to reflect on and make sense of their own personal experiences... the challenges and successes, what works and what doesn't work within a locality'. Adding to what Sue said, Demo opted to ask some rhetorical questions before diverting to a reflection on human psychical struggles. Demo asked:

Do you think the current classroom situations permit a teacher to layback? How can you afford to do that with students demanding to know where you stand on current debates? ...will you or will you not answer them? Of course you will.... But if teachers understood that the inner day to day struggles they themselves face are not much different from the students' struggles except maybe the change in contexts. For me, I think we are now better placed to respond to students' needs.... At least now we can do research on what we teach, understand what the students want, and make our own unanswered struggles and views known to the students.... In other words, we can enrich students' experiences by sharing our social perspectives, say on the government, schooling and even teaching.

The two respondents, who were on their last teaching practice before completing their teaching degree requirements, reinforced the fact that today's teaching demands an application of both '*inter*-personal' (the ability to notice and make distinctions among others, to look outward) and '*intra*personal' (relating with oneself, looking inward) experiences (Burnaford *et al.* 2001). Sue's claims that teachers may no longer be able to successfully facilitate students' learning without tapping into his/her own personal experiences could be attributed to Gale and Densmore's (2000, 2003) notion of 'engaging teachers'. That is to say that there is currently 'the need for teachers to be cognizant of the "big picture" informing education, to engage with it and to connect this with local community action' (p. 3). And as Sue puts it in her texts above, the "big picture" that would make learning more productive is teachers' own exploration of 'what works and what doesn't work within a locality'. I take her to mean there is a need for teachers to reflect on both sides of the issue – the positive and the negative aspects of their personal experiences – and to think socially not personally.

Demo's rhetorical questions, on the other hand, seem to encourage teachers to think both philosophically and psychologically on their teaching positions and the ways a particular position may impact on their teaching processes. His views that today's students are more demanding and that teachers can no longer afford to lie back, may be seen as drawing attention to the level of competency teachers are expected to operate with especially in the current social contexts.

Demo's use of the discourse of inner-struggles (in his text) that he claims teachers may engage in through research could also be perceived as reinforcing what was identified in earlier as the value of exploring 'psychological technique' (Appel 1996) in educational contexts. Appel (1996: xxv) asserts:

Educational researchers will offer valuable findings when we conceive of human beings as being in constant relationships of struggle with themselves and their worlds. Immediate satisfaction versus delayed gratification, fear of pain versus the pleasure of doing good deeds, selfish wants versus social needs: these are the unresolved and unresolvable stuff of human life.



Appel's conception that 'human beings [are] in constant relationships of struggle with themselves' concurs with Sue's claims that teachers need to 'make sense of their own personal experiences'. This may be so because 'the challenges and the successes' that Sue has highlighted are part of the reasons why human beings struggle with themselves. Also, Appel's opposing binaries of 'immediate satisfaction versus delayed gratifications' and 'selfish wants versus social needs', for example, may be perceived as contributing to the discourse of the inner-struggles that Demo referred to in his texts. Furthermore, 'the unresolved and unresolvable stuff of human life' in Appel's text above is comparable to what Demo calls 'our own unanswered struggles' that according to him teachers need to 'share with students'. In other words, what Appel and Demo seem to be saying is that human beings are constantly embedded in some struggles that may not be easily resolvable. Hence, by subjecting themselves to some 'educational research' teachers may form an understanding of these struggles and how they may affect their relationship with 'themselves and their world', their students and other education stakeholders.

### *Reflection*

It is clear from the conversations that what the teachers want and what the education stakeholders want from the teachers often operate at a subliminal level of consciousness, inarticulated or inarticulable, despite the preponderance of explicit prescriptions on teaching. Hence, there are conflict, misunderstandings, teacher victimhood and radicalism, and feelings of loss and mistrust, despite the numerous prescriptive guidelines and assurances the dominating power, the government, constantly (re)produces. That is, teaching and schooling in Kenya are sites of complexity and contradiction.

In light of such social, political and psychological contradictions, teachers need to assist students to engage texts with an increasingly wider perspective to create a critical awareness and praxis based on an ethics of care and responsibility for self and others. Implied in this is a call for them to rediscover the storylines or historical narratives and social practices underpinning the texts. As facilitators, teachers ought to be able to assist the readers/learners to find alternative subject positions and to move beyond the prescriptive curriculum goals and institutionalised social policies like those found in most teachers' handbooks (see, for example, Igaga 1993; MEST 2002). These alternative subject positions, I suggest, would enable learners to reinterpret and explore the complex web of desires and anxieties of authors as well as the readers themselves.

Such intimate conversations with teachers produce and reproduced patterns of language use (discourse). To enable educators in similar positions to gain voice and discuss their teaching passions, anxieties and fears, there is need to engage in a critical analysis of teacher discourses. This involves an analysis of teacher narratives, that is, understanding teachers as selves, as belonging to a community of professionals, and as researchers and learners making meaning of their teaching practices. In this instance the teachers are also too often (dis)empowered subjects, marginalised in educational policy making, and operating within constraining institutionalised social practices. This paper proposed a rethinking of teachers' teaching positions that as Robertson (1997: 26) says, 'uses psychoanalytic knowledge to interpret not only the contents and structures of [texts], but also how readers incorporate these structures into social practice'. This, it is hoped, will shift the teaching practices of literature texts in Kenya to a more radical, rigorous and self-reflective form of social action. What is clear is that social, political and psychic constructions embodied in language, the reading of, interacting with and teaching of texts also involve social, political and psychic construction(s).

In conclusion, therefore, although postcolonial discourses have helped make English texts (potentially) visible in the conscious minds of the teachers through analyses of literary genres, the impersonation of characters and identification of thematic styles, they have been less successful in their call for a deeper questioning of how certain subject positions have been constructed, unconsciously or otherwise, through these texts. Rather than teachers deconstructing these texts,

teachers might take a more imaginative reading position by way of understanding, for example, how the texts they teach construct subjectivities, repeat traumas or provoke forgetting. By shifting the pedagogical paradigm they can work towards contesting or problematising those subjectivities and social and psychic processes.

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