

# When Old Habit(u)s Die Hard

## Bourdieu, teacher education, and becoming a mathematics teacher

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Dr. Kathleen Nolan

*University of Regina, Regina, SK, Canada*

# Reconceptualizing secondary mathematics teacher education: Critical and reflexive perspectives

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This qualitative research program seeks to strengthen connections between teacher education, curriculum reform and mathematics education research. The objectives of this research program focus on challenging the traditional images of mathematics teacher education programs as places to 'train' and 'prepare' mathematics teachers. In reconceptualizing teacher education programs, this research initiative studies the interplay of three different perspectives, or dimensions, of teacher education.

- The pre-service, or prospective, teacher perspective (**the PROspective**): the goal of the research is to create a multi-dimensional model for the internship experience in secondary mathematics teacher education, one that strengthens theory-practice transitions.
- The perspective of novice teachers (**the RETROspective**): this research component strives to inform and reform teacher education programs through enhanced university-school partnerships.
- The perspective of a teacher educator (**the INTROspective**): the research program includes a critical self-study inquiry into the pedagogical and curriculum choices that a mathematics teacher educator faces in her own practice.

# When old habit(u)s die hard: Bourdieu, teacher education, and becoming a mathematics teacher

- ◆ Focus on the RETROspective dimension of larger research program
- ◆ Study conducted with a group of novice secondary mathematics teachers (U of R graduates)
- ◆ Research traces intersections of identity, agency and reflexivity in ‘becoming’ a mathematics teacher using Bourdieu’s social field theory
- ◆ Role of discursive ‘others’ in novice teachers’ constructions of identity and agency
- ◆ Spaces for ‘within structure’ strategizing and reflexivity

# Methodology & Methods

- ◆ Research participants: 10 novice teachers (1-7 years teaching experience); graduates of U of R mathematics T.E. program
- ◆ Data: online survey, 2 semi-structured interviews with each participant and 2 focus group discussions with participants.
- ◆ Research questions focused on:
  - teachers' experiences in the first few years of teaching; their beliefs on teaching and learning mathematics;
  - how 'empowered' they feel to map out their own way of being/becoming a (good) teacher;
  - how (or if) school discursive practices shape their teacher space (teacher identity);
  - their views on the role of teacher education programs in becoming a mathematics teacher.

# Theoretical Framework

- ◆ Novice teachers' stories provide insights into the ideologies and power relations involved in the discursive practices of schools and teacher education.
- ◆ In this research, critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) is shaped and informed by Bourdieu's social field theory (BSFT)
- ◆ BSFT helps... analyze the shifting network of relations between social practices and social fields, with an eye to understanding the relationship between (school) structures and (teacher) agency (Bourdieu, 1977) in becoming a teacher.
- ◆ Educational institutions as “a conservatory of inherited traditions” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977)
- ◆ *BSFT*: Concepts of social practice, habitus, field, doxa, capital, reflexivity

# Theoretical Framework (cont'd)

- ◆ A person's *habitus*, or set of dispositions, in a social practice *field* (that is, a socially instituted and structured domain or space, such as mathematics classrooms) are tightly bound up in and by the network of practices and discourses within that field.
- ◆ The traditional (legitimate and sanctioned) discourses of the field 'persuade' prospective and novice teachers toward a comfortable, non-conflicting habitus-field fit in their classrooms and schools.
- ◆ There are opportunities for enacting agency, albeit surreptitiously, through strategizing and reflexivity in the field
- ◆ To understand novice teachers' perceptions of structures, barriers and/or limitations in their decisions and actions
- ◆ *Interview Question:* Describe the role of 'others' in being and becoming a teacher

# (Re)presentation of data

- ◆ Fictional “letters from the field”
  - Dear novice teacher...
  - Signed from school administrator, teacher colleague, parent, student... & Pierre Bourdieu
  - Compels reader to identify with dominant discourses for becoming a teacher
- ◆ Focus group transcript excerpt
  - Sandra, Andrea, researcher
  - Bold faced text (desires and expectations weighing heavily...) reproduced to construct fictional letters
  - Perceptions of producing new teachers in the image of old

Dear Novice Teacher:

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I am writing to you about the idea you shared with me for trying something new and different in teaching the grade 9 class. I think that's a great idea, but we are not going to do it because we don't want to start any brush fires. I'm concerned that there might be a parent out there who doesn't like it or who will question it.

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Sincerely,

Your school administrator

*Dear Novice Teacher:*

*“Doing one’s duty... means conforming to the social order, and this is fundamentally a question of respecting rhythms, keeping pace, not falling out of line. These various ways of reasserting solidarity contain an implicit definition of the fundamental virtue of conformity, the opposite of which is the desire to stand apart from others.”*

*Sincerely,*

*Pierre Bourdieu, 1977, p. 161*

# Analysis and Interpretations

- ◆ Dispositions constituting habitus tend “to adjust to the objective chances of satisfying need or desire, inclining agents to ‘cut their coats according to their cloth’, and so to become the accomplices of the processes that tend to make the probable a reality” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 65).
- ◆ Andrea and Sandra have articulated forms of agency in silently procuring more and different cloth from which to cut their coats.
- ◆ Bourdieu’s concept of agency “involves strategic improvisation within a limited range of possible choices” (Williams, 2011, p. 131).



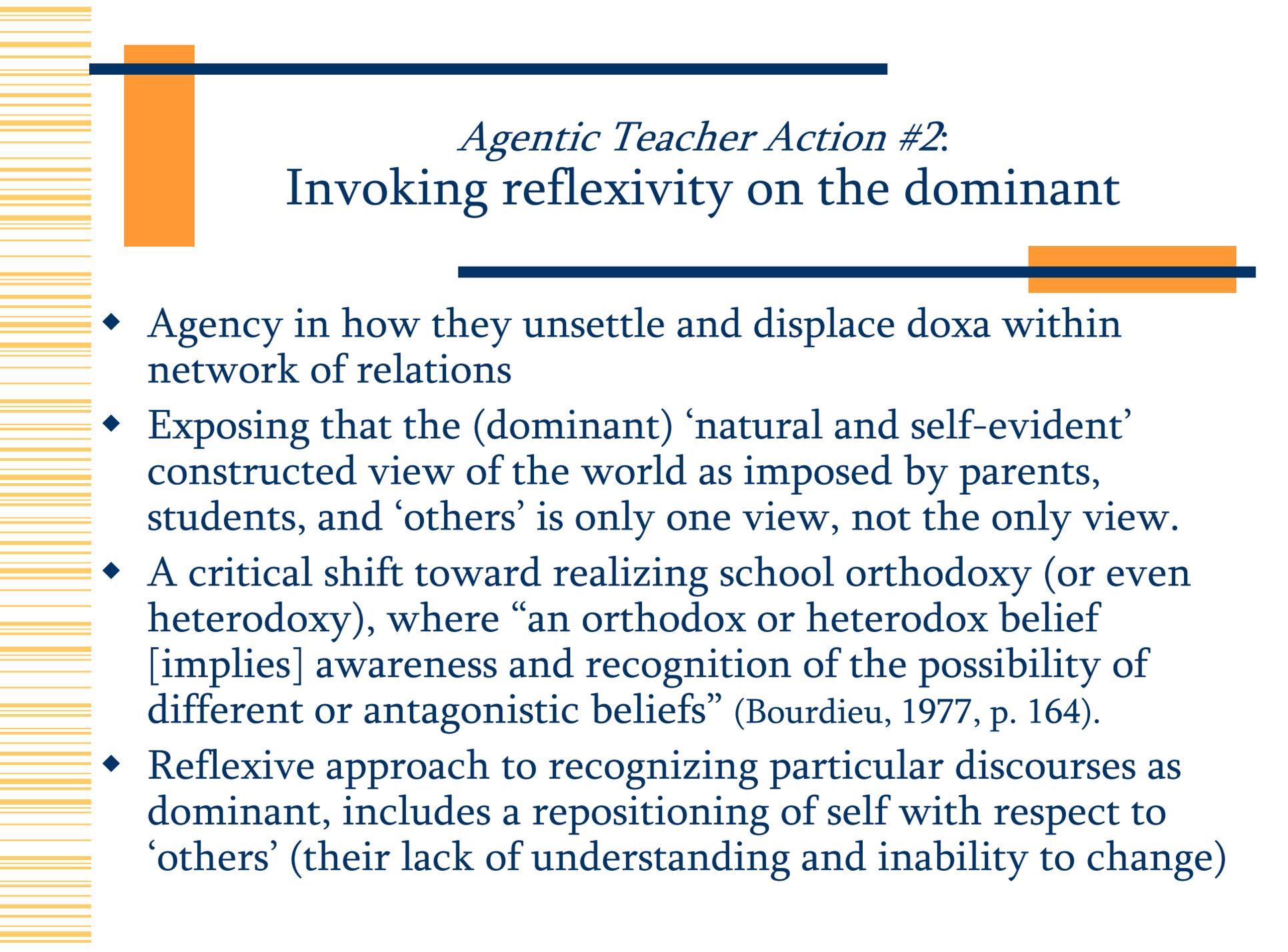
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*Agentic Teacher Action #1:*  
Strategizing on the value of keeping quiet

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- ◆ Strategy of “censoring oneself”
- ◆ Learning the value of privileged (‘tried and true’) cultural capital and the truth of how these forms of capital ensure the protection and reproduction of existing power relations and social class distinctions.
- ◆ In drawing on a strategy of ‘keeping quiet,’ these novice teachers display insight into the cultural arbitrary being reproduced in schools—one that *could* preserve and/or improve their position.
- ◆ They are convinced, however, of the benefits of a non-compliant approach— of one that marks their difference.



## *Agentic Teacher Action #2:* Invoking reflexivity on the dominant

- ◆ Agency in how they unsettle and displace doxa within network of relations
- ◆ Exposing that the (dominant) ‘natural and self-evident’ constructed view of the world as imposed by parents, students, and ‘others’ is only one view, not the only view.
- ◆ A critical shift toward realizing school orthodoxy (or even heterodoxy), where “an orthodox or heterodox belief [implies] awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164).
- ◆ Reflexive approach to recognizing particular discourses as dominant, includes a repositioning of self with respect to ‘others’ (their lack of understanding and inability to change)



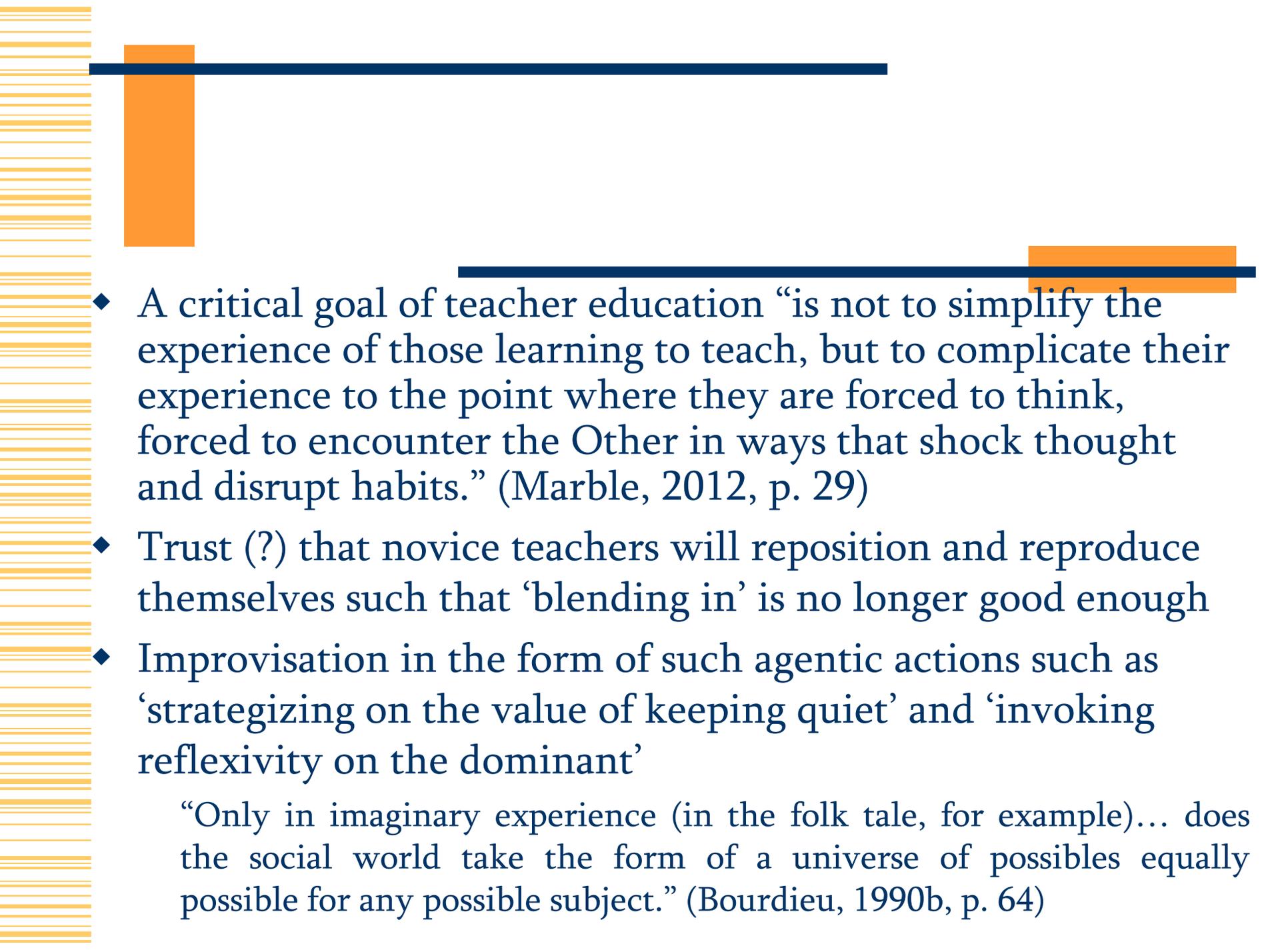
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# Concluding Thoughts...

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- ◆ Becoming a teacher... mistakenly understood as a journey of self
- ◆ Bourdieu's sociological theory highlights the network of relations that discursively drag teachers into compliance with normalized constructions of the good teacher and associated practices
- ◆ Walshaw (2010) argues it is necessary “to develop an understanding of how teaching identity is produced and reproduced through social interaction, daily negotiations, and within particular contexts, which are already overburdened with the meanings of others” (p. 125).

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- ◆ A critical goal of teacher education “is not to simplify the experience of those learning to teach, but to complicate their experience to the point where they are forced to think, forced to encounter the Other in ways that shock thought and disrupt habits.” (Marble, 2012, p. 29)
  - ◆ Trust (?) that novice teachers will reposition and reproduce themselves such that ‘blending in’ is no longer good enough
  - ◆ Improvisation in the form of such agentic actions such as ‘strategizing on the value of keeping quiet’ and ‘invoking reflexivity on the dominant’

“Only in imaginary experience (in the folk tale, for example)... does the social world take the form of a universe of possibles equally possible for any possible subject.” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 64)