

TEACHERS' SUBJECTIVIZATION AT SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal why and how teachers become “subjectified” in resistance to the system’s objectifying policies. Semi-structured questionnaires were given to teachers working in a public school in Ankara, Turkey. The resulting data were interpreted within the framework of three approaches: critical pedagogy, the relational approach, and social constructivism. The main finding is that teachers exhibit strong subjectivities and subjectivization practices while constructing their professional fields in relational and intersubjective dimensions with administrators, students, and parents.

Keywords: *Power, subject, teacher, dialogical teaching, contradiction, transformation*

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will introduce my book on teachers.² To begin, I explain why I did this study. In Turkey as well as all over the world, there are very few practical applications based on the transformation in education in relation to what Henry Giroux called the “language of possibility.” Some Turkish academics, from a Marxist structuralist perspective, have addressed the problematic related to the professional practices of teachers in the context of the reproduction function of the capitalist educational system. According to these studies, teachers do nothing but reproduce the system imposed by the politically powerful. Teachers here are seen as captives of the structures of the system. By contrast, in my own work, I have criticized these structural-functional and reproductive approaches, arguing that teachers have some transformative opportunities, possibilities, and power even within the system. I addressed this in the context of how teachers construct their teaching both professionally and sociopolitically, how they resolve contradictions, and how they create opportunities for transformation. Therefore, the main question of my research was to reveal the mechanisms teachers use in order to “*subjectify*” themselves professionally.

Research Method and Theoretical Basis

Method.

My research is a qualitative study based on a broad review of theoretical approaches and field work. The field work was conducted in a public school located in a poor conservative neighborhood in Ankara (Turkey) in 2015. I gave semi-structured questionnaires consisting of 146 questions to 21 elementary school teachers from different branches. In addition to the questionnaires, I used other data sources (e.g., observations of teachers in classrooms, parent meetings, school watch, national

² Kemal İnal, Öğretmen ve İktidar. Öğretmenliğin İnşasında Özneleşme, Çelişki ve Dönüşüm, Ankara: Töz Yayınları, 2019, 647 sayfa. (Teacher and Power. Subjectivation, Contradiction and Transformation in the Construction of Teaching, Ankara: Töz Publishing House, 2019, 647 p.)

ceremony, teachers' room, corridors, and garden) to help interpret the answers given to the questionnaire. I conducted interviews with school administrators and collected detailed information about the school. In general, I tried to produce a "school ethnography"—cultural pedagogical knowledge that includes observations on administrators, teachers, students, parents, and administrative staff. I tried to politically interpret the pedagogical culture that teachers produced while constructing their profession at school. I aimed to devise logical frameworks by dividing the answers given to the questionnaire into subcategories. An effort was made to use data that does not support as much as data that does support my thesis.

Theoretical background.

I first argued that the subject is a historical reality by considering the construction of the modern subject in Western thought through the eyes of various schools of thought. I drew especially on Marxist and non-Marxist approaches that argue that subjects are not fixed but can transform their environment. For example, I interpreted the teaching styles of teachers based on Paulo Freire's concept of "dialogical pedagogy." In addition, I used the concepts of "history from below" (Michel de Certeau) and "subpolitics" (James C. Scott) to help understand how teachers constructed their profession in a relational way and thereby become "subjectified" at school. Based on the nonreductionist approaches of critical pedagogues such as Freire, Henry Giroux, Michael Apple, and Peter McLaren, I tried to identify how various forms of discrimination (class, gender, race, etc.) manifested themselves in school in a cultural language. By addressing the criticism of metaphysical and idealistic subjects as well as some approaches such as "process without subject" (structuralist) and "conformist actor" (functionalist), I tried to tackle how the subject was actively constructed between individual relationships and social institutions. In this context, I suggested that the teacher is not a passive object of the system.

My work is a synthesis of three approaches: critical pedagogy, social constructivism, and a relational approach. I argued that teachers used more critical methods to liberate their poor and conservative students. Therefore, contrary to determinist, structuralist, or functionalist approaches, the teachers form social relationships not as a one-way street but in a Freirean, dialogical sense while, at the same time, constructing their

professional fields practically. This means that educational practices can be formed democratically, despite the structural strengths of the powers-that-be. While teachers oppose the objectification imposed by the system, they both reproduce their professional fields in the context of democratic and libertarian values, and carry out this construction process on the basis of cooperation and solidarity with their students. Therefore, I propose that education is the area where the opposition politics, theses, and approaches are constructed in a pedagogical language, as much as the power itself reproduces itself.

Discussion

Despite all power's pressure, direction, and standardization, teachers resist the system consciously or unconsciously, politically or apolitically, spontaneously or in organized forms, by using different tools in various settings; while resisting, they construct a process of "subjectivization" in order to solve their contradictory problems. Therefore, the school cannot be accepted as an area without opposition where power absolutely establishes its own power. Opposition to power—expressed mostly in pedagogical language, logic, and values—continues its existence in a wide variety of forms, motives, and patterns. On the other hand, from time to time teachers may be political subjects rather than pedagogical agents. This may be the case for organized as well as unorganized teachers. Subjectivization processes, whether political or apolitical, often contain many different anti-power practices in the professional context: objecting to administrators on various educational issues, opposing wrong decisions, ignoring some rules, interpreting reforms according to their own knowledge, protecting themselves, opening other areas for themselves, transforming curriculum information by reinterpreting it, and so on.

Based on my findings, I interpreted the construction of the teaching profession as a subjectivization practice that transforms teachers from professional agents to more or less political subjects. Subjectivization is a moment of change or even transformation and a realization of praxis in various rates, forms, and orientations. Subjectivization is teachers' response to objectification.

Therefore, constructing the teaching profession by teachers cannot be reduced to schematic or automatic behavior in a continuous system. Teachers' subjectivization practices can be as strong and effective as the structure of the system itself. The relationship between the system and teachers is not a dichotomy. Based on necessary sides of any dialectical process, this relationship, which expresses the contradictory reality of the phenomenon, emphasizes subjectivization more than objectification.

I examined various factual views, orientations and forms of teacher subjectivity in constructing the teaching profession at school. I argued that the teaching profession is constructed by teachers in interaction with other actors—administrators, students, parents—in an intermediate zone between adjustment and resistance. Accordingly, the act of constructing the profession takes place in an area where a structural adjustment and the subjectivization of teachers intersect. The educational institution is also shaped in an area where the official needs of the system are met and the actions of the subjects towards liberation can come into conflict with the system. Therefore, schools are neither a field of absolute adjustment to the powerful system nor a constant area of conflict. But even in the adjustment process, teachers resist objectification by using democratic educational mechanisms such as dialogical teaching.

Although teachers use the methods desired by the system, such as establishing absolute authority over students, they use these not to objectify but to “subjectify” students. In the Freirean sense, dialogical teaching is an educational strategy that connects to the development of students' critical consciousness. This is both an awareness process and a form of resistance. It has a characteristic that gives the system its original character, stubbornly and resolutely striving upward like ivy. Therefore, this process also includes subjectifying possibilities against the objectifying powers of structuring such as a centralist education system, uniform materials, hierarchical command-control chain, etc. So this process toward liberation is set up relationally, not dichotomously. In other words, when conflicts and contradictions arise between teachers and students, teachers and administrators, and teachers and parents, an attempt is made to solve them by turning to a democratically oriented relationship. I specifically dealt with conflicts and contradictions between the

teacher, who is considered an actor of modern culture, and the poor parent, who is seen as a representative of traditional/conservative culture.

In Turkey, both pedagogical and political problems in the school are culturalized. Culturalization showed that the pedagogical realities in the school were not constructed by a single subject, but instead are intersubjective. Teachers try to resolve problems by entering into intersubjective and democratic relationships with administrators, students, parents, and other teachers. Teachers realize their subjectivization not on their own, but intersubjectively, as a democratic, collective enterprise.

I observed that teachers defined many problems and developed many different approaches, models, and relationships regarding how to solve them. This shows that the teacher is not a captive passive object of the dominant system. The teachers took a dialogical stance against every monolithic imposition of the dominant system. They constructed an intersubjective relational space together with other actors. In this context, teaching is not only a teachers' product but the collective work of different subjects, including parents, students, and administrators. This work can take place spontaneously and individually, as well as in a programmed way. While the teachers were performing this process of what I call subjectivization, they produced concrete, conscious, and reality-based definitions. Such definitions served as bulwarks against the idealizations in which teaching is seen as a sacred, automated, and unconscious profession, imposed by the system. For example, teachers' criticism of low wages shows that they attached greater importance to working conditions than to professional idealizations. The teachers responded to the system's objectifications by subjecting their own working conditions to objective evaluations.

Teachers have a world of subjectivities—individual styles, personal experiences, world views, historical understanding, class consciousness, form and orientation—although they must, at the same time, comply with the structural requirements of the

system imposed on them. Thus, their subjectivities can provide fuel for subjectivization. For example, I found that most teachers apply various strategies to avoid alienating bureaucratic work. In particular, I observed that they try to avoid filling in the questionnaires sent by the Ministry of National Education and academicians from outside the school because they do not want to be used as test subjects. In these moments they are expressing a desire for emancipation. Instead of these alienating practices, teachers focus on educating students in the best way, establishing a democratic relationship with parents, and forming self-development groups with other teachers.

Naturally, subjectivization is constructed in relation to other subjects and formed in intersubjective acts. This also expresses the teacher's strategy to cope with systemic problems by increasing their social and cultural capital. In this context, teachers are aware that the teaching profession, which is relationally constructed at school, is a collective process, not an individualistic one. While collectively defining this area and constructing it, they try to take the initiative in the decisions taken to reconstruct their professional field; they attempt to resolve conflicts according to their professional interests. This equips them with the knowledge, experience, and opportunity to be subjects, not objects.

Conclusion

My study explored the potential and limits of teachers' professional practices to be agents of change. My findings show that while teachers try to construct their professional fields relationally in an intersubjective perspective within a framework of democratic values, they are also trying to develop this potential by increasing their various forms of capital and to overcome objectifying boundaries. How and to what extent the professional field is constructed democratically depends largely on the subjectivization of the teacher. The subjectivization process shows that teachers construct their profession as a subpolitics in the form of a history from below. I interpret this as a form of resistance against power.