NAVIGATING NEOLIBERALISM
FROM TEACHING IN THE CLASSROOM TO TEACHING TEACHERS

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We first met in a classroom during our graduate studies at McGill University and connected through discussions about teacher professional development. Despite having different professional trajectories, we had both worked at schools in countries where proficiency in English was prized and seen as a gateway to socio-economic mobility (Manan et al., 2015) due to its global popularity as a language of access to different aspects of society (Phillipson, 2006). Both of us noted how neoliberalism had affected and shaped our educational contexts and professional endeavors.

To guide our discussion on neoliberalism, we drew from Sparke's (2013) definition that "neoliberalism names an approach to governing capitalism that emphasizes liberalizing markets and making market competition the basis of economic coordination, social distribution, and personal motivation" (p. 480). While this definition is broad, we narrowed it down by looking at how existing literature interprets its use within education. Specifically, we drew from Ball (2012) and Spring (2014) who both posit that neoliberalism has commodified education through privatization, the influence and participation of non-state actors, and hierarchization of the origin and development of education and learning materials. For us, long before we were formally introduced to neoliberalism in our graduate studies, we witnessed how the language of neoliberal governmentality, the notion that neoliberal policies seep into everyday life (Manan, 2021), shaped the discourse around teacher training and professional development.

In this essay, we look to the past to reflect on how neoliberalism has impacted our journeys as teachers and teacher leaders to better understand how to move forward. Guided by the principles of currere, we share stories from our time working in schools that have allowed us to make connections despite our different contexts and potentially make headway and room for new possibilities in the future.

KOMAL

Let's begin by "returning to the past" (Pinar, 1994, p. 21), by sharing our journey towards teaching. For me, it was purely accidental: Teach for Pakistan (TFP), the local chapter of Teach for All (TFA), held an information session at my university. As an avid reader, I was shaken by the idea that nearly half the children in Grade 5 in my country's public schools could not read a simple sentence in English (Idara-e-Taleem-o-Agahi, 2024). I still had a few semesters before I could graduate and apply, but I wanted to do something immediately.

I joined a local educational technology start-up as a facilitator. We worked at a tiny primary public school, hoping to replicate Sugata Mitra's (2007) hole-in-the-wall experiment where we taught students digital literacy. Very quickly, we realized that students who didn't have a fair grasp of English could not navigate the internet, let alone read a Wikipedia article or watch a YouTube video. Yet, as public school students, they would be the least likely in Pakistan's stratified educational system to master English (Pakistan Ministry of Federal Education and Training, 2018).

Their proficiency in English would have repercussions beyond school; it would likely determine if they were first able to *enroll* in undergraduate studies and then if they would be able to complete their studies, as higher education in Pakistan is exclusively conducted in English.

JESSICA

My journey to becoming a teacher was more traditional. In university, I decided to pursue a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at McGill University with the hope of merging my passions for learning languages, travelling, and teaching. During the last year of my degree, I had the opportunity to complete a field experience in Hong Kong. Enamored with the experience of living overseas, after graduation, I accepted my first teaching position at a private school with a bilingual program in Taipei, Taiwan.

KOMAL

After graduation, I transitioned to TFP, a two-year Fellowship. In the same vein as TFA, TFP places graduates, referred to as Fellows, at underserved schools across major cities in Pakistan. As Crawford-Garrett and Thomas (2018) have noted in their critique of TFA, there was a distinction between what we were supposed to do and the teaching profession itself. While I had designed and facilitated learning activities at my prior job, Teach for Pakistan was my first experience of working in a proper classroom. I was placed at a low-cost private school, the type that is known for hiring and losing an endless series of unlicensed teachers (Srivastava, 2015). There, I taught English to grades four to six for two years. The language of instruction was Urdu, the national language, but the majority of my students spoke Pashto, as they were from the Pashtun ethnic group. Given that only seven percent of the Pakistani population have Urdu as their native language (Coleman, 2010), the majority of schoolchildren in public schools are not able to access primary or secondary education in the language they know best. The valuing of English or Urdu comes at the cost of devaluing local or indigenous languages (Tamim, 2021).

In my first month, I vividly remember one of my grade five students stuttering and pausing after every word in a reading assessment. Prior to my placement, I'd received some training on pedagogy and classroom management, but after meeting my students, I realized that simply following the curriculum would not address my students' needs, as many, if not all of them, were reading below grade-level.

I started educating myself on language and literacy instruction; as a former humanities student, wading through text was comforting in a way. I learnt about the components of literacy instruction, I looked up articles from practitioner teachers, and I collaborated with other Fellows who taught English. As part of TFP, each Fellow was required to develop student learning outcomes and unit plans based on the standards from the 2006 National Curriculum, but I found it to be grammar-intensive to a fault. How could my students identify nouns in sentences if they couldn't decode a word or comprehend the sentences themselves? I made the pedagogical choice to modify learning objectives for remedial instruction.

I'm grateful for my time as a Fellow, but ultimately, I left my Fellowship feeling critical of the TFA/TFP model, particularly their insistence on decontextualized "best practices" (Philip et al., 2019, p. 5) that didn't take my multi-lingual, underserved classroom into account and the

savior narrative that permeated our Fellowship (Crawford- Garrett & Thomas, 2018). As I got to know my students, I witnessed how drastically their linguistic background and socio-economic class shaped not only their current academic environment but their future academic trajectory as well. Two years of "leadership" without adequate and contextualized teacher training could not be expected to resolve the class stratification and inequality that is rife in Pakistani society and that ultimately affects the quality of education students in Pakistan have access to. The teaching and learning of English do not exist in neutral spaces; rather, as Manan (2021) asserts, English is "embedded in regimes that are organised by relations of social power, class privilege and economic polarisation" (p. 988). Tamim (2013, 2021) has chronicled the struggles of working-class students in higher education, attesting to the pervasive influence of English on their academic journey.

Our fluency in English did not qualify us to teach it in the public schools where we were placed. We needed contextualized and needs-based professional development that took our contexts into account. We were always expected to just teach for two years and leave the school to continue as it always had. My Fellowship motivated me to continue learning, so I enrolled in a graduate studies program in education.

JESSICA

In Taipei, I started teaching grade four and five ESL and electives such as art and health. We used a curriculum that was borrowed and minimally adapted from the English language arts program from Ontario, Canada. The borrowing of curriculum and teaching practices from the West (North America & Europe) aligns with the findings of a literature review by Tan and Chua (2015), which demonstrated that China borrows from the Western educational policies, curriculum, and practices to address the reality of neoliberal globalization. However, this borrowing is not unique to China, as it can be found across countries in the East (Tan & Reyes, 2016). Further, the school specifically borrowed from an English-speaking country, perpetuating the belief that native-English speakers have sole expertise over the language (Holliday, 2005, 2006). But, blindly borrowing curriculum and imposing it in this context undermines local knowledge and education (Wu, 2007). This type of policy borrowing contributes to the devaluation of local knowledge, teachers, and education.

Most of my students were wealthy; the parents needed to pay additional fees for their children to learn English from native speakers like me, furthering the idea that teachers from the West are more knowledgeable and have better pedagogical skills (Holliday, 2005). Oftentimes, we were told to conform to parents' expectations of what learning looks like. This entailed doing grammar drills, giving page-long lists of vocabulary, and testing them weekly, as this was the culturally accepted standard for good teaching. Meanwhile, the school told us to teach in ways that were distinctly Western approaches to education, such as doing project-based learning, collaborative projects, and learning through play—all distinctly student-centered learning activities (Tan & Reyes, 2016). Neoliberalism turns these pedagogical styles into commodities based on the demands of the global market where one is a more valued commodity than the other.

This push and pull highlighted the issues with the globalization of education (Spring, 2006)—how Western ideals have imposed themselves on Eastern educational contexts (Tan & Chua, 2015; Tan & Reyes, 2016). On one hand, the parents wanted Western (read: white) native-English teachers to teach English, as it was believed that they would be better at teaching English (Holliday, 2005; Sung, 2011)—a notion that falls into the falsely held belief that native speakers

are better at teaching English (Phillipson, 1992; Widdowson, 1994). On the other hand, the parents and some students rejected North American ways of teaching because they were very different from the cultural ideal. They also feared that it would not teach the students how to pass standardized college entrance English tests (Li et al., 2012), such as the IELTS or the TESOL.

My experience at private schools in Taiwan was my first inkling that education was more like a commercial service than a learning experience. My employment felt transactional in the way that I, "the imported good," was there to make a profit for the school. Education's neoliberal model means that private schools are selling what the parents (read: consumers) want (Brathwaite, 2017). After all, the school was just filling the parents' demand for foreign English teachers, right?

This feeling was amplified when I started working at an international school in Thailand. I worked with a wonderful team of teachers who, due to their passports being from the Global South, were paid less than a third of my salary. Their job title was that of an assistant; however, they nearly had the same responsibilities as me. Ethically, I had a lot of issues with it, and when I would bring up this disparity, I was brushed aside, and the issue was swept under the rug. Here, the discrediting of non-native speaking teachers as not as valuable as native speaking teachers (Phillipson, 1992; Thomas, 1999; Widdowson, 1994) was truly apparent.

At the same time, a previous colleague reached out to me about a leadership position at a private school I used to work for in Taipei. The position was to be a mentor teacher for the upper primary division of their bilingual program. I believed this would be a perfect next step that would allow me to improve my teaching and leadership skills.

KOMAL

I had a similar rationale for accepting my next job at an educational non-profit organization seeking to "reform" a public school in Karachi. In an attempt to address educational inequity, the Pakistani government launched public-private partnerships. A study by Bano (2008) discusses the efficacy of these alliances between governments and private individuals or entities, including NGOs. One of these was the Adopt a School program. While the adoption varied on a case-to-case basis, individuals or organizations could take over the management of the school and, thus, improve learning outcomes. The educational non-profit where I would work after my TFP Fellowship had adopted two public schools.

As a Fellow, my impact had been limited to the three grade levels I taught, and I knew that once I left things would go back to the way they used to be, as no structural changes had been made. My new position would have me supervising the entire English faculty, Grades 1-10, and I felt this was a chance to bring about sustainable change. However, while I had been able to forge connections and friendships with my colleagues during my placement despite being an outsider, it was so much harder here. I was an outsider sent to "correct" the existing faculty.

Simultaneously, in graduate studies, I was learning about professional development for teachers and starting to see professional development as a holistic process. As a teacher myself, I was now aware of what Hargreaves (1994) calls the "intensification of teaching," whereby teachers' workloads are continuously increasing due to bureaucracy and other pressures (p. 118). While I was there to provide professional development, I was mindful of the demands made on teachers and sought to alter my approach accordingly.

JESSICA

I felt the same way! I quickly came to realize that I didn't need to prove myself as being some strong leader-type intent on making changes that would increase teachers' workloads. Rather, I needed to listen to the teachers and see how I could help them mitigate the negative impacts of structural barriers. By reflecting on my time in their shoes, I started collaborating with them to find ways to surmount the structural issues that were imposed on us.

KOMAL

I completely agree. Public schools in Pakistan are often in need of repair; my own school required several months of renovation to make the school usable. If you have barely functional bathrooms, dimly lit classrooms, and a culture where innovation or even doing more than the bare minimum is not acknowledged, how motivated would you be to implement pedagogical change? Pair this with a system of reforms whereby best practices are simply imported into a context where the ground realities—and struggles—have not been addressed. In these scenarios, teachers' agency is compromised.

One example is a provincial initiative to improve reading skills by transitioning from analog to synthetic phonics. This is a huge adjustment particularly when you were taught the former. The initiative now lives on in the form of resources including scripted lesson plans that may be well-intentioned, but I wonder how many teachers are able to completely adhere to the script when teaching. I know I can't. I've always made adjustments to my lesson plans based on what was happening in the classroom. There may also be reasons as to why teachers may not want to transition to a synthetic phonics approach. I'm thinking of Manan et al. (2015) where the findings indicated that teachers in a low-cost English medium school chose to code-switch between English and other languages to help boost student learning. Is it realistic to expect teachers to teach from a lesson plan, especially if these are pedagogies and strategies that they're unfamiliar with?

JESSICA

It's not realistic to teach something that you're unfamiliar with without proper training. I struggled with this issue as a teacher as well, but I did the same as you and read as much as I could about pedagogy from teacher practitioners. In my case, the issue was that the curriculum was not truly meant for my ESL students but for native English speakers. Over the years, I learned to adapt my curriculum or, in some cases, create my own to meet the needs of my students.

KOMAL

That really resonates with me. The teacher education curriculum for a B.Ed. in Pakistan uses an ESL approach as well. When I began teaching pre-service teachers at a college in Karachi, I really struggled with how the course guidelines would not address Pakistan's linguistic diversity or the challenges of teaching English in multi-lingual classrooms where 93% of the population is

learning the language of instruction (Urdu) alongside English (Coleman, 2010). So, I brought in anecdotes from my own experiences or shared samples of actual student work.

Building communicative capacity is further complicated by the fact that, in many public or low-cost private schools, a period is only 30-40 minutes on average. Six or seven periods of English class aren't enough especially when you have students for whom school is the only space in which they hear English. Immersion may be a "recommended" practice, but for many of us, code-switching is the only way we could boost student learning.

JESSICA

I had a similar situation when teaching in the bilingual program. The students were not completely ready for full immersion, as they often didn't have opportunities to hear and use English outside of class. This made a marked difference between where the curriculum said the students should be in their language learning journey and where they actually were. As a teacher, I would adapt my lessons towards the students in front of me because I didn't feel the need to conform to the school's one-size-fits all mentality to curriculum. However, once I was a teacher leader, I found myself torn between implementing the curriculum and being a caring and empathetic leader (Green, 2014).

As a leader, it was my job to be the face of, "you need to follow the curriculum," while also wanting to encourage teachers' agency in adapting and modifying the curriculum. At first, I felt torn between what I thought my role was versus the kind of leader I wanted to be. Over time, I started acknowledging my agency as a leader and sought out ways to balance my decisions. When teachers would come to me and say that the curriculum was irrelevant or that it wasn't suitable for their students, first, I would acknowledge that it was definitely challenging for our students to meet the expectations similar to those who are fluent in English. Then, I would encourage them to adapt or modify the curriculum so that it was at-level and culturally appropriate for their students. If they were uncertain of how to go about making these changes, I would guide them through it. I would train them in how to make changes to lessons and facilitate workshops on teaching strategies, such as using the students' first language to help them learn English.

KOMAL

Yes, the curriculum is held up as an ideal and something I too was expected to follow, but given the achievement gap, I had to introduce remedial instruction alongside grade-level content. This was complicated by the differing levels of skill and English proficiency in my faculty. I also needed to hire unlicensed teachers because we didn't have enough public school teachers assigned to our school.

JESSICA

Simply put, the world needs more teachers (UNESCO, 2023). In Taiwan, there was increased demand for international teachers because of its Bilingual 2030 policy (Padgett, in

press). Specifically, there was a need for international, native-English speaking teachers but not enough applicants. The school where I worked also resorted to hiring unlicensed teachers from English speaking countries instead of hiring local ESL teachers. Often, this led to issues, as teachers were teaching full-time while learning most, if not all, aspects of their jobs. This resulted in a lot of teachers coming and going or passively not doing their jobs because it came down to "needing a [foreign] adult" in the room with students, which led to a lot of teacher-centric teaching and classroom mismanagement.

KOMAL

This is a challenge I faced as well. Most of my faculty were teaching in a teacher-centric way too and would simply transmit the knowledge to the students. This included dictating answers for comprehension exercises and not facilitating whole-class discussions when reading texts. This may have been the way they learnt and a strategy they were comfortable with. As teachers, it's sometimes humbling to sit down and reflect on how much of your teaching is shaped— both consciously and unconsciously—by the classrooms in which you learned. So, I was cautious about the policies I introduced and spent most of my first year trying to build a rapport with my teachers so that I could understand how they conceptualized teaching, what the pressing issues in their classrooms were, and how to best tailor support from there.

JESSICA

It's a slow yet rewarding process to work with teachers on their teaching skills. As a teacher leader, it often fell to me to train and work with the new teachers until they could meet the basic necessities of their jobs. To your point, I agree that the starting point of working with teachers was to build rapport, meet them at their individual starting line, and gradually build from there. I was initially told to give them everything they needed all at once and show them how to mark their students' work—essentially teaching them their whole job at the same time as being expected to continue on with the rest of my teaching and curriculum development responsibilities. As noted by Curtis (2013), teacher leaders are often given more tasks without being relieved of their normal duties. So, I had to choose. Do I give them everything in one-go, basically shake their hands and walk away so that I could do the rest of my job? Or, do I take my time to build rapport and build on their skills as the year went on? I chose the latter and ended up working way past my paid 40 hours per week.

KOMAL

Same. I'd initially resolved to conduct impromptu observations to help me understand my teachers' classrooms better, but some days, I would just end up checking lesson plans or handling other administrative tasks. Because this was a public school, the number of privately hired teachers was quite low. Public schools in Pakistan are open six days a week, which is a hard sell. Despite this, there were always things I felt like I should be doing. Towards the end, I also developed

chronic health issues and felt like I was undercompensated for the work I'd done. I don't know if being firmer with saying no would have necessarily resolved this, because the issue goes deeper than setting boundaries. It was about the implicit expectations and job responsibilities. When working in educational development, you have to be careful not to fall into the savior narrative, sacrificing yourself for the cause. Personal sacrifice can't fix structural issues.

JESSICA

I found it really hard to say no to all the extra demands. A few times, I nearly resigned out of exhaustion and feeling like the system was taking advantage of my motivation to help teachers. I remember taking a step back during our holiday break and realizing that, just like I did when I was teaching, I needed to find ways to circumvent the structural issues with my job. I really tried to empathize with the teachers and solve problems with them instead of imposing solutions on them. Using this same tactic, I started asking them what training and professional development they felt they needed. From that, I created a set of workshops that I would guide the teachers through, matching a speed they were comfortable with. The workshops were there to train teachers on the aspects of their jobs they felt they needed the most guidance in. They could also be tailored around the topics they were teaching in their courses, making them directly applicable.

KOMAL

Yes, I was doing something similar as well. Like you, I was breaking down instruction into specific, actionable things. I often pared down rubrics or reading assessments so that teachers wouldn't be overwhelmed with new information. Not everything could be done at once. When building reading skills, I started with building fluency and worked my way up to improving comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. None of my teachers were exactly alike in their skill-sets, so I had to develop individualized training plans as well and address their specific struggles.

JESSICA

The workshop alternative allowed me to be more impactful in a manageable way as well as individualize the learning. While I had my set of workshops that were common, I would tailor them to ensure they was directly applicable to the teacher in front of me.

Upon reflection, I realize that I had to find ways to navigate the system as a teacher and a teacher leader. I felt as if the higher my position, the harder it became to push back on the demands. This led me to wonder how we, as teacher leaders, could make space for this change within schools.

Recently, I've read of the "Structurated Model of Practitioner Inquiry" by Edwards and Kalan (2024, p. 58). This model calls for teachers to take action "to disrupt educational structures which impact teachers' practices in the classroom" (p. 65).

KOMAL

Agreed**.** Our classroom is where the resistance begins. It's also important to not get tunnel vision or let our classrooms become islands; there's a community outside the classroom. Forming community and meaningful partnerships with teachers and sustaining them is really where we begin working towards a different future. Holding space for each other and seeing each other as individuals disrupts neoliberalism's "one-size-fits-all" mentality regarding education (Portelli & Oladi, 2018, p. 380)

JESSICA

Exactly! Small acts of resistance can lead to bigger changes in the educational system (Bullock, 1987). I could envision this by sitting with the teachers in my group and planning how we would remove the limitations of the curriculum and address the learning needs of our students.

KOMAL

For me, it would look like forming learning communities with my teachers, ensuring that their teaching workload is reasonable and fairly compensated. We would be beginning a collective learning journey, rooted in resistance, and ultimately aiming for transformation.

CONCLUSION

Through utilizing the principles of currere, we found that, even though our contexts and professional journeys came about in different ways, we faced similar issues stemming from neoliberalism's influence on education and language teaching. By reflecting on our contexts, and the systemic issues, we were able to create opportunities for resistance. As teachers, we navigated issues around the curriculum and expectations being culturally inappropriate for our students by adapting our lessons and our teaching methods. As teacher leaders, we empathized with our teachers and negotiated ways to help them improve their teaching and teaching context and circumvented the structures imposed upon us.

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