

# NO ROOM FOR UNCERTAINTY – CURRICULAR AND ASSESSMENT PRESSURES AS DRIVING FORCES FOR TEACHERS’ ACTIONS

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**ABSTRACT** | Open and complex classroom settings, which foster students’ skills to navigate uncertainty, are considered crucial to teaching and learning in a highly dynamic, increasingly digitalized and multidiverse world. This contrasts with the escalating culture of high-stakes testing. Consequently, uncertainty has been addressed as a crucial element of teacher professionalism. The paper brings together three different case studies which explore the effects of assessment and testing on student-teachers as well as qualified teachers, especially in the way they talk about teaching and students. The paper compares the situation in Germany and North Carolina, USA. While high-stakes testing is much more advanced in the US than in Germany, the three studies point to similar tendencies: students are no longer viewed as individuals but as numbers, assessment becomes the omnipresent logic and there is a tendency towards closure. The three studies examine the mechanisms of the reproduction of this closure-oriented and assessment-driven system on three different stages of teachers’ careers.

Key Words: standardization, teacher education, assessment, accountability, uncertainty

## KEIN RAUM FÜR UNGEWISSHEIT – CURRICULARE ZWÄNGE UND PRÜFUNGSDRUCK ALS ORIENTIERUNGSRAHMEN DES LEHRERHANDELNS

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG** | In unserer dynamischen, digitalen und multidiversen Welt kommt offenem und komplexem Unterricht eine Kernfunktion zu, weil er die Fähigkeiten der Schüler\*innen im Umgang mit Ungewissheit zu fördern vermag. Dies steht jedoch im Gegensatz zu einer Testkultur, die mit immer größeren Konsequenzen für Schüler\*innen und Lehrer\*innen einhergeht. In den USA manifestiert sich dies im sogenannten „high-stakes testing“, bei dem standardisierte Tests zur vergleichenden Erhebung von Schulleistungen eingesetzt und auf dieser Basis Belohnungen und Sanktionen erteilt werden. Es werden drei Fallstudien aus Deutschland und den USA zusammengebracht, welche den Einfluss von Leistungsmessung auf Lehrpersonen in ihrem Sprechen über Unterricht und Schüler\*innen untersuchen. Obwohl high-stakes testing in den USA wesentlich etablierter ist als in Deutschland, weisen alle drei Studien in eine ähnliche Richtung: Schüler\*innen werden nicht mehr als Individuen, sondern als Zahlen betrachtet, Leistungsmessung wird zur allgegenwärtigen Logik und es zeigt sich eine Schließungstendenz. Es wird herausgearbeitet, durch welche Mechanismen sich dieses schließungs- und messungsorientierte System reproduziert.

Schlüsselwörter: Assessment, Lehrerbildung, Standardisierung, Ungewissheit

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

According to the notion of so-called reflexive modernity (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994), uncertainty is an essential element if not the key constituent of life in globalized, highly mobile and increasingly digitalized post-industrial societies. It impacts various areas of the postmodern condition: Knowledge and values are affected, because due to the loss of the grand récits, both are no longer secured by set beliefs (Lyotard, 1984). This reshapes peoples' (cultural) identities, which postcolonial research has identified as hybrid and which result from processes of subjection within constellations of power (e.g. Foucault, 1982). Moreover, uncertainty has been identified as a key element of scientific theories themselves: positivist determinism has given way to probabilistic or constructivist thinking. There has also been a rapid increase in social, linguistic, and cultural diversity, particularly in urban centers, which also increased the rural-urban divide. All this has intensified the perception of risk in a social, political, economic and ecological sense, epitomized by the concept of the "risk society" (Beck, 1992).

As knowledge becomes more dispersed and available, students must adopt a critical lens through which to both understand and act on that knowledge and make sense of it relative to their prior knowledge and experience. As such, teachers must engage in the sort of teaching that "empowers students to critically examine beliefs, values, and knowledge with the aim of developing new epistemologies, center multiple ways of knowing, and develop a sense of critical consciousness and agency" (Lopez & Olen, 2018, p. viii). In other words, teachers should engage students in navigating uncertainty inside and outside of the classroom. This rationale has become widely accepted in subject matter education across various domains, including within physical education (PE). Some PE research (e.g. Körner & Frei 2010, 2012, Lüsebrink & Wolters 2017) concerns itself with the question what role the interactional and topical openness of settings plays in PE classrooms. One strand of this research focusses on the acquisition of movement skills and concepts as well as personal, social and strategic competences, such as risk-taking, in complex, open, task-based and co-operative learning environments (e.g. Dyson & Karmina 2018). The respective research has identified uncertainty as a key element of these settings (e.g. Krieger 2011; Regenbrecht, Bähr & Krieger, 2019). Another strand of research is concerned with the question of how teachers deal with uncertainty in the PE classroom (e.g. Lüsebrink 2012). One of the key challenges in this area is that PE teachers seem to draw on their own sports socialization rather than on well reflected concepts of teaching PE, therefore limiting opportunities for uncertainty and, with that, potential learning (e.g. Schierz & Miethling, 2017; Volkmann 2008). Also, PE research has identified that internships in initial teacher education are not necessarily places of uncertainty-friendly innovation, but tend to advocate patterns of closure (Pallesen, Schierz & Haverich, 2018). In light of these findings, we hope that this article

can be a worthwhile contribution to the uncertainty discussion in PE research by reporting on related phenomena and patterns from English as a foreign language and other subjects, as well as from a binationally comparative perspective.

Within academic literature, transformative education, and associated pedagogies, are considered critical to the development of democratic societies. Twenty years of increasing standardization in Germany and more than twenty years of increased high-stakes-testing in the U.S. have claimed to improve the quality of teaching and, with that, teacher education. Output-orientation and accountability have been hailed as creating more instructional quality and equity. In this paper, however, we adopt a critical perspective on standardization. We explore the effects of curricular and exam pressures by bringing together three different studies from Germany and the U.S. We explore this phenomenon in two ways: First, we will follow the stages of teacher development, moving from early stages of teacher education at university to early stages of being a fully qualified teacher and proceed to experienced teachers. Second, with a gradually broadening lens, we will show how pressures spread across systemic levels. We will first discuss pressure on the micro level with respect to practice in individual classrooms, then move to the meso level and examine how teachers become agents of pressures beyond their individual classrooms and in their schools, and finally show how this mechanism floods the entire system and becomes powerful on the macro level.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we will briefly explain the common theoretical ground that our studies share. Second, we will discuss how student teachers encounter the structure of the field of practice during an internship in Germany. Third, we will present the findings of a study with fully qualified teachers on co-operative learning in the foreign language classroom (again in the German context). Fourth, we will present the findings of a study looking into the effects of increased high-stakes testing in the U.S.

## **2 | PHENOMENON AND THEORETICAL FRAME**

Real and perceived exam, testing and curricular pressures have been identified as an important determinant of teachers' actions (e.g. Palmer & Snodgrass-Rangel, 2011). They are discussed as both objective influences and as subjective points of reference for teachers' self-positioning. Teachers are reduced to objects of ubiquitous testing and consequently, they reduce their students to the same (McNeil, 2005; Au, 2007; 2010; 2011; Diamond, 2007; Hursh, 2007; Berliner, 2011). It is important to note that this process is bidirectional in the sense that teachers are on the one hand subjected to the institutional logic of assessment, but on the other hand reproduce this logic in their practice. This corresponds to the literature on competence orientation in Germany in general (e.g. Zeitler, Heller & Asbrand, 2013) and in the foreign language classroom in particular (e.g. Tesch, 2010), which conceptualizes this process as a bidirectional mechanism. External impulses are fed into the system by administrative means, via curricula for example, and then are recontextualized (Fend, 2006) by teachers in their everyday practice.

Our three studies share the notion of this bidirectional conceptualization of how systemic pressures and teachers' actions interact. It points at the assumption that actions of individuals in a social system depend on a reciprocal process of meaning-making: On entering their job, teachers are exposed to an existing structure which provides a normative framework, i.e. defines what is considered normal and functional given the defined purposes of the organization. This structure limits the possible actions of the individuals and at the same time provides them with status, interactional rights, or resources. The irony of this is that every subordination of an individual to an existing system empowers this individual to transform the very organization s/he has bowed to.

Following this logic, being and becoming a professional teacher means finding and shaping a place in the organizational structure which is reasonably functional for the organizational norms and reasonably truthful to the individual norms as well as compatible to the habitus of the professional. It then means dealing with the unavoidable tensions between these different levels of norm and habitus (e.g. Rosemann & Bonnet, 2018; Bonnet & Hericks, 2019). These negotiations are interactional in nature given that, according to symbolic interactionism, meaning emerges in social intercourse (Blumer, 1969, p. 2).

The three studies here reflect this interplay, though the partners in the negotiation shift somewhat from context to context.

We analyze the interactions across participants using a reconstructive approach to capture participants' points of view within this process of meaning-making. We

- use open and interactional data, such as authentic social intercourse, group discussions, interviews;
- subject these data-sets to a sequential analysis, which reconstructs meaning from interpreting interactional sequences rather than from coding individual utterances; and
- analyze the textual deep structure of transcripts by looking not only at what is being said, but on how it is being said.

In the following three studies we examine meaning-making and positioning in different data-sets with the overarching question of how real and perceived pressures influence the teachers' actions (particularly with respect to how teachers conceptualize their students and their learning), in what ways these pressures are external or internal, and how the resulting tensions between norms and habitus are negotiated.

### **3 | STUDY 1: CURRICULAR AND ASSESSMENT PRESSURE ON THE MICRO LEVEL – MENTEES AND MENTORS NEGOTIATING THE PRESSURE IN INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION**

The first study focuses on interactions between student teachers and their mentor teachers while planning or reflecting upon English lessons. A frequently uttered claim is that throughout these mentoring conversations, mentors should "assist the mentee in linking and seeing the relevance of various kinds of knowledge derived from various sources" (Malderez, 2009, pp. 263). However,

students frequently report that they perceive discrepancies between what is being taught in university-based seminars and what they experience during school-placements. The research interest, therefore, is to examine which norms are verbalized within mentoring conversations, which tensions might arise between perceived norms and how these are being negotiated by student and mentor teachers. The sample consists of 12 groups, each consisting of one mentor teacher and two student teachers in a master program for future TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) teachers. Each group recorded one mentoring conversation in preparation for a lesson, subsequently conducted the lesson and then recorded the conversation reflecting upon the lesson afterwards.

### 3.1 | METHODOLOGICAL FRAME AND METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

In order to explore the relationship between knowledge, norms, and social practice, this study relates to the sociology of knowledge. The basic underlying assumption is that social practice can be conceptualized as a meaning-making process (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 1966). In order to reconstruct this process, it is necessary to differentiate between communicative and conjunctive knowledge. Communicative knowledge is represented on an explicit level and can immediately be verbalized by an agent. It comprises theories about one's actions, justifications and norms, for example (cf. Bohnsack, 2014, p. 37). In contrast, conjunctive knowledge cannot be accessed directly, but is "tacit" (Polanyi, 1958) or "incorporated" in the sense that it is the underlying logic of agents' actions. This latter kind of knowledge can only be reconstructed from social practice itself. It is important to note that the researchers "do not presume or presuppose that they know more than the actors [i.e. agents, as we call them in this paper] in the field, but that those actors [i.e. agents] themselves do not really know what exactly they know" (Bohnsack, Pfaff & Weller, 2010, p. 101). The method corresponding to this methodological frame is the documentary method.

While during the 1990s and early 2000s, the focus of documentary research has been on reconstructing implicit knowledge, more recent documentary studies have shifted attention to working out the relationships between explicit and implicit knowledge (cf. Bohnsack, 2014). This relationship has been conceptualized as the tension between habitus, which lies on the level of implicit knowledge, and norm, which is located on the level of explicit knowledge. Bonnet and Hericks (2019) have specifically adapted this theoretical frame to research language teacher professionalization. They point out that the interplay between implicit and explicit knowledge shapes teacher professionalization (ibid.). Following this line of thought, teachers are constantly being confronted with norms about teaching: institutional norms, i.e. expectations regarding what they are supposed to do as teachers, and norms of identity, which encompass their own expectations what a "good teacher" should be like, for example. However, these norms are not purely external, since the teachers in turn perceive them through the lens of their habitus. They go through a constant process of positioning themselves with regard to these norms.

How can we gain access to perceived norms and the teachers' habitus? The documentary method is a way to systematically reconstruct the underlying logic of social practice from documents such



- 274 Sf: Effectively, they ONLY learned one (.) or possibly two numbers (.) the one  
 275 they wrote down and maybe the one they had to spell out.  
 [...]
- 286 M: Strictly speaking if you want to keep count (.) the bingo in the beginning?  
 287 they wrote down NINE numbers? spelled in full, that is.
- 288 Sf: Right.
- 289 M: And they also wrote one CARD? in a special case at that one table two cards (.)  
 290 that equals that equals- in that lesson, they have written (.) eleven words,  
 291 plus (.) the sentence on the board. That REALLY ISN'T a lot.
- 292 Sf: Mhm.

In his proposition, the mentor (M) on the surface level distances himself from the question about the lesson goal by calling it “stupid” (260). However, he then asks Sf to read out the lesson goal (263) and afterwards rephrases his initial question (cf. 260 f.), this time asking it himself (267). He thus verbalizes the institutional norm that within each lesson, a predefined goal should be reached. This norm is attributed to a group that M refers to as “they” (260) and that is located in “probationary training” (ibid.). Therefore, “they” can be understood as teacher educators/evaluators (*Fachleiter\*innen*)<sup>1</sup>. In spite of his verbatim distancing from this question, M takes on the role of a teacher educator, and continues to do so throughout the conversation.

Along with this norm comes the need for the student teacher to justify the outcome of his or her teaching. The initial lesson goal: to “raise the pupils’ awareness” (264 ff.), conceptualizes language learning as a process of becoming aware of linguistic structures. This initial goal is in a harsh contrast with how the group then discusses whether or not it has been reached. In order to assess the outcome, Sf starts counting how many numbers the pupils have “learned” (274 f.). She deduces the number of learnt words from the number of words the pupils have written or spelled (cf. 275), thus equating writing and spelling with learning. The following elaboration by M follows this line of thought, as well. It is even a climax: Whereas Sf counts how many new numbers the pupils have written or spelled, M now “keep[s] count” of how many words have been written down in total, thus limiting ‘what counts’ to writing. Interestingly, both of them name only productive skills, writing and spelling. The receptive skills, reading and listening, are not taken into account. The underlying logic is that the group is giving evidence for the outcome of the lesson, and that this evidence needs to be as solid and sturdy as possible. In the context of accountability, language production, especially writing, is prioritized over reception. The process of language learning, which in the lesson aim originally had been conceived as open and uncertain, now becomes closed – limited to productive skill development – due to the need to measure it.

1 *Fachleiter\*innen* are expert teachers that act as full- or part-time teacher educators/evaluators and are employed by the state institute of education. They both run the seminars of the 18-months-long probationary teaching (the second phase of teacher education in Germany after students have taken their M.Ed. degrees) and assess probationary teachers at the end of the course.

The comparative analysis of further sequences has shown that the institutional norm of reaching the lesson goal, or, to put it on a more abstract level, of teacher assessment on the basis of student learning, guides the way the group talks about language learning. The group's frame of orientation can best be described by the term visibility. The perceived need to justify their teaching leads to a closure in the sense that only learning processes which are visible and can be measured are of value. The group's focus is on how the lesson would be assessed by an imagined examiner, as it becomes apparent in the mentor's conclusion "this is how you have to stage it" (354 f.). The passage culminates in Sf's conclusion: "It doesn't really MATTER what you do, the main thing is that the lesson goal fits [...] because I mean you can have a good PLAN but then you're being torn apart because they say <nice PLAN but doesn't fit the lesson goal>" (380-387). Thus, the pressure to withstand future assessment perceived by the students, outweighs the concern for the pupils' learning processes.

On the textual level, the institutional norm is represented through the passive voice ("you're being torn apart") and a vague "they", as in M's turn "yeah because then they argue <You didn't really GRASP what you did>" (389). The group explicitly distances themselves from this anticipated practice of assessment by calling it "mean" (382 f.), voiced simultaneously by M and Sf. In homology to the sequence above, there is a discrepancy between the distancing on the explicit level (cf. the "stupid question" 260) and the reproduction of the practice of assessment on the implicit level by M: "but you haven't really grasped yourselves what was the NEW thing that you did here" (392 f.). Thus, the anticipated assessment in probationary training is voiced and thereby re-enacted by M in the mentoring conversation.

To conclude, the institutional norm of teacher assessment on the basis of student learning coincides with a frame of orientation of visibility with regard to language learning. This can be interpreted as a habitus-dimension of devaluing non-explicit learning or acquisition respectively, which cannot be assessed as easily as chunks of explicit knowledge. In order to contextualize this finding, it has to be added that within the master-students' teaching internship, their practical teaching skills are not assessed. However, the anticipated assessment in the future phase of probationary training already seeps into the group's practice here and now. It is important to say that this perceived norm is "virtual" (Goffman, 1963, p. 2) in the sense that it is an expectation towards what an imagined teacher educator will expect of their teaching in the future. Nevertheless, it clearly impacts the way the group speaks about language learning, and, therefore makes pedagogical decisions.

The case study presented here is not singular within the sample: The imminent probationary period is a recurring motif or almost a 'myth'. Whenever it appears, it is accompanied by a tendency towards closure and measurability. As the same result has been found with respect to PE (Pallesen, Schierz & Haverich, 2018), we have reason to believe that it is systemic and goes beyond individual subjects.



#### 4 | STUDY 2: CURRICULAR AND ASSESSMENT PRESSURE ON THE MESO-LEVEL: HOW IN-SERVICE-TEACHERS DISCOVER WHAT PART THEY PLAY IN CREATING PRESSURE IN THEIR CLASSROOMS AND IN THEIR SCHOOL

As the first case study captures a very early stage in a teacher's biography, the next question is which role exam and curricular pressures play for experienced teachers. In what follows, we will present a case from a study on cooperative learning in the foreign language classroom (Bonnet & Hericks, 2014, 2019). The three-year-longitudinal study documented the attempts of four teachers to implement co-operative learning in their TEFL-classrooms. Teacher interviews were held at four times: at the beginning of the project and at the end of each of the three years. It is important to note that the researchers did not interfere with the teachers' activities, but the teachers followed their own ideas and developmental trajectories.

The theoretical frame is identical with the preceding case study. Again, the sociology of knowledge with its differentiation between explicit and implicit knowledge serves as the theoretical background; and again we reconstruct how teachers' habitus interact with the norms they perceive using the documentary method. We will focus on one case from the study, a teacher we'll call SB. At the beginning of the study, she had been a teacher of English and PE for five years. She teaches at a German academic secondary school (*Gymnasium*). Her case is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the complexity of pressures as conflicting external and internal forces.

In the very first interview (cf. passage below), which was in her fifth year, SB sets the stage for her participation in the project. She uses the metaphor of a "corset" to explain how she feels that administrative rules and regulations keep her from teaching the way she'd like to teach. The interesting question is how she perceives these pressures, reacts to them and how this bears out in her classroom practice. In the first interview, SB explains her motivation of participating in the project of turning her TEFL classroom into a place of co-operative learning and elaborates on how she became more and more convinced and determined that co-operative learning would be the solution to her increasing uneasiness about various aspects of her teaching. In one of these passages the two conflicting norms become apparent:

*Where I thought, that somehow makes sense at last! Students decide on their own pace: <OK I've got it, so can I take the test now?>, it is no longer these, those pressure, which the teacher is exerting. <So, have you got it? If Yes! Super, on we go to the next topic. If not. Tough luck, so you have to revise it yourself and by the way; we'll sit the test in two weeks.> So, and erm, I felt that was a pretty good idea to reduce the pressure, from everybody, so from the teacher as well, erm, to be the comic relief<sup>2</sup>, to somehow perform on that stage upfront and, and, to teach content to be learned, but really to be of assistance to students' learning in the classroom. (SB 1: 636-644)*

2 The original term she uses is "Pausenclown". It is a set metaphor in German. Literally, it refers to a clown appearing during the interlude of the main show. In colloquial German, it means that somebody makes efforts to capture somebody else's attention but isn't successful.

The passage creates a juxtaposition between two opposite horizons of comparison. On one hand, there is the positive horizon of the imagined co-operative future, in which students can structure their own learning and even determine their own examinations. This positive horizon of comparison is identified with teaching content that is meaningful to students and teachers alike. It is contrasted with what SB perceives as her current practice, in which teachers are clowns who play on a stage and perform meaningless chunks of content. In actual fact they are not even part of the main act but only appear during the interlude. In what is conceptualized as current normality, teachers exert pressure and cynically dismiss their students' struggling with this situation.

As in various other passages, SB displays a normative orientation towards independent student learning. Throughout the interview, she uses phrases such as "I wish that my students can work more independently" (SB1: 698), or "that I could withdraw a little bit" (SB1: 711), or "I was well pleased how the students started working with the dictionary on their own [...] and you could see ok that is erm, that is going to stick if they research it on their own" (SB1: 674) to describe it as her identity norm to increase students' autonomy and in doing so optimize their learning. The interviews contain episodes about a former job of hers, in which her colleagues and herself successfully organized events together and how their boss provided a lot of freedom for them to organize their work. These narratives suggest that SB's identity-norm of self-determination, meaningfulness and co-operative work might even have rubbed off into her habitus.

That said, one would expect SB to be able to establish a stable co-operative practice in her classroom. This is only partly the case, though. Lesson transcripts show various elements of instructivist closure in her teaching. One recurring pattern is that when approaching co-operative groups, she initiates closed initiation-response-feedback (I-R-F) sequences dealing with grammar or spelling. Another pattern is her concluding co-operative lessons with a spontaneous teacher-centered sequence in order to sum up the lesson's results. When reflecting on these lessons, she repeatedly utters disbelief in the interviews that she did what she did. This pattern, which seems contradictory to SB herself, can be explained by looking at the data from the second year of the project. In the transcript, an opposed norm-habitus-pair surfaces:

*Yes, I'd actually like to be able to really restrain myself a bit and also, somehow, most of all, erm, trust in the students for them to actually do that. Well, it is not only like this, once one such a such a tricky situation became or if I have the feeling that everything is under pressure, then teachers take the reins real quick and think you have to somehow control all that right now and pulling myself out of this, with peace of mind, and to see that the students are getting that done and also really work on their own. (SB 2: 511-518)*

On the one hand, this sequence refers to an organizational or institutional norm. SB talks about the obligation or even necessity to control everything which clearly associates the teachers' need to exert ubiquitous control with an anonymous external authority which subjects her to this imperative. On the other hand, this exertion of control is construed not only as an external

pressure. By using the impersonal third person, SB conceptualizes this imperative as a collective normality. This means that it is also part of her own everyday practice and therefore an element of her professional habitus. She makes this clear by framing the respective actions of taking “the reins” in the first person singular (“I have the feeling”). In other words, it is her very own usual reaction of reverting to disciplinary action and instructivist teaching, which she is referring to here. This means that the norm of exerting control and closing open situations is also in correspondence with an element of closure of her own habitus.

To sum up this second aspect, one can conclude that in the second year of the project, the tensions SB is under have been brought to the forefront. After two years of changing her classroom into a co-operative place, it has become apparent that the initial construction (student-oriented identity-norm vs. institutional norm of instructivist and controlling closure) is too simple. The conflict is more complex, because the vault lines are threefold: The student-oriented norm of SB clashes with the closure-oriented element of her habitus and a closure-oriented norm. They are related to each other in the mode of an implicit reflection (cf. Bohnsack, 2017, pp. 165-167). So, let us look at the third year to see whether the conflict can be resolved.

In the final interview, SB is asked whether she is using co-operative learning in other groups and whether she will carry on with it. Her answer is very clear: She will only do that if students already possess the necessary social and communicative skills. Otherwise, she will revert to her former practice of teacher-centered teaching. She explains this by referring to a ubiquitous practice of assessment on all levels: teachers assess students, parents assess teachers, teachers assess each other. The first aspect of this is that the necessary openness and uncertainty of co-operative or individualized learning create problems for the students.

*That [co-operative learning, AB] is really not possible in the Gymnasium system, I believe, unless, you really do it as an entire department. [...] But as you know, I'll hand the class over at some point and they have to work on with the textbook and some things will be presupposed for them to know, then I've got a problem with that. (SB 4: 384-388)*

*One has to be able to grade them so that they can somehow pass or as a consequence don't pass. (SB 4: 418f.)*

The problem that SB describes is primarily framed from the students' perspective: SB explains that the students will have problems with the next teacher, because the lack of curricular and performance control, which she considers a necessary feature of a co-operative and/or individualized classroom, cannot guarantee that students meet the expectations of their next teacher. On closer inspection, the phrase “I've got a problem with that”, reveals a second meaning. In this sense, SB actually says that the students' perceived lack of performance creates trouble for her as a teacher. This is fleshed out by other passages of the interview, in which she provides narrations of how she is held accountable by the subsequent teacher, who blames her for the students' perceived shortcomings and strongly doubts the validity of the grades she gave them.

The second passage is very interesting because it provides a different twist to the issue of grading. In this statement, the challenge that SB refers to is no longer the question whether her students are successful. The challenge is simply whether students can be assessed properly. This procedure eliminates any uncertainty. It replaces the uncertainty going along with accounting for individual learning trajectories by putting students through a totally juxtapositional sorting mechanism: either pass or fail. The use of pronouns (“one”, “them”, “they”) removes any personal individuality and creates two anonymous groups: the unpersonal collective of teachers, which the generalized “one” makes her a part of and the third person plural, which conceptualizes the students as an amorphous and distanced collective.

While all the subsequent passages were focused on the teachers struggling against systemic and largely anonymous forces of closure, in the final year of the project a different source surfaces. From SB’s narratives and reports as well as from classroom transcripts it becomes apparent that the students themselves have a habitus of closure. When asked why SB would be very cautious about keeping co-operative learning up, she refers to her students as follows:

*They are still very much erm project oriented, product oriented. <Right we’re gonna do a project now and this project will look co-operative and there has to be a product which I can measure somehow> We’re really permanently having this measurability-phobia erm and that is just something, which is in each other’s way. (SB4, 443-446)*

In this passage she refers to the students’ product-orientation which is ultimately test-driven. Whatever authentic meaning SB has in mind for a task she sets, the students will reframe it as an assessment, which in turn means that the students invest precisely as much energy as they think they need for the grade they want. The phrase “look co-operative” suggests that a co-operative appearance is more important than a co-operative substance. The way she uses the present tense together with the temporal adverb “still” conceptualizes this as-if-attitude as almost impossible to overcome as it has remained more or less stable over the three years of the project.

The reason for this stability is given in the metaphor “measurability-phobia”, which conveys the complex amalgam of norms and associated anxieties. SB refers to the common practice as a medical condition, which prevents real co-operativity from developing. When asked, who “we” is, she replies “we school”. Thus, she spells out how she is an agent of the very pressure she initially attributed to the system. In other words: She acknowledges the “creature” (Bausell & Glazier, 2018, p. 309) within her, without actually becoming fully aware of it. The metaphor contains even more, though. From what she pointed out before, one could have expected something such as a measuring-mania: Everybody assesses everybody. Her term goes beyond that in two ways. “Phobia” expresses anxiety, which means that the existing practice haunts teachers and students and makes them feel heavily uncomfortable. Furthermore, “measurability” even intensifies the horror, because the object of the anxiety

is not just exams but the fact that these exams could actually be valid. With respect to SB this means that it dawns on her that she cannot simply dismiss and shake off her colleagues' verdict, but that it actually eats away at her professional identity. This in turn means that carrying on with co-operative learning would only be possible if this corroding effect would be compensated from somewhere else. This is where the project ended. On this basis, we cannot say how SB's story went on. We know that she has indeed reduced the co-operativity of her classroom again. We do not know however how far she has gone in dealing with the conflicts that have emerged.

## **5 | STUDY 3: CURRICULAR AND ASSESSMENT PRESSURE ON THE MACRO-LEVEL: HOW HIGH STAKES TESTING IN THE U.S. SOCIALIZES TEACHERS**

Studies 1 and 2 illustrate how the assessment orientation, present on various levels in the German education system, indirectly and overtly bares down on student teachers and experienced teachers alike. Across professional stages, teachers take on the language and logics of accountability and assessment and become part of that system, despite parts of their habitus or certain identity norms that call for something very different. This third study examines how initially licensed US teachers, faced with an escalating testing culture, experienced and engaged one another in high-stakes testing within quarterly Community of Practice (CoP) discussion groups over the course of six-years.

CoPs, which emphasize collegial dialogue, are typical components of teacher induction models in the U.S. They are largely driven by participant agendas and, thus, allow new teachers to “shape and take on new identities“ (Chuddapah & Clayton, 2011, p. 64). The research interest of this study is to examine how newly licensed teachers described high stakes testing in relation to their professional work over an extended period of time and to explore how they shaped one another's' orientations to high stakes testing via a close study of their dialogic interactions.

### **5.1 | METHODOLOGICAL FRAME AND METHOD OF INTERPRETATION**

Data for this study was gathered between 2009-2015, in an induction program designed to support the professional development of recent program graduates in their first five years of practice. Participants (51 elementary teachers) met quarterly in small CoP groups (6-8 participants each) to share dilemmas of practice and receive feedback and support from their peers. While graduate students were present at these sessions, participants steered the direction of the discussions. All conversations were audio taped and verbatim transcripts were constructed of each session. Additional data collected included field notes taken by graduate assistants, used to enhance and add context to verbatim transcripts, and participant reported information about themselves and their school contexts. Of the 51 total participants, 14 (23%) participated across the entire six year study. Participants reported teaching in a diverse set of school contexts, all of which were affected by intensifying testing requirements for students and teachers alike.

We engaged in two rounds of data analysis. First, we conducted a longitudinal discourse analysis, focused on how participant talk about testing shifted over time. We began with year 6 data and then worked backwards, coding for references to accreditation and testing that emerged within participant dilemmas of practice. This thematic analysis revealed three distinct stages of data, each reflecting how testing increasingly influenced teacher autonomy and identity. Across the six years of discourse data, participants frequently referenced high-stakes testing, the prevalence of testing as a topic increasing as the stakes intensified over time. Discussions included both explicit descriptions of increased burdens on curricular and pedagogical autonomy as well as nuanced commentary that linked mounting difficulties in professional and student relationships with testing. In the second round of data analysis, we engaged a critical micro-analysis, looking closely at the uptake of testing language both within and across speaker turns. Specifically, we coded patterns of language teachers used to reflect students (theirs and their colleagues) across the three stages of escalating testing context.

## **5.2 | THE CONTEXT OF HIGH-STAKES: TESTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE UNITED STATES**

Standardized tests have existed since the advent of schools in the United States. However, it is only in the past fifty years that these tests have been deemed “high-stakes”: not only are they about individual performance, but they are also about the nation’s performance writ large. In 1983, the A Nation at Risk report, “predicted that unless public education received a major overhaul and unless expectations for student achievement were raised, America’s economic security would be severely compromised” (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, p. 4). This report led to an increased focus on accountability, particularly in the form of standardized tests. Accountability efforts within schools and classrooms rose across the decades that followed.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 mechanized the auditing and regulation of all schools, and the teachers and students within them with the purported purpose of increasing achievement in schools for all students. However, the implementation has had much of the opposite effect. Fear of punishment has led schools to thwart the system – and students – to save themselves. “Students who either pass or are close to passing the test become valued commodities and those students who need the most help are left to fend for themselves” (Hursh, 2005, p. 614), often dropping out. At the district and school level, consequences for “failure” to reach required schoolwide scores include school takeover. Within classrooms, standardized testing has influenced curriculum, teaching and learning (Au, 2007). At the curricular level, curriculum areas taught in schools have narrowed, privileging the tested domains of reading and math over science and history, for example, and a pivoting to scripted curriculum (Renter, Scott, Kober, Chudowsly, Joftus & Zabala, 2006; Zellmer, Frontier & Pheifer, 2006; Au, 2007). With regard to teaching, teachers spend a significant amount of time on test preparation in their classrooms, not to mention time spent on testing itself. Nelson (2013) found that the time students spend taking tests ranged from 20 to 50 hours per year in heavily tested grades. In addition, students spend 60 to more than 110 hours per year in test prep in high-stakes testing grades. Many might argue that “high-stakes testing

so distorts and corrupts education that their continued use seriously endangers the educational profession and limits the learning outcomes of our youth” (Nichols & Berliner, 2007, p. 8).

This study examines the experience of teachers caught in the web of the NCLB era. How were they influenced by the testing influx? Furthermore, how did they influence one another as they sought to wade through an escalating testing context?

### 5.3 | DISCURSIVE UPTAKE ACROSS DATA

Data analysis reflected the many ways the accountability and standardized testing machine infiltrated participants’ talk, not only thematically but also discursively. Furthermore, close examination of teachers’ discourse revealed the ways that teachers’ patterns in many ways began to reflect the discourse prevalent in the accountability movement. Here we discuss one pattern we noted across the years of data collection: participants’ growing use of nominalization in their discourse.

Nominalization is the process of creating nouns out of words (generally verbs and adjectives) that are not nouns. This leads often to the use of passive rather than active voice, obscuring the “human being” involved in a particular action.

*Nominalizations give priority to actions rather than to the people responsible for them... [and] often they conceal power relationships and reduce our sense of what’s truly involved in a transaction. As such, they are an instrument of manipulation, in politics and in business. They emphasize products and results, rather than the processes by which products and results are achieved (Hitchings, 2013).*

Furthermore, nominalization is the process of “substitut[ing] abstract entities for human beings” (Sword, 2012, para. 2): individuals become things, numbers and generalizations rather than individually identifiable people.

In our analysis of participants’ discourse, we recognized a collective trend toward nominalization as one example from the data that reflected the teachers’ internalization of the testing apparatus. This became particularly apparent in what we referred to as Phase Three of our data collection, from 2013-2015, as the state of North Carolina began tying teacher evaluation to student proficiency on standardized exams. In other words, this discursive obfuscation of the student as human coincided with testing as an official gate for both students and their teachers.

Evidence of nominalization appeared in how the participants began talking about their students in this phase. One example is how teachers’ replaced students’ names, descriptions of their learning processes, and individual experiences with numbers associated with students’ test scores. It is important to note that while standardized exams were ubiquitous at this point in the study timeline, the exams (and thus scoring mechanisms) often differed across districts, thus the meaning of test scores can be hard to decipher even for those familiar with the US testing context.

Regardless, the pattern of talk across teachers from different districts reflected the use of numbers to define and categorize students. Examples of participants' talk included the following:

- Is there a district coach who could help with the *low 2s*?
- So *every kindergartener is a 2*, copy and paste.
- *I have a 4* right now.
- So we're thinking, some of those *bubble kids* who are borderline, this will be able to, you know, help them at the end of the year.
- So 438 was the on track cutoff, right? So if they got a 442 or above, they automatically go to 4th grade. So *the 338, 339, 340, 341s, they might even*, even though they got the letter that they were on track to pass, they don't pass.

Coupled with the overwhelming use of numbers to stand in for students is the use of collective pronouns reflected in teachers' discourse. Individual students not only morph from individuals with names to digits but, furthermore, to collective numbers as in "low 2's" or "bubble kids" or "the 341's". In addition, the term "copy and paste" reflects that every kindergartener is, in essence, the same: *They are all 2's. Copy and paste*. This preponderance of numerical discourse among these teachers in their first through fifth years of teaching is illustrative of Greene's (2005) argument of the beginning educator's tendency to "identify their students by grades and test scores, [thus] depriving the young of a sense of agency" (p. 78). Students essentially disappeared, morphing into "abstract entities" (Sword, 2012, para 3). Like the first case study, the focus for these teachers turned to what was easily "measurable" and discernable rather than on what was uncertain or more complex: the real messiness of teaching and learning and of kids' individual experiences.

Perhaps more alarming than the ways the teachers described their students were the ways they engaged each other in constructing students as such. Participants began to frame each other's dilemmas around the testing apparatus. They built their narratives *collectively*, without question. Take for example the jointly constructed narrative below, as Justine describes one of her struggling students:

*Justine: So I guess my student is a little bit further than that. We have two reading things. He's a BR which is a beginning reader...and that's for SRI scholastic reading inventory. And then in class he is a D, so that's like kinda kindergarten level.*

*Nancy: That's like "see spot run".*

*Sally: Yeah they are supposed to be out of D by the end of kindergarten.*

*Justine: yeah so he's...going to be moving to 5th grade. Because he is EC and he's like getting these services and like I've been told retaining him is not really my choice.*

The use of acronyms across this short excerpt reflects the teacher's use of nominalization. The student, never named, is a "BR", a "D" and "EC". Rather than question Justine's framing of her student in these ways, her colleagues ratify and affirm her use of testing terms. The depth of



the impact of the apparatus is shown by the use of the copula. The teachers do not say that the students “perform on level D” or “Their test score is 341”. The teachers say, instead, that the student “is” a “D” and students are the “341s”. The teachers thus dismiss the complex identity of the student, reducing his or her existence from a human being to a test score. These findings indicate that the norms of teaching in the time of standardized assessments have essentially collectively become part of the teachers’ habitus. Lost in the process are the students as individual actors, reflecting in some ways the reality experienced by SB in the second case study.

#### 5.4 | FRAME OF INTERPRETATION

The prevalence of testing as a topic across participants’ dilemmas of practice, and the undeniably somber tenor with which testing was described, prompted us to theorize high-stakes testing as a Foucauldian apparatus. According to Foucault (1980), an apparatus is a pervasive, inescapable network that incessantly brandishes power over and within a social body. The apparatus is a “highly intricate mosaic” that coerces participation via a “complex system of relations” (ibid., p. 62). The apparatus maintains a strong hold because it operates at various interlocking levels. In our study, the apparatus became evident in the impact of national and state policy discourse on the teachers undergoing induction. Participants in this study were unable to maintain long-term strategies of resistance because the apparatus became infused into their day-to-day curricular and pedagogical choices. Eventually, as NCLB took stronger hold, student results on standardized testing became a contingency for professional licensure, a factor in job security, and an incentive for supplemental pay.

As evident from the analysis of our data across the six years, teachers’ discourse reflected the ways that standardized frames were becoming part of the teachers’ individual habitus and collective norm. The early data, captured at the beginning of the newest standardization wave, suggested a sense of opposition to the looming testing cloud. Later data suggested that the teachers’ own identities were being subsumed by this testing frame, by the apparatus itself (Bausell & Glazier, 2018). However, that is not to say that the teachers did not recognize this shift to their sense of self as teacher. Many did, as evidenced by comments including: “The teachers don’t feel like teachers because they’re not. They’re test givers.” And “we have all these meetings about growth and numbers. And it’s just really disheartening and hard to do. And we actually had the principal say to us ‘Your job is to teach to the test. That is your job’. She repeated it over and over again. [...] When she said that, it really changed my mood on how the whole year was going to go.” Finally, one teacher reflected:

*I think the issue, too, is that we, and speaking about we as teachers, I think we judge each other based off of that data. Like when I sit in on these district meetings, like, everyone talks crap about my school because the data isn’t always so awesome. The county, it’s always those teachers suck over there because it’s the lowest in the county, when they don’t recognize a lot of times, the situations we deal with. So I think that we have a cultural problem, too. It’s not just people outside of education but us.*

Not only did the teachers recognize the effect of testing practices on themselves and their students, but they also recognized their own participation in maintaining the apparatus. They saw themselves embedded in a system that left them one of two options: either play the regulatory game or quit teaching.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

Our analyses have shown striking parallels between the U.S. and Germany and have highlighted very profound problems of how curricular and assessment pressures impact teachers' professionalism and practice. They have detrimental effects on teacher-learner-relationships, by dehumanizing this relationship and reducing students to be just numbers or competence levels. This fundamentally ignores the inter-human-relationship-aspect of learning and thus hinders social learning and personal growth. Furthermore, it fundamentally dismisses the uncertain nature of learning. On a process level this means that there may be cognitive and motivational losses, because students do not develop a sense of ownership and therefore reduce their investment in the respective classrooms (Johnson & Johnson, 2003, pp. 138-139). There are also losses on the level of content, because the dismissal of students' relevances means that their sense of what is urgent for their generation is lost and consequently motivation drops (Dörnyei, 2001, pp. 62-66). This is a problem from a humanist point of view, but also creates problems for society at large. First, it means that students' potential beyond the measurable core remains totally invisible and potentially underdeveloped. Second, the innovative function of school as an agent of addressing relevant issues is blocked. Third, if students experience school as oppressive and irrelevant to themselves and to society at large, they will disinvest in the so-called democratic system this school claims to legitimize.

Our studies suggest that the entire complex of curricular and exam pressures and their impact is anxiety driven as teachers and students alike fear negative consequences if they don't adhere to the practice of ubiquitous testing. The studies also suggest that this complex is bi- if not multi-directional. This means that testing and mutual control are not only exerted by teachers on students. They are also exerted by teachers on each other. And it is put into place as early as initial teacher education, which means that within the entire process of teacher socialization (from school-student to university student to experienced teacher) there is not a single phase without curricular and assessment pressures being exerted.

This said, there is the question how high-stakes testing in the US compares to assessment orientation and standardization in Germany. The comparison between SB and the American teachers' talk on their practice of mutual assessment provides the most decisive bearings to this question. SB is still undecided whether the mutual assessment may actually be valid or not. And she is rather anxious that it could. In contrast, her American colleagues have already been pushed past that point. The testing apparatus actually provides the numbers, which are attributed objective validity and which are legitimized by the NCLB discourse, in order to judge teachers' – and, most dramatically, each others' – competence. In doing so, they are reduced – and reduce one another – to test scores.

This not only dehumanizes professional discourse between colleagues but also dismisses crucial parts of teacher professionalism. And what is more, in creating a crude chain of direct cause and effect between teachers' actions and student performance, the teaching and accountability discourse displays a shocking ignorance of the most basic principle of so many theories of learning, i.e. the fundamentally uncertain relation between instruction and learning. In this sense, high-stakes testing in the U.S. has been pushed to a point which has not been reached in Germany. Our analyses strongly suggest, though, that this next step is imminent if current moves towards standardization are intensified. In this light, the German shift towards competence orientation may intensify the very pressures it was once claimed to aim at reducing.

What do our findings suggest as strategies for teacher education? Our analyses clearly indicate that both in the U.S. and Germany, there is a strong tendency of an assessment-driven (Germany) or even high-stakes-testing-driven (U.S.) practice to reproduce itself. The fact of this has already been pointed out in teacher research in both the English-speaking (i.e. "apprenticeship of observation", Lortie, 1975) and German-speaking (i.e. reproduction of the secondary-school-student-habitus, Helsper, 2018) discussion on teacher professionalism. Accordingly, studies on "phases of practice" come to conclude that their professionalizing effect is limited and that, in fact, internships may even have detrimental effects (Hascher, 2012). This idea is by no means new, and the effect of the reproduction of dysfunctional strategies has been described for many subjects (for PE cf. Schierz & Pallesen, 2016; Schierz & Miethling, 2017).

What is new, however, is that our analyses add to this an idea of how this reproduction works on the different levels of the school system. One of the most alarming results is that the assessment and testing habitus – which both teachers and students display – is stronger than opposing impulses of the teachers. This suggests that if teacher education should stand any chance to beat the "creature" of testing, it has to provide opportunities for intense work on the level of norm, but particularly on the level of habitus. This means, it has to be reflective and it has to be experiential. Our findings suggest that student-teachers need fields of experience that allow for alternative practice. And they need a strong element of support and opportunities for reflecting on and distancing themselves from the practices they encounter in schools and relate those experiences to their own habitus and norms. Only with this kind of support will they be able to find their own way of dealing with the tension between pressures and the imperatives of closure they create and the uncertainty, which is a necessary and constitutive element of any pedagogical interaction.

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