

Exploring Student Teachers' "Stuckness": Assembling an Alternative to the Logic of Representation in Teacher Education

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Student teachers' stuck moments are a standard feature of teacher education. Habitually, these moments are framed through a representational logic where stuckness is the inevitable result of a perceived divide between theory and practice, or an expected part of the learning to teach process. This work aims to trouble these reductionist explanations. It proposes how an alternative mode of thinking, a logic of assemblage—and the Deleuzoguattarian concept of assemblage—can generate more capacious framings of stuckness and offer new ways of sensing and be(coming) in teacher education.

On a March morning in 2004, I drove to Franklin Elementary School with my fellow student teacher, Rebecca, in a clunky 1996 Mercury Villager minivan. We had just pulled into our school's parking lot when an inexplicable and paralyzing force took over. Although my shame and embarrassment around the episode make it difficult to recall particular aspects, certain details never fade. I remember the sweat pooling underneath my turtleneck sweater, the gritty taste of metal in my mouth, my clammy hands gripping the steering wheel, and my eyes glaring at the smiling faces on the cover of a required course text, "How to Be an Effective Teacher: First Days of School." The car engine was still running as I fought hard to control my breath. Rebecca, already outside the car, tapped the hood and motioned for me to hurry up: "We're gonna be late!" With a shaky hand, I rolled down the window and yelled, "I'm sorry, Rebecca. I just can't do this. I can't go in." All of a sudden, I hit the gas and sped off, watching a flustered Rebecca—"WTF?!"—and a wobbling hubcap through the rearview mirror. I never made it inside my student teaching placement that day. Instead, I spent the ensuing hours curled under a blanket in my dorm room wondering what I was doing with my life.

My field supervisor, who heard about the incident from a concerned Rebecca, attributed my act to my "unwillingness to embrace discomfort." She had apparently witnessed moments like mine before. That night, she left a note in my student mailbox with the following quote:

“Not only must you accept this adversity, you must love it, seek it out, communicate with it, delve into it, increase it. – Felix Guattari”.¹ Although I had no idea who “this Gu-ATARI® guy” was, the note—and the residue left by that experience—lingered.

Almost twenty years after I hightailed it out of Franklin’s parking lot, I am now a university professor dedicated to teacher preparation. In this role—and perhaps in some sort of twisted karmic retribution—I have witnessed myriad versions of this parking lot scenario among my own student teachers: moments of excruciating emotional intensity that are often difficult to describe, yet visceral and palpable precisely because of the physical effect(s) they leave on the body (for example, hyperventilating, burst of tears, exhaustion). Student teachers describe these experiences as instances of uncertainty, frustration, and despair; moments when they feel, for lack of a better word, *stuck*.² For the purpose of this work, I define “stuck moments,” or “stuckness” as instances of incoherence or instability that manifest a surge of affects, or “bodily” impulses and “sensations.”³

These incidents are neither new nor unique to teacher education. In the research literature, these occurrences are frequently characterized as instances of crises, dissonance, or resistance, with stuck moments typically understood as an expression of the theory-practice gap.⁴ In other words, teacher candidates get stuck because they are unable to translate their theoretical knowledge (presumably acquired in a teacher preparation program) into classroom practice. Since much of this research is rooted, both implicitly and explicitly, in theories such as constructivism or conceptual change, stuck moments are typically described in one of two ways: 1) as a problematic “cognitive bottleneck”⁵ or “cognitive discrepancy”⁶ that needs to be bridged by a rational, self-aware, student teacher; or 2) as an emotional, educative experience that prospective teachers *should* face to become “changed”⁷ or “transformed.”⁸

I argue that these conceptualizations—stuckness as the result of the theory-practice gap and/or as an expected part of the learning to teach process—are tethered to what Deleuze and Guattari call a logic of representation. This logic centers the primacy of the human subject, organizes the world into hierarchical binaries, and assumes that reality can be accurately represented through language.⁹ Under this mode of thinking, for example, student teachers

are the locus/source of stuckness, theory is pitted against practice (with theory often privileged over the latter), and the ineffable stuck moments reported by student teachers are either ignored or explained away in reductionist ways (that is, stuckness is the result of a teacher's inability to bridge theory and practice). Although this logic anchors a great deal of scholarship in the field of education, its failure to account for the complexity of these affective experiences restrict new ways of imagining and be(coming) in teacher education.

In this article, I hope to achieve two purposes. First, I call attention to the problematic logic of representation that frequently undergirds the simplistic portrayals of student teachers' stuck moments and the theory-practice gap problem in teacher education. Second, I propose how an alternative kind of thought, a logic of assemblage, can prompt us to ruminate about stuckness and the theory-practice gap in more fecund ways. To accomplish these aims, I first outline the restrictive assumptions behind a logic of representation. Then, I describe the characteristics of a logic of assemblage and highlight how this mode of thinking can create more capacious understandings of stuckness, framings where the intensities of these experiences are both centered and honored. I end by theorizing stuck moments as an assemblage, or a moving network of forces and bodies that come together for a period of time and can affect what a student teacher can *do*. Rather than view stuck moments as instances that student teachers need to "get out of" or be "rescued from" (a logic of representation at work), I propose that these experiences brim with potentialities for rethinking teacher education.

THE LOGIC OF REPRESENTATION: A PROBLEMATIC CONSTRUCT

Stuck moments are often attributed to the theory-practice gap, yet little has been done to problematize the gap itself, or offer alternative framings of this problem. I contend that the theorization of student teachers' stuck moments as indicative of a divide between theory and practice actually operates from a problematic type of thinking known as the logic of representation.¹⁰ This logic, embedded within humanism¹¹ and emerging from the Enlightenment, works from a particular set of epistemological and ontological assumptions that reinforce a narrow way of thinking and shape a particular view of teacher

education.¹² These humanistic assumptions include the belief that there is an objective reality that exists; language and reason are *the* tools that can accurately study and reflect that reality; there are universal “truths” that can be known; and the (human) self is a rational, stable, and superior being.¹³

For French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), this logic of representation is the “oldest and weariest kind of thought” (5) because it works in an arborescent, or tree-like, manner.¹⁴ Like a tree with its trunk firmly grounded to singular spot, branches that reproduce along bifurcating lines and reach a particular endpoint, a logic of representation, *too*, is static, hierarchical, and only capable of unidirectional movement. Similarly, like the branches of a tree, this kind of thought “endlessly develops the law of the One that becomes two, then of the two that becomes four.”¹⁵ In other words, arborescent thinking works to re-produce itself, replicating more of the same, and thereby reinforcing dominant (and stagnant) patterns of seeing and studying the world.

We see this logic at work in the litany of scholarship on stuckness and the theory-practice problem in teacher education: we seem to *know* what stuckness *is* or *means*, place the human self (that is, the student teacher) at the core of stuckness, and assume that through *reason* (hence all the research/emphasis on the cognitive), we can bridge or close the divide between theory and practice and therefore avert moments of crisis. Little consideration, however, is given to how these conciliatory attempts are problematic—futile even—since they are still bound within a dualistic, representational logic that defines theory and practice as two separate entities, privileges reason over emotion, and centers the human as the sole active body, or agent, in any process.

To understand how this logic operates, let us revisit my own stuck moment. A representational logic—and the same kind of reasoning that arguably undergirds a significant part of teacher education research—might try to explain or rationalize the parking lot scenario, review the existing literature in search of plausible explanations, and then impose some meaning on the event (that is, “Erica’s stuck moment was likely prompted by her inability to take what she learned in her program and apply it to the real-life classroom.”) Alternatively, but still under this mode of thinking, we might decide to completely ignore my behavior in the car, dismissing it as an anomaly because its ineffability doesn’t

match the other branches (research studies) of the tree, or the established research corpus. Now while there is nothing inherently wrong with either analysis—both are plausible representations within the bounds of this logic—I argue that this kind of thinking forecloses other modes of knowing or attending to stuckness. After all, as seen (and sensed) in my own runaway experience, stuck moments do not often arise in ways that are easily decipherable or decoded. They can manifest across a myriad of spaces and time (a public-school classroom, a university program, but also a school parking lot). They can involve the nonhuman realm (a required course text, a 1996 Mercury Villager van), and they can provoke affective intensities that move or affect bodies in unexpected ways (prompting a perfectionist “Type A” student to simply ghost her field placement for the day).

To be clear, my purpose here is not to abandon this type of logic in teacher education (or refute the theory-practice gap). As Foucault (1984) reminds us, it is impossible to unshackle ourselves from a representational logic; the tools of critique were provided precisely by the logocentrism of the Enlightenment.¹⁶ However, it *is* possible—indeed, necessary—to trouble its fixed and reductionist practices. To unsettle the self-replicating ideas borne from this arborescent thought, I propose exploring student teachers' stuck moments through an alternative way of thinking, or what Deleuzian scholar, John Rajchman (2000) calls, a logic of assemblage¹⁷.

A LOGIC OF ASSEMBLAGE

A logic of assemblage challenges and critiques many of the humanist tenets of the logic of representation. Working from a different set of onto-epistemological assumptions, it proposes, for example, that there is no such thing as an objective reality; language is never transparent (and therefore incapable of capturing reality); meaning is always shifting; the human self is fractured and contradictory; and human *and* nonhumans occupy the same non-hierarchical plane. Unlike the tree-like workings of a representational logic (that is, ideas and propositions yoked to predetermined points that can only replicate themselves), Deleuze and Guattari use the figure of the rhizome—a horizontal, subterranean plant stem with no primary center—to describe how a logic of assemblage works. For Deleuze and Guattari, a rhizome operates from particular characteristics. These characteristics include (among others): (1) *connection* and *heterogeneity*: each

point in a rhizome is connected to another, often heterogenous, element, (2) *multiplicities*: rhizomes are comprised of lines that extend unpredictably in all directions and form “multiplicities” (more complex structures), and (3) *cartography*: due to the constantly evolving nature of the root structure, rhizomes require equally open and multiple forms of (re)presentation¹⁸. These principles, while specific to the rhizome, can be used as a heuristic to understand how a logic of assemblage functions.

Challenging the dualistic either/or logic of representational thought, where a stuck moment is *either* indicative of a theory-practice gap *or* a “cognitive bottleneck”¹⁹, a logic of assemblage looks to connect and expand new possibilities: stuckness could be this *and* that *and* that *and*.²⁰ In this way, a logic of assemblage, forces us to sense how stuck moments, much like a rhizome, can never *just be* an inevitable result of some gap between theory and practice (a singular representation); they necessarily involve the connection of multiple, heterogeneous elements (theory *and* practice, reason *and* emotion, human *and* nonhuman); and they are never static or fixed, but continuously shifting and transforming into something else. As such, a logic of assemblage pushed me to explore various possibilities, including the proposition offered by this work: conceptualizing stuck moments as an assemblage, or a moving network of various forces and bodies.

STUCK MOMENT AS ASSEMBLAGE

As implied by the name, another key feature of this logic is the concept of *assemblage*.²¹ In the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, assemblages are “complex constellations of objects, bodies, expressions, qualities, and territories that come together for varying periods of time to ideally create new ways of functioning.”²² Working with this logic and concept to reexamine my own stuck moment, a researcher might linger over my renegade experience and embrace it as what Gilles Deleuze calls, a rebel becoming, or that which evades representation and explanation. Wondering what other “states of things, bodies, various combinations of bodies, [and] hodgepodes”²³ might be at play, one could consider how my stuckness might have been animated by a moving constellation of forces, including the *discursive* (for example, dominant thoughts around what it means to teach or be a student teacher, the neoliberal regime, and the No Child Left

Behind legislation that was placing tremendous pressure on my cooperating teacher and me); the *material* (such as a required course text plastered with images of smiling children and teachers taunting me from the dashboard); and the *affective* (the "paralyzing force that took over me," heartache over a recent breakup, doubts on whether or not I wanted to be a teacher, and so on). As an assemblage, these discursive, material, affective forces—along with human and nonhuman bodies (my peer Rebecca, the course book, the van, the parking lot, me)—collectively worked to affect me in ways I could never imagine or anticipate (for example, send me spiraling out of a school parking lot to wonder if teaching was right for me).

Of course, this is not to say that all stuck moments are the same. Far from it. But guided by this logic and the concept of the assemblage, we can imagine teacher education programs as situated within a nexus of discursive, material, and affective forces or flows. These forces constantly and continuously envelop, collide, rub, and animate the bodies and spaces with(in) and across these programs. When a student teacher gets stuck, I contend that bodies (both human and nonhuman)—along with the flowing affective, discursive, and material forces—are configured in particular ways (however fleeting) and influence a body's capacity to act.²⁴ In this way, stuckness is not a singular *thing* that student teachers need to face and overcome, but a dynamic and relational *process* that—like the rhizome—is constantly unfolding and shifting from one moment to the next.

POTENTIALITY IN STUCKNESS

In addition, since assemblages are processes in formation, they are always in a state of emergence. Imbued with capacities or forces that have not yet been realized, assemblages harbor imminent potentiality. This allows us to speculate what stuck moments, even in their mobile, ephemeral becomings, can *do*. Might we imagine, for example, stuck moments—instances when student teachers lose their footing and find themselves "dogpaddling" in an effort to "maintain their sea legs"²⁵—as sites of potentiality? Rather than label stuck moments in limited ways—as "cognitive bottlenecks"²⁶ or "cognitive discrepancies"²⁷—could they work as pedagogical gifts²⁸ or pedagogical openings, where more supportive modes of becoming teacher are possible? Although this line

of thought falls outside the scope of this paper, conceptualizing stuck moments as an assemblage (and studying them through this particular logic) allows for more capacious and “*rangy*” possibilities.²⁹

Ultimately, I do not consider stuckness as something in need of fixing or something we need to rescue student teachers from. Such viewpoints presume stuck moments as barriers to some telos-driven end and suggest that change cannot happen with(in) stuckness. Instead, my rendition rethinks the centrality and value of blockage. I contend that a logic of assemblage, and conceptualizing stuckness-as-assemblage, can defamiliarize what tends to go without saying in teacher education (the theory-practice gap), and can offer future student teachers with new ways of sensing and be(coming) in teacher education.

CONCLUSION

Student teachers’ stuck moments are a standard feature of teacher education. Traditional research understands stuckness as an inevitable result of a perceived divide between theory and practice, or an expected part of the learning to teach process. Guided by a logic of assemblage, I offer a wider and more complex theorization of stuck moments, one that troubles the representational logic undergirding traditional teacher education. As I suggest, we impoverish the experiences of stuckness when we understand them simply as educative (or instances of individual failure or crisis that demand cognitive and behavioral solutions); instead, our understanding grows more capacious when we engage with a logic of assemblage and recognize the constellation of forces--discursive, material, and affective-- that viscerally and powerfully impact student teachers. When we resist the temptation to domesticate or rationalize these forces, we are led to models of teaching and learning which are dynamic, relational, and fundamentally rhizomatic. Such an approach demands a greater engagement with complexity, given that we cannot rely on traditional conceptions like mastery or best practices to remedy stuck moments or bridge the theory-practice gap. Yet engaging in this way may help us to attend more deeply to these ineffable experiences, while charting a cartography of teacher education that is grounded in multiplicity, openness, and complexity. In the process, teachers who face their own renegade van experiences, will encounter more supportive modes of becoming in teacher education.

1 Félix Guattari, “Pour Une Refondation des Pratiques Sociales,” *Le Monde Diplomatique* (1992): 26-27. This phrase comes from a piece Guattari wrote for *Le Monde Diplomatique* a few months after his death. It was published posthumously.

2 I use the phrases “stuck,” “stuck moments,” or “stuckness” as these were the words verbally articulated by my student teachers, either in conversation or via written journal entries, to express what they were feeling and experiencing during their crises. While the words stuck or stuckness traditionally signify some sort of “static condition” or “lack of movement” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014), as I will argue, these instances are far from “unanimated dead zones” (Stewart, 2007, 6). They are moments continuously animated by movement, fluidity, and a field of material, affective, and discursive forces. However, like all phenomena that evade meaning and representation, the language used to describe them (that is, stuck moments or stuckness) is, and always will, fall short.

3 Bessie Dernikos, et al., eds., *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education: Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2020). To be clear, these are not your mundane, ubiquitous instances of “stuckness” that transpire on an hourly basis in the classroom: “Students don’t understand long division, should I keep pushing forward or review the procedure?” “How should I handle this outburst of behavior?” The examples examined in this article are of a different kind: they are instances of crisis, often highly emotional and existential in nature, that literally and figuratively rattle student teachers, often to the point where they begin to question their purpose, their work, and even their future as teachers.

4 Maurianne Adams, Lee Ann Bell, and Pat Griffin, eds., *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Kevin K. Kumashiro, *Against Common Sense: Teaching and Learning Toward Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Elsewhere (Erica Eva Colmenares. “Affect[ing] the Theory-Practice Gap in Social Justice Teacher Education: Exploring Student Teachers’ ‘Stuck Moments’” (PhD diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 2018), I discuss how the logic and framing of theory-practice gap is injurious to university-based schools of education in particular. Policy makers and venture capitalists often use this specific problem—overt attention to theory and lack of applicability to practice—as a way to cut financial support from university-based teacher

education and fund alternative, (that is, more lucrative) bootcamp teacher education programs.

5 Paul Gorski et al., eds., *Cultivating Social Justice Teachers: How Teacher Educators Have Helped Students Overcome Cognitive Bottlenecks and Learn Critical Social Justice Concepts* (New York: Stylus Publishing, 2013).

6 Kenneth A. Strike, "A Conceptual Change View of Learning and Understanding," in *Cognitive Structure and Conceptual Change*, eds. Leo West and A. Leon Pines (Orlando: Academic Press, 1985): 211-231.

7 Marilyn Cochran-Smith, *Walking the Road: Race, Diversity, and Social Justice in Teacher Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004).

8 Adams, Bell, and Griffin, eds., *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*.

9 Dernikos, et al., *Mapping the Affective Turn in Education*; Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

10 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 2, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

11 Broadly, "humanism" does not refer to a unified concept, but rather, a set of themes that emerged over time.

12 Kathryn J. Strom and Adrian D. Martin, "Thinking with Theory in an Era of Trump," *Issues in Teacher Education* 26, no. 3 (2017): 3-22.

13 Bessie Dernikos, "A Gender Gap in Literacy? De/territorializing Literacy, Gender, and the Humanist Subject" (PhD diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 2015); Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, "The Call for Intelligibility in Postmodern Educational Research," *Educational Researcher* 29, no. 5 (2000): 25-28.

14 Strom and. Martin, "Thinking with Theory."

15 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

16 Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul

Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

17 John Rajchman. *The Deleuze Connections* (Cambridge: MIT press, 2000).

18 Kathryn J. Strom, and Adrian D. Martin, *Becoming-teacher: A Rhizomatic Look at First-year Teaching* (New York: Springer, 2017).

19 Gorski et al., *Cultivating Social Justice Teachers*.

20 Strom and Martin, *Becoming-teacher*.

21 More than anything else, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) believe that concepts are meant to be used as tools.

22 Graham Livesey, "Assemblage," in *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

23 Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975-1999*, trans. David Lapoujade, Ames Hodges, and Mike Taormina (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 2007), 177.

24 Bodies, of course, are not solely relegated to the human, corporeal kind, however (that is, a student teacher, a cooperating teacher, children in a field placement classroom, a course professor). They include bodies of knowledge (for example, thoughts, ideas, postulations, theories of social justice, constructivism) and bodies of matter (for example, textbooks, class readings, curricula, a stack of papers) as well.

25 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

26 Gorski et al., *Cultivating Social Justice Teachers*.

27 Kenneth A. Strike, "A Conceptual Change View"

28 Deborah P. Britzman, *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*. (New York: SUNY Press, 2012).

29 Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).