

## Autonomy as Responsibility in Professional Life: Deconstructing Teaching Standards

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### Abstract

The irony of teaching standards policies is that they undermine the very commitments to professional autonomy that they espouse. Positioned as condition (of competence and conduct) and consequence (of competence and conduct), autonomy becomes both philosophically and practically problematic. Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, the authors deconstruct the British Columbia standards policy titled “Standards for the Education, Competence, and Professional Conduct of Teachers.” Deconstruction is not aimed here at the destruction of standards policies but towards understanding and appreciating the role they can play in acknowledging that which is core to teaching and yet difficult to name within the language of standards. Our efforts are directed towards the rehabilitation of autonomy as educational responsibility that recognizes its own deep-seated and perhaps necessary contradictions.

**Keywords:** Teacher autonomy; Educational responsibility; Teaching standards

## Introduction

While the movement for more teaching standards has gained considerable strength around the world, there has been little talk of teaching standards in Canada until quite recently (Phelan, Erickson, Farr-Darling, Collins and Kind, 2007). Beginning in the late 1990's there have been publicized reforms in teaching standards by conservative governments in the provinces of Ontario (Beck, Hart, and Kosnik, 2002), Alberta (Phelan, 1996), and British Columbia (2004). Teaching standards articulate the knowledge, skills and attributes of good teachers and as such are often linked to the pursuit and achievement of professional autonomy. Yet, we will argue, teaching standards policies undermine the very commitments to professional autonomy that they espouse. Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, we deconstruct the policy titled "British Columbia Standards for the Education, Competence, and Professional Conduct of Teachers" (hereon referred to as the "Standards policy"). Deconstruction is not aimed here at the destruction of standards policies but towards understanding and appreciating the role they can play in acknowledging that which is core to teaching but difficult to name within the language of standards. Our efforts are directed towards the rehabilitation of autonomy as a form of educational responsibility that recognizes its own deep-seated and perhaps necessary contradictions. In what follows, we first describe the origin and substance of the Standards policy and with the help of Shakespeare's *King Lear* we identify its inherent problem – the conditionality of professional autonomy. Having done so, we deconstruct the Standards policy by illustrating how freedom as sovereignty pervades the document and its implicit logic – the logic of contract. We then delineate an alternative logic – the logic of promise – that might undergird professional standards. One way or another, we conclude there is no escaping tragedy when autonomy as responsibility is revealed.

In 2004 the Ministry of Education in the province of British Columbia in Canada, via the British Columbia College of Teachers (referred here on as 'the College' or BCCT), introduced standards for the education, competence and professional conduct of its members (Phelan, Erickson, Farr-Darling, Collins and Kind, 2007). The Standards policy represented an attempt to outline the knowledge, skills and attitudes required of professional educators (BCCT, 2004). The introduction of formalized teaching standards was surprising given that the College had been in existence for over seventeen years and had never entertained a formalized set of teaching standards. The British Columbia College of Teachers (BCCT)<sup>1</sup> was created by a legislative act called the *Teaching Profession Act* in 1987, which outlined the object of the College as establishing standards for the education of applicants for certificates of qualification and the competence and conduct of certificate holders (British Columbia Public School Employers' Association, 2011; British Columbia Laws, 2011). So while there was a mention of 'standards' in the original Act, it was broadly understood as the criteria and standards that the College would develop to address their legislated mandates such as the certification and decertification of teachers in the Province and those prepared elsewhere in Canada and overseas (Phelan et al. 2007). In 2003, there were several key amendments to the Teaching Profession Act two of which were relevant to the formalization of teaching standards. First, the College's policies and practices of approving whole teacher education programs in B.C. educational institutions were revoked; and second, the College was required to accept and address complaints directly from the public about the conduct of any currently licensed educator. Both legislative changes led to the production of a draft document called the *Standards for the Education, Competence and Professional Conduct of Educators in British Columbia*. One set of standards would address what some believed to be quite different, though inter-related, contexts in which judgments were to be made about teachers – teacher education, teachers' classroom performance, and teachers' professional/ethical conduct. The Standards document consisted of thirteen general or "foundation statements" of standards, with each statement being accompanied by four to seven more specific descriptors (Phelan et al. 2007). The Standards attempted to answer the question of what constitutes good teaching: professional educators must "value and care for all children" (foundational statement #1); "have an in-depth understanding about the subject areas they

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<sup>1</sup> In 2011, in a report commissioned by the government of British Columbia, the BCCT was deemed dysfunctional and, consequently, the body was abolished and replaced by the *Teacher Regulation Branch* on January 9, 2012.

teach” (foundational statement #3); “implement effective teaching practices” (foundational statement #7); and “apply principles of assessment, evaluation and reporting” (foundational statement #8) (BCCT, 2004). Subsequently, faculties of education – the British Columbia Deans of Education – throughout the province signed an agreement with the College acknowledging the pivotal role of the Standards in assessing applicants for certification. Rather than testing applicants as they applied to the College for certification, the College was to rely on assessments carried out by the teacher education programs in the province. To this end, the Deans of Education had agreed that their programs – curriculum content and assessments – would be designed with the Standards in mind. Ultimately, the College would have access to university course assessments and be able to determine their sufficiency in terms of knowledge and skill as per the Standards (BCCT, 2004). The significance of the Standards policy for teacher autonomy was evident in the logic of exchange that undergirded it. The policy offered teachers professional autonomy in exchange for compliance with standards of competence and professional conduct. “Professionals enter into a contract with the public that provides them with a level of autonomy and self-regulation *in return for* an agreement that the profession will place the interests of the public above individual interests” (BCCT, 2004, p. 4; emphasis added)<sup>2</sup>. Teacher autonomy in this instance surfaces as a commodity that can be granted or withdrawn (Pitt & Phelan, 2006). Teachers risk losing autonomy should they display a “fatal flaw” (BCCT, 2004, p. 5) of not complying enough (e.g., when they privilege private over public interests). *What is at stake in the language and logic of exchange?* To help us explore this question, we turn, somewhat unexpectedly, to Shakespeare.<sup>3</sup> The plot of the Shakespeare’s play – King Lear – revolves around a king who decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, Regan, Goneril and Cordelia. Lear’s gift is conditional as he demands that each make a declaration of love to him in advance. Unlike her sisters, Cordelia cannot bring herself to speak as her father desires and merely says that she loves Lear as a daughter ought to love her father. The King, in whose simple-minded understanding love is a commodity that can be measured, urges his youngest daughter to discover what portion her declaration can draw. But Cordelia loves only according to her bond as daughter. Failing to please, she is banished forthwith. Lear’s gift does not “extend beyond the confines of the economic circle of exchange” (Derrida, 2007, p. 449). Territorial power is traded for a calculable love. The hallmark of the economic relationship is that circulation is dominated by “the rule of reciprocal utility; it does not capture the uniqueness of the ethical relationship,” in this case the relationship of father and daughter (Mosès, 1993, in Wimmer, 2001, p.167). Rather, the conditionality of Lear’s gift reflects his position as sovereign with power to withdraw his favour when his subject denies him his desire. The use of the term “gift” is, in this instance, misplaced because “for the given to be possible, for a given event to be possible, it has to look impossible” (Derrida, 2007, p. 449). The impossible possibility connotes that which cannot be predicted as a possibility; any consciousness of a gift given to the other “in thanks or in exchange” (p. 449) cancels the gift and means that giving has not taken place. As such, “the impossibility of giving continues to haunt giving” (p. 449). With the gift comes the logic of promise, and the unconditional. With the exchange comes the logic of contract and a conditionality associated with the intrinsic power of sovereignty. But what is King Lear to do? To whom should he pass his sovereign power? How will he know that he has done so wisely? On the other hand, what is Cordelia to do? Sovereign power “knows no reality other than the established one, and it holds the monopoly on procedures for the establishment of reality” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 4). If Cordelia wishes to be heard by the King, she must use the idiom of the sovereign. In doing so, she will have cast her relationship with her father in terms of an economic exchange; she will have undermined the very bond

<sup>2</sup> In the most recent version (January, 2012) of the same document, the statement is reworded as: “Certificate holders enter into a contract with the public that provides them with a level of autonomy in return for an agreement that the educator will place the interests of the public above individual interests.”

<sup>3</sup> We appreciate the irony of turning to metaphor in a manuscript that relies on Derrida’s deconstruction, an approach which seeks to dismantle any prioritization of resemblance, identity, or rule of the same. Our point here is to use Shakespeare as a way into a more complex Derridean discussion of conditionality. We accept that there is always an ambiguous relation between concept (Standards policy) and metaphor (Shakespeare) but a discussion of that relation is beyond the remit of this paper.

she feels. Her only option is silence: “I cannot heave/my heart into my mouth”. Lear’s position is clear: “Nothing comes from nothing” (Scene 1, Act 1, King Lear, Signet). If all tragedy is in the end comic, then perhaps the irony of the Standards policy is that it undermines the very commitments that it espouses. Sealed within a philosophy of the subject (Derrida, 1995a), autonomy is rooted in the Western concept of sovereignty, which privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one’s understanding of others from their point of view” (Young, 1990, p. 300). Invoking a notion of responsibility that is regulated within principles of reason and accountancy (Derrida, 1995a), teachers and students are subjected to principles of calculability, possibility and decidability. An educator’s ethical obligation becomes little more than a technology as standards of conduct and competence invite escape from, rather than engagement in, judgment. Derrida explains: “When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make; irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program.... It makes of action the applied consequence, the simple application of a knowledge or know-how. It makes of ethics...a technology. No longer of the order of practical reason or decision, it begins to be irresponsible” (Derrida, 1992, p. 41, 45). Teaching understood as ethical action requires practical reasoning – figuring out and doing the right thing at the right time for the right reasons in response to the right people (Coulter et al. 2007). Understanding what to do and doing it cannot be anticipated in advance of the encounter with others; the particular must be prioritized – particular students and particular circumstances – if teaching is to be ethically and educationally responsive. Autonomy cannot be a commodity that is granted or withdrawn at the will of a sovereign state; it cannot be conditional if teachers are to exercise their ethical and educational responsibility. If conditionality persists as a problematic frame in educational discourse, it behooves us to display how it works. To do so requires deconstruction.

“Deconstruction has to be understood as an occurrence – or even more precisely: it has to be understood in its occurrence. What is at stake in the occurrence of deconstruction is an attempt to bring into view the impossibility to totalize, the impossibility to articulate a self-sufficient, self-present center from which everything can be mastered and controlled. Deconstruction reveals that every inside has a constitutive outside which is not merely external but always in a sense already inhabits the inside, so that the self-sufficiency or self-presence can only be brought about by an act of exclusion. What gives deconstruction its motive and drive is precisely its concern for or, to be more precise, its wish to do justice to what is excluded ... It is motivated by a concern that is explicitly ethical and political” (Biesta, 2001, p. 47). Two points of presence animate but delude the policymaker—the phantasm of a sovereign state and a sovereign subject. The phantasm of sovereignty presents itself as natural or as organic, and “tries to pass off what is always a historically conditioned performative fiction (a *comme si*, an as if) as a constative or objective observation (*comme ça*, as this or like that)” (Naas, 2008, p. 200). The phantasm is always historically conditioned and linguistically coded, but appears as ahistorical and non-linguistic. Derrida describes a metaphysics of presence that generates and sustains the phantasm of sovereignty. He points to “a desire to think things together in a unity, to formulate a representation of a whole, a totality. It seeks the unity of the thinking subject with the object of thought, that the object would be a grasping of the real. The urge to unity seeks to think everything that is a whole or to describe some ontological region, such as social life, as a whole, a system” (Young, 1990, p. 303). The claim to totality is incoherent because the process of totalizing expels aspects of the entities. Expelled to an unaccounted-for, “accidental” realm, what Derrida calls the supplement. There is therefore the creation of two, not one, an inside and an outside. The identity sought (e.g., state) receives its meaning and purity only by its relation to its outside, that which it is not (e.g., individual). The desire to bring things into unity generates a logic of hierarchical opposition. In order to define an identity, some parts must be excluded, separating pure from impure, good from evil, grateful and ungrateful, loyal and disloyal. The logic of identity works to keep these boundaries firmly drawn. A number of mutually exclusive oppositions structure standards policies: public/private and state/individual. The first item of the opposition is elevated over the second because it designates unity, order, responsibility over multiplicity, disorder, and irresponsibility. The logic of identity also posits the subject or person as a

self-identical unity (Young, 1990). The unity of consciousness and its immediate presence to itself are assumed. The subject becomes the origin and “self-same starting point of thought and meaning, whose signification is never out of its grasp” (Young, 1990, p. 303). For Derrida, the metaphysics of presence seeks to detemporalize and despatialize the signifying process that is language, inventing the illusion of pure present meaning and eliminating the “multiplicity of meanings and directions for interpretation and development in which it can be taken” (Young, 1990, p. 304). The result is a denial of difference, the “irreducible particularity of entities” (Young, 1990, p. 304), that makes it impossible to reduce them to commonness. “Such particularity derives from the contextuality of existence, the being of a thing and what is said about it is a function of its contextual relation to other things” (Young, 1990, p. 304). The deconstruction of the Standards policy that follows constitutes a deconstruction of the phantasm, and involves a deconstruction of any pure origin or any “indivisible, inviolable center” (Naas, 2008, p. 191).

“It is the object of the college to establish, having regard to the public interest, standards for the education, professional responsibility and competence of its members, persons who hold certificates of qualification and applicants for membership and, consistent with that object, to encourage the professional interest of its members in those matters” (BCCT, 2004, p. 3). The opening line of the Standards policy document invokes the role of the autonomous state in directing professional bodies such as the College of Teachers to set standards for the profession in the “public interest”. Immediately, both the “public” and the “profession” appear as pure, clear, univocal, universal, ahistorical, immediate presences. The state remains abstract and depoliticized as it assumes its right to speak on behalf of a consensual public. And yet, there is no public interest without a corresponding private (read: professional) interest. “Public interest” is variously represented in the document as “public good”, “public trust”, and aligned with “the goals of our society” and “a healthy and compassionate constitutional democracy”. On the one hand, the notion of public is conceived as “a deep, horizontal comradeship” that extends its reach to all classes and ethnicities (Anderson, 1991, p. 7)—towards a common good. On the other hand, the public is aligned with the state as the “the gage and emblem” of democratic freedom (Anderson, 1991, p. 7) and moral authority. Teachers, on the other hand, are not members of the public nor actors in a public sphere. Professional interests, connoted as “individual interests” are not denied but are secondary to teachers’ duties as servants of the state. Anticipating self-interest the policy-maker continues, “Members of the College [meaning teachers] may ask... ‘What’s in it for us?’” (BCCT, 2004, p.5). The policymaker replies: “To be truly useful, members should clearly see themselves and their work reflected in the Standards for the profession... of “good moral character”—“fit and proper persons to be working with the children of British Columbia” (BCCT, 2004, p.5). The Standards Policy reflects Kant’s distinction between the private and the public uses of reason. Although reason must be free in its public use (e.g., intellectual, scholar), it must be submissive in its private use (e.g., civil servant, soldier, teacher). So while teachers are not asked to practice in a blindly obedient manner [the College of Teachers endorses “reflective practice”], they must adapt the use of their reason to their circumscribed situation as servants of the state, and to their task of carrying out a mandated curriculum. Teachers are positioned as instrumentally rational subjects. They are bound “to sign a commitment that their professional practice will be governed by the ethics and principles as outlined in the Standards document” (BCCT, 2004, p.6) and so in Kantian terms to compare their judgments to those of others (generalized other of “public”) in order “to escape the illusion that arises from the ease of mistaking subjective and private conditions for objective ones” (Hinchman, 1996, p. 496). The distinction between the public (government bodies) and private (professional body) is reinforced by use of terms such as “craft” and “practice” to describe teachers’ work and its development “throughout their careers”. Historically, craftsman remained distinct from the public but seamless within the tradition of the guild. Crafts men and women adhere to standards of knowledge, know-how, and competence. Teachers who adhere to the standards of their craft “can provide confidence to the public and parents that educators are well-educated”, and “competent and skilled in carrying out their duties” (BCCT, 2004). The idea of a profession, however, goes beyond that of craft. The idea of profession supposes that beyond and in addition to knowledge, know-how, and competence, a testimonial commitment, a freedom, a responsibility

under oath, a sworn faith obligates the subject to render accounts to some tribunal yet to be defined” (Derrida, 2002, p. 222). If teachers are professionals, therefore, it would suggest that their own values and commitments—their sense of what is “good”—must enter into judgments about practice. The Standards Policy assumes a detachment from those values and in doing so can overlook, as it were, the multiplicity of bodies, the multiple values, languages of practice, values and agendas inherent the professional body. In schools or school board offices or universities, the everyday encounter with philosophical difference is commonplace. Yet, the College of Teachers’ standards policy tends to project education and teacher education as uncontested fields. The focus is on sameness of outcome and security of identity untroubled by the complexities of difference. The devaluation and resignification of difference then becomes subordinate to the idea of a good profession (or good society) as a telos. The profession here is conceived as a totality in two ways. “It has no ontological exterior, since it realizes the unity of general will and individual subjectivity. It also has no historical exterior, for there is no further stage to travel” (Young, 1990, p. 308).

### **The Phantasm of the Sovereign Subject**

“I am a professional and this is what I can do.” (BCCT, 2004, p. 5). The Standards Policy is firmly entrenched within a liberal tradition which considers the human being, the teacher, as the subject of what he or she is doing, thinking, saying, as “the subject of his or her own experience, life, activity, responsibilities and so on” (Montefiore, 2001, p. 177). Derrida characterizes the liberal subject in terms of traits such as “identity to itself, consciousness, intention, presence or proximity to itself, autonomy, relation to the object” (Derrida, 1995b, p. 219). The phantasm of the self suggests or leads us to believe in a non-alienation of the self from itself in language and “in a coincidence of the self that speaks and the self that hears itself speak in a *vouloir dire*” (Naas, 2008, p. 190). “The very first phenomenon as phantasm would thus seem to be the phantasm of hearing oneself speak in order to mean-to-say.... The phantasm is thus both the phenomenon of the phantasm and the suppression of repression of the phantasm as phenomenon” (Naas, 2008, p. 190). Such repression is evident in the Standards Policy’s assertion that there is a direct relationship between educator competence and student achievement, and indeed between teacher educator competence and teacher competence. To claim a direct pedagogical relationship, in this manner, is to forget that teaching is a social activity, and that the mediation of relations among students and teachers by speech and actions of one another is a fundamental condition of this sociality (Young, 1990). Conceiving of teaching and learning in terms of direct and unmediated relations requires “the cognitive closure between the different social-historical worlds” of those involved (Castoriadis, 1991b, p. 95). The otherness of the players involved in the pedagogical encounter is deemed irrelevant. “The idea of the self as a unified subject of desire and as an origin of assertion and action is interrupted by the psychoanalytic notion of the unconscious” (Young, 1990). Consciousness, meaning, and intention are only possible because the subject-in-process slips and surpasses its intentions and meanings. Any utterance, for example, not only has a literal meaning, but is laden with ambiguities, embodied in gesture, tone of voice, and rhythm that all contribute to the heterogeneity of its meaning without being intended. So it is with actions and interactions with other persons. What I say and do always has a multiplicity of meanings, ambiguities, plays, and these are not always coherent (Young, 1990, p. 310). Even if policy-makers reject Young’s description of an incoherent subject, the positing of a teaching subject who must conform to the norm of the autonomy of the collectivity (profession) “in such a way as to permit the explicit, reflective, and deliberate self-institution and self-governance” of this professional body (Castoriadis, 1991a, p. 76). Somewhat paradoxically, the teacher must therefore be posited as a rational, sovereign subject who can exist autonomously apart from the law (standards), capable of accepting or rejecting it. As such, the policy-maker is still faced with the dilemma of a subject with two internal elements —that of a ruling, law-making, controlling or evaluating, and, another aspect of the self that would, by definition, destroy or drastically reduce personal autonomy if it were not directed, ruled or evaluated critically (Hinchman, 1996). One or both of these internal elements must be seen as implicated in a larger transindividual context that may promote or thwart the project of being autonomous (Hinchman, 1996). Such a subject is a divided subject, prone to unruly internal forces of impulse, self-interest, and passion all of which must be subjected to

reason/rational “I”. The subject must relinquish autonomy if she/he is to be recognized as competent. As the policy states, “educators who embody the standards should be able to relate intellectually, pedagogically and ethically with children as they teach the specific subjects and curriculum of British Columbia.” In light of the submission/mastery dilemma, it is too simplistic to say that subjects accept or reject laws. For Foucault (1972) there is little or no distinction between autonomous beings and the law. Teachers learn to see themselves and their practice in terms of the systems of ideas and knowledge that are available to them; they must become recognizably competent to others (Phelan & McLaughlin, 1995). A truly independent person is impossible because it is very difficult to reflect upon a particular law when that law also grounds the possibility of thought and action (Foucault, 1972). The idea of autonomy, Castoriadis (1991a) writes, will remain intractable so long as autonomy is understood in the Kantian sense, that is, “as a fictively autarchic subject’s conformity to a “Law of Reason” or Sovereign State, in complete misrecognition of the social-historical conditions for, and the social-historical dimension of, the project of autonomy” (p. 75). When we think we have found presence, in the intuition “I think” or “I can” or in an other’s “I will grant”, we still depend on a “a language that unfolds with its own patterns and mediations, with its extended doubts and equivocations” (Williams, 2005, p. 33). “There is a wonderful moment in King Lear when Kent, another banished loyal subject of Lear’s, sees and salutes his master, not as a monarch but as an old man, his lack of respect shocks and thereby quickens perception” (Fraser, 1998, lxix). “Be Kent unmannerly/When Lear is mad. What wouldst thou do, old man?/Think’st thou that duty shall have dread to speak/When power to flattery bows?” (Scene 1, Act 1). Is Lear a powerful sovereign or just an old mad man? Where sovereignty names the freedom or seeming freedom of a sovereign to act and exercise its power, it must remain pure, unmediated and without contradiction. Kent’s utterance opens up multiple interpretations of Lear’s actions. Are his actions that of an old, vain man? Are they that of a mad man, operating outside the realm of reason? Lear’s sovereignty is seen for what it is—mediated and contradictory. Multiple reasons to doubt his judgments exist and opportunities to disagree abound. Is the pure truth of his sovereignty illusory? And yet sovereignty is not to be understood in terms of truth or falsity, or image and reality but in terms of power and affect (Naas, 2008). “The phantasm is not a representation or misrepresentation of the way things are but a projection on the part of a subject or nation-state of the way one would wish them to be—and thus, in some sense, the way they become, with all their real, attendant effects” (Naas, 2008, p. 207). The internal is projected and then taken to be something external to the subject; nonetheless, the projection has profound effects on the world and reinforce the phantasm. Perhaps, in part, Shakespeare played with this notion of the phantasm of sovereignty. The veneer of the “unreal and the ritualistic” overlaying the initial action of King Lear, is not peculiar to the love test but evident throughout the play (Fraser, 1998, p. Lxix): The characters themselves move in an air of unreality. There is about them a felt sense of contradiction, as between what they are and what they seem to be. Lear is not a king but the show of a king. It is an unsubstantial pageant over which he presides, a recalling, in its unreality, the specious parade with which an earlier tragedy of Shakespeare’s commences, that of Richard II, the mockery king.... (Fraser, 1998, p. Lxix). “Lear is not a king but the show of a king.” Presence is not truth but is a part of an economy of truth, that is, its power relies on many claims that lie outside it and circulate within it, for example, claims about origins (Williams, 2005). Sovereignty is a king without clothing. Must the fictions and phantasmic powers of sovereignty be relinquished in the name of the unconditional coming of the other, if there is to be an ethics, if there is to be a future? (Naas, 2008).

### **Freedom as the Unconditional: A Logic of Promise**

It seems clear at this juncture that “we must ultimately relinquish sovereignty, the phantasm of sovereignty and the sovereignty of the phantasm, in the name of the very thing that has traditionally been identified with it, that is, in the name of the *unconditional*” (Naas, 2008, p. 188). The unconditionality of the event that is education and the unconditional coming of the other that is the student must be acknowledged, even embraced, if there is to be an ethics and if there is to be a future beyond predetermined outcomes. Derrida treats the concept of the unconditional in a very unconventional way. He disassociates the unconditional from the power intrinsic in sovereignty. One might then ask, as Caputo does provocatively, if “there [is]

something “unconditional” that is nonetheless without “sovereignty”?” (Caputo, 2003, p. 450) Derrida’s unconditional occurs without sovereignty and thus is powerless. It is an unconditional without sovereignty, a freedom without power—but not without force. This movement in Derrida’s thought to liberate the unconditional of any sovereign power is to prevent—through its powerless condition—its transformation into a counter-sovereignty. For Derrida, the unconditional force can disrupt and critique the phantasm of sovereignty in any of its forms. Such a conception of the unconditional for Derrida is intimately related to an unconditional freedom of thought that “must put in question, in the name of freedom itself, the principle of sovereignty as a principle of power” (Derrida, 2002, p. 234). In other words, the unconditional is without power but full of force—a weak force—a critical force that must resist and not react, as would power. The unconditional is weak and vulnerable—and always threatened—and it is by this very condition that the unconditional becomes a force of resistance. By appealing to the powerless freedom of thought it can question and critically resist forms of dogmatism and unjust appropriation. Here we want to consider first the aporetic space of the unconditional as a force that can and, as Derrida invites us to consider, has to resist sovereign forms of power by manifesting itself always as a weak force that resists becoming a reaction and transforming into a counter-power or reacting as a new power. First, the aporetic space of the unconditional, the possible-impossible, as Caputo has pointed out is—a call—a promise. It is in the order of what yet has to come—it is beyond being—and of the altogether other. The call provokes, bothers and disturbs us. “If it does not have the structure of being, that is because it has the structure of a call from beyond being to which being, always breathless, cannot catch up” (Caputo, 2003, p. 14). This call is of the logic of the promise, of what *might be* and not of what *it is*, a *might be* that is evoked by the mode of thinking of the *may be* or of the *perhaps*, to which I will refer later. Second, the unconditional does not have the structure of being and yet is “far from being a hyperbeing;” the unconditional call could be described as “a ghost, as a shade or a specter, a demi-being, not real enough to do anything but able only to haunt us with uncanny possibilities, above all, the haunting possibility of the impossible” (Caputo, 2003, p.16). The haunting of the possible by the impossible manifests as an aporetic space that is pregnant *with and by* promise. This is so because it continuously punctures the horizon of the possible, the conventional, the determined and certain. In other words, when something takes place and is made possible by the laws and conventions then nothing really happens in the fullness of the event or in the strong sense of the word. Derrida has written extensively about these aporias: the gift, hospitality, friendship, forgiveness, justice and invention. For example, regarding the gift Derrida writes that for the given to be considered a gift has to come as a surprise, “it has to extend beyond the confines of the economic circle of exchange. For given to be possible, for a given event to be possible, it has to look impossible. Why? If I give to the other in thanks or in exchange, giving has not taken place...the mere consciousness of given annuls the gift” (Derrida, 2007 p. 449), therefore “the impossibility of giving continues to haunt giving. This haunting is the spectral structure of [the] experience of the event; it is absolutely essential” (Derrida, 2007, p. 453). So this spectrality is absolutely essential for the event to happen. The eventful of the event, the logic of the event, is the logic of the aporetic space of the un-conditional – the im-possible – and as spectrality is not of the realm of the *‘what it is’* or of the *‘is’* but belongs to the realm of a particular *‘as if’* and even more a *‘what if,’* and this for Derrida means the sphere of the *perhaps*, the *peut-etre* which is “threatening to irrupt from within and to disturb the conditions of *etre*” (Caputo, 2003, p. 16). This is the “dangerous perhaps of the possibility of the impossible that solicits us from afar” (p. 16). The ‘unconditional’ is constituted as a ‘call’ to “something beyond being” (p. 16). The perhaps, this unconditional call to something beyond being, is an openness to the open. It is open because of its vulnerability, because it is powerless. It is powerless but yet it is a soliciting and provoking force. The Italian word for *perhaps* beautifully illustrates this connotation of the *perhaps*. In Italian “*forse*” means both *perhaps* and force. It is a force – a call – that does not enforce, that does not react as power but “calls without the worldly wherewithal to enforce its demands or to be enforced, to create the concrete entitative conditions in the world in which its unconditional appeal would be realized” (p. 16). As such the unconditional does not belong “to the order of existing authorities (*exousiai*) or entitative conditions. Nor is its unconditional call a categorical imperative, for it lacks the imperial authority to be an imperative, so it is not Kantian lineage either” (p.16). The experience of the

perhaps does not enforce or command through a predetermined framework. As Derrida writes, it is not “a thinking of necessity...what takes place does not have to announce itself as possible or necessary; if it did, its irruption as event would in advanced be neutralized”(Derrida, 2002, p. 235). The perhaps, as the thinking of the possible-impossible, is the mode of thinking of the event for Derrida. Hence the event is always characterized by this aporia. This aporia is one Derrida invites us to accept as something promising and not paralysing precisely because it never presents itself as a something to be sure of or as a complete possibility, but rather as a *may be*. Derrida’s *perhaps* echoes Nietzsche’s *may be*, a *may be* that never presents itself as an assertive possibility but instead arrives as a promise, a promise of what is not yet and may, or might, be. [The promise of Cordelia’s silence, a love that will not speak its name?] It is the perhaps that opens up for the event as exceptional, as an exception to rule. As Derrida writes: “Once there are rules, norms and hence criteria to evaluate this or that, what happens and what doesn’t happen, there is not event” (Derrida, 2007, p. 457). The perhaps also beckons us toward an openness to the “unpredictable arrival of the other, of the event as other” for which we need to be disarmed and vulnerable (Derrida, 2007, p. 452). For Derrida the event and its absolute otherness fall on us as a surprise because, as he wrote, If it doesn’t fall on me, it means that I see it coming, that there is a horizon of expectation. Horizontally I see it coming, I fore-see it, and the event is that which can be said [dit] but never predicted [predit]. A predicted event is not an event. The event falls on me because I don’t see it coming. Like the *arrivant*, the event is something that vertically befalls me when I didn’t see it coming. The event can only seem to me to be impossible before it occurs [arriver](Derrida, 2007, p.451). For Derrida is important to press on this verticality of the event which falls on us by the weight of its unpredictability, and at the same time he is also cautious to assert that even if the event can’t be predicted this doesn’t mean that events do not occur. Even more the event, to be worthy of the name, to appear as an event, has to be “already repeatable in its very uniqueness” (p.452) the uniqueness of the event is iterated again and again as a return again and again of the call of the perhaps. A persistent return of the aporetic promise that with its revenance and spectrality haunts the possible and punctures its horizon again and again. It invests representations of freedom with the force of its unconditionality. We are reminded here of a teacher colleague, Maria, who works with five-year old children. She shared with us her awe and surprise at what transpired when she took a tentative step out of the conventional rules of the classroom. Instead of trying to control and manage children’s interactions, she listened more carefully to their dialogues about a particular collaborative project. The way in which Maria described the experience echoed what we might think of as a pedagogical event. She was suddenly surprised by the depth of the children’s dialogue, moving as it did from the story “The Three Little Pigs” to issues of gender and power. It completely defied her previous understanding of what a child’s interest would be; it was totally unexpected for her, and she described herself as feeling vulnerable, uncertain as to how to follow up on what was happening. Aghast and excited, Maria described her decision to follow what was happening without really knowing how things might develop. In living with that uncertainty and allowing herself to think “what if?” the horizon of the conventional for this teacher was punctured by the unexpectedness and surprise of a pedagogical event. For a moment, Maria was not concerned with, what we might term, the realm of ‘what is’ but with that of ‘what might be’. Maria allowed herself to think in a new way, to think, as Derrida (2002) would say, with the promise of the “perhaps.” For Maria, this changed everything. The power of the event, such as that experienced by Maria, undoes the power of any kind of subject, even a critical or deconstructive one, and presents in its place “a force” that can disrupt the power of any sovereign phantasm (Naas, 2008, p. 200). When thinking about the concept of the event in the context of teaching, the question of openness is paramount. What welcome is extended to the force of the pedagogical event? What might it mean for teachers to experience the pedagogical event as a rich possibility and not as a risk to be managed, as ethical invitation and not anxious deviation? What reception is possible in a profession characterized by the logic of contract and its attendant commitments?

### **Tragedy and Promise: Autonomy as Responsibility Revealed?**

That is not easy. It is even impossible to conceive of a responsibility that consists in being responsible for *two* laws, or that consists in responding to two contradictory injunctions. No doubt. But there is no responsibility that is not the experience and experiment of the impossible” (Derrida, 1992, p. 44-5, original emphasis). A contractual relation of the type at stake in the Standards policy must hide its uncertainties and its hesitations; consequently it may conceal rather than reveal the extent of its responsibilities. The Standards policy implies that “...what takes place, arrives, happens, or happens *to me* remains still controllable...within a horizon of anticipation.... It is of the order of the masterable possible, it is the unfolding of what is already possible. It is of the order of power, of the “I can....” No surprise, thus no event in the strong sense (Derrida, 2002, p. 234). Derrida reminds us, however, that the educator is constantly caught in moments where his or her decision will change not only the future and present but also the past. The reinvention is always oriented to the particular needs of the other (Edgoose, 2001). The other cannot be submitted to the general; the other is “who” of friendship that provokes “conscience” and therefore opens up responsibility (Derrida, 1995b, p. 275). In this manner, Derrida invokes a different notion of responsibility that ‘regulates itself neither on the principles of reason nor on any sort of accountancy’ (Derrida, 1995b, p. 272). This is where education occurs, “takes place, it seeks its place wherever this *unconditionality* can take shape. Everywhere that it, perhaps, gives one (itself) to think” (Derrida, 1995b, p. 236). In the face of the singularity of the other, all knowledge, rules, and norms are suspended in the decisive moment because the singularity of the other demands recognition and obliges one to act justly in regard to that singularity (Derrida, 1992). The radical otherness of the other in the ethical relationships means above all that the relationship is not reciprocal. “It is not about exchange or barter which condemns the other to provide restitution for the good I do him” (Mosès, 1993, p. 367 in Wimmer, 2001, p. 167). The difficulty facing educators is the double injunction: How can one respond both to the need of respecting the necessity of a universal formal law (e.g., a Standards policy that attempts to name a collective responsibility) and at the same time be responsive to the singularity of the other and the heterogeneity that welcomes the other (Egea-Kuehne, 2001)? Derrida suggests that we should not have to choose; rather these double injunctions, contradictions, aporias, are the essence of responsibility and the condition of its possibility (Egea-Kuehne, 2001). For, at a certain point, “promise and decision, which is to say responsibility, owe their possibility to the ordeal of undecidability which will always remain their condition” (Derrida, 1994, p.74). The undecidable is not merely the vacillation or the tension between two decisions. “It is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obliged – it is of obligation that we must speak – to give itself up to the impossible decision, while taking account of law and rules. A decision that didn’t go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision; it would only be the programmable application of unfolding of a calculable process. It might be legal; it would not be just” (Derrida, 1992: p. 24). Lear’s decision to banish Cordelia was in a sense an easy decision to make; the rule to implement was clear—“nothing comes from nothing”. There was no decision to be made and therefore no responsibility to be taken. Lear reduces life to that where complex realities are reduced to formulas. Maria’s belief that she was acting “in the best interests of children” (BCCT, 2004) confined the children’s thought. Each assumed a map, “a realm where everything is presumed to have been charted, where all boundaries are believed to be known, including those of nature and human nature; but where no account has been taken of the heath which lies in all countries and in all men and women just beyond the boundaries they think they know” (Mack, 1965, p. 231). Eventually, Lear is made to suspend his autocratic impatience and listen—“No, I will be the pattern of all patience; I will say nothing.” (3.2.37-38). Maria suspends the assurances of conventional wisdom about children and is astounded when she listens, without a word, to their dialogue. Every act brings the possibility of the unforeseen and the unforeseeable, the inscrutable where we had supposed all was clear, the unexpected though we thought we had envisaged all contingencies and could never be surprised...nakedness issues out of opulence, madness out of sanity and reason out of madness, blindness out of seeing and insight out of blindness, salvation out of ruin (Mack, 1965, p. 231). What tragedy gives to all to see, writes Castoriadis (1991) is that “Being is Chaos” (p. 118) – that there is no correspondence

between human intentions and actions, on one hand, and their result or outcome, on the other; we cannot even control the meaning that our action has in the world; and ultimately the “prevailing order is...order through catastrophe – a “meaningless” order” (p. 118). Lear dies. Cordelia hangs. Standards prevail?

## Conclusion

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