Title of Project:
"Looking out": Neoliberal Discourses and
English Language Teacher Professionalism

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Final Report

Motivation for the Research

This research is concerned with discourses of English teacher professionalism in sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan African teachers are frequently portrayed in media and policy as deficient, unskilled, and unprofessional operators, responsible for poor educational and linguistic outcomes (Bashir et al., 2018; World Bank, 2010). Discourses that claim that teachers lack professional capabilities and require correct 'management' can be very powerful. According to Foucault (e.g. 2004), discourse provides the boundaries of what is thinkable, and, thus, powerful discourses from large global organizations and national governments have the effect of shaping how teachers might view themselves and their profession. Further, when teachers are presented as the "problem" in low-quality education systems, they are excluded from policymaking; in Rwanda specifically, teachers have been absent in the implementation of sweeping policy shifts around English medium of instruction and competency-based curriculum (Muvunyi, 2016; Williams, 2017), even though these reforms severely impacted—and continue to impact—their working lives.

      In this thesis, I focus on a professional teacher group, the Association of Teachers of English in Rwanda (ATER), which opposes this discourse of African English language teachers as deficit. ATER positions itself as a grassroot, teacher-driven professional development association, which addresses the dearth of development opportunities and seeks to improve the professional capacity of English language teachers across the country. Like other sub-Saharan English language teacher associations (Cameron, 2017), ATER is also a site for extensive influence from global education and English language industry powerbrokers, including the British Council (BC) and the U.S. Department of State (USDOS). Thus, this research fills a gap in exploring how sub-Saharan collegial networks conceptualize teacher professionalism, even when operating in complex global and national political, social, and linguistic environments.

Research Questions

1. What are the global discourses and attending 'regimes of truth' around teacher professionalism that shape policy and practice in sub-Saharan contexts?

2. What discourses around teacher professionalism are present in Rwanda and how have these discourses assumed prominence?
3. What collective discourses around professionalism are apparent within ATER?
4. How do individuals within ATER express and enact discourses of their own professionalism?

Research Methodology

I used a variety of data collection methods within a multi-level comparative case study methodology (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016). First, I considered how teachers are positioned and how terminology around professionalism is being deployed through policy and donor activity at the global levels, and then how these discourses are altered and adapted into discourses that exist at the national level in Rwanda. With this backdrop, the primary object of inquiry is ATER, the local level where I investigated how global and national discourses are resisted, contested, and assimilated into the discourses that emerge from the teacher collective to construct and enact an ATER-specific understanding of professionalism.

ATER itself consists of three levels: *association leaders* (ex-teachers now employed by large NGO or foreign government organizations; they run operations and set agendas, secure funding, and maintain the social cachet of the association), *association members* (mostly working teachers who are organized into smaller regional communities of practice, which are led by community leaders), and *community of practice (COP) members* (which includes association members and non-member teachers who work in the COP communities). At each of ATER's leadership levels, I employed different methods to draw out collective and individual expressions of professionalism. Alongside analysis of ATER documentation, association leaders participated in focus groups and one-on-one interviews. Community leaders participated in multi-stage case studies which included observations, interviews, and visual methods. Finally, I led a professionalism workshops with COPs to reach peripheral members and non-member attendees.

For the national and global levels, I conducted a broad desk review of documentation within education policy, English language teaching, and Rwandan governance. For each level, I conducted discourse analysis on the spoken and written texts using a Foucauldian discourse approach (Kendall & Wickham, 1999; Rose, 2001). Cross-level comparison and network analysis was conducted between three levels to trace discursive threads, with three primary strands identified with differing uptake, deployment, and contestation at each level of the CCS; the three strands were epistemic neutrality, individualism, and depoliticization and externality.

Summary of Findings

Findings across the study are categorized according to their level. Within global discourses, I noted the celebration of the noncritical teacher who accepts the instrumentality of English as a "crucial element of an international business class structure" (Ives, 2006, pp. 136–137) and views their work as equipping a generation of students for the needs of the global marketplace – even if that marketplace is out of reach. Further, in global education and English teaching discourses, standardization is valued at multiple sites. The teacher relies on a body of pre-delineated, legitimate (and neutral) scientific knowledge regarding the subject of English language teaching which emerges from Global North institutions. This knowledge forms the basis for standardized credentialing procedures, which are used to demonstrate competence and legitimate membership within the field; these exams and syllabi conceptualize "correct" language, teaching practice, and pedagogy but are also connected to colonial assumptions around

2

the superiority and neutrality of English require Global South reliance on Global North. These discourses also normalize personal financial investment to acquire this linguistic and professional capital: paying for credentials, language exams, or covering the costs of ongoing professional development in order to remain "competitive in the perpetually changing world of flexible capitalism" (Sugarman, 2015, p. 112).

At the Rwandan national level, discursive threads around standardized knowledge are immediately evident: I argue that the Rwandan government constructs a "truth" about Rwanda in defining problems and solutions according to technical expertise. Through discourse, Rwandans are oriented and responsibilized towards the vision of national development put forth the government. The government presents "bad" and "good" conceptualizations of Rwandan subjectivity and indicates spaces where change must take place; this external form of control is especially levied upon teachers and their work. Goals for the reformation of Rwandan subjectivity are discursively represented in repeated phrases like "mindset change" and "knowledge society" or "knowledge economy" skew in favor of neoliberal economic activity (VVOB, 2018). English is posited alongside other market goods, such as adopting "neutral" management techniques, that will increase the entrepreneurial potential of the individual and the nation at large. Teachers are required to implement imported policies around English medium and competence curriculum even though significant gaps in state agency offerings mean that teachers are not re-trained for these reforms. Rather, they are individually responsabilized (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017) for that professional development and expected to take on the additional burden despite their poverty wage (IPAR Rwanda, 2014).

Within the association, there are spaces of both incorporation and resistance of the discourses emanating from global and national levels. Broadly, the professionalism valued in ATER leader and community leader discourses aligns with global and national assumptions. The valued subjectivity is embodied by ATER members adopts the independence and creativity required of Global North English teachers (Holliday, 1994, 2016); this professional is reflexive and able to identify individual areas of expertise and engage actively in the association, participating in the knowledge sharing and investing in their future career. Here, the association is actively combating the pejorative positioning assigned by global education bodies and demonstrating that even English teachers with little proficiency are able to function and develop as professionals. But the traits of a valued association member also align with neoliberal subjectivities: members take on the lion's share of responsibility for acquiring the knowledge and skills required by ambitious government policies and become self-driven (and largely self-funded) lifelong learners. Those who adopt this professional approach are eligible for rewards in the form of better jobs and overseas scholarships and placements via British Council (BC) and the U.S. Department of State (USDOS).

There are important spaces of individual and collective pushback. Members push back against discourses which link patriotism and service, arguing that a profession should be respected and paid accordingly. They also call for outside assistance with pedagogy and English language, which indicate the limits of association self-reliance: language is not learned solo, and unfamiliar pedagogies and approaches require demonstration and modeling.

Implications

The form of professionalism valued in ATER, which is influenced by global and national concepts, has great potential for addressing and dismantling pervasive deficit discourses levied at sub-Saharan English language teachers. ATER discourses encourage teachers to see themselves

as qualified and professional, with a repertoire of activities and materials to share with the organization as a whole. Self-reliance and group-reliance allow teachers to "own" their sense of professionalism and avoid reliance on outside "experts," thereby, promoting a sustainable, teacher-driven approach to professional development. In taking on this professionalism, teacher members are asked to invest their time, money, and knowledge to demonstrate their commitment to the profession and their care for fellow members. This form of professionalism has exciting implications for the transformation of the Rwandan teaching profession at large in terms of valuing and celebrating the expertise and potential for teachers to be involved in decision-making processes.

However, if the professionalism valorized by the association becomes overly elite and inaccessible to "ordinary" teachers, the association risks becoming another space of exclusion. The poverty suffered by many Rwandan teachers is a fundamental limit to their engagement in this form of professional development and adoption of the association mindset. Thus, the association itself is limited as a model for widespread teacher improvement. Instead, ATER stands to create a different class of teacher-professionals, "self-entrepreneurs" who are able to invest in themselves and advance within the field. These actions may initiate an internal brain-drain as "better," globally-competent teachers with strong English language communicative skills move out of teaching positions, or, at least, they may obscure the link between capability and competence. Individual investment nets individual improvement and advancement, rather than widespread system change. Thus, it appears that this professional subjectivity may only be available to a minority of teachers who have the time, space, and money to pursue it.

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6

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22

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