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Intellectual wellbeing: the pursuit of freedom in the professional learning of teachers

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ABSTRACT

In this article we advance a new way of theorising professional learning and development through the concept of intellectual wellbeing, or *noetic syntonia*, which we define as the positive sense of self derived from an authentic engagement with the ethical, theoretical, and practical challenges of one's professional domain. Drawing on concepts from philosophy and social theory, and particularly on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, we suggest that prioritising intellectual wellbeing is nothing short of a challenge for schools to reconnect with the essence of what an ethical approach to education should be, and to move away from outdated practices and policies that promote a simplistic idea of personal 'growth' measured through assessment, audit, and foregone educational outcomes. We begin by setting the scene for research into teacher professional identity before describing the concept of intellectual wellbeing in detail, including questions of ecology and value. We then offer an example of how intellectual wellbeing may be nurtured through simple, practical steps at the school level.

Introduction

What does it mean to teach well? What does it *feel like* to be a good teacher? In this theoretical article we pose these questions as a way of exploring the concept of intellectual wellbeing, or *noetic syntonia*, which we define as the positive sense of self derived from an authentic engagement with the ethical, theoretical, and practical challenges of one's professional domain. Drawing on concepts from philosophy and social theory, and particularly on the work of Simone de Beauvoir (1948), we argue that there is much to be gained in rescuing the concept of intellectual wellbeing from its cruder psychological framing as a checklist of self-help activities or mental aptitudes to nurture. Applied to the teaching profession, we suggest that prioritising intellectual wellbeing is nothing short of a challenge for schools to reconnect with the essence of what an ethical approach to education should be, and to move away from outdated practices and policies that promote a simplistic idea of personal 'growth' measured through assessment, audit, and foregone educational outcomes. Globally, schools are faced with teacher burnout, attrition, retention and recruitment crises, and above all by the mental ill health of teachers and students. We argue that current approaches to physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing, while obviously important, are not

attending fully to the intellectual sphere. We argue that refocusing on intellectual wellbeing or *noetic syntonia* may just bring the teaching profession back from the brink and bring warmth and light, or Henri Bergson's notion of élan vital (1907), back into the classroom. We begin by reviewing existing research into the intellectual components of teacher professional learning before describing the concept of intellectual wellbeing in detail. In order to consider the conditions in which intellectual wellbeing flourishes, we put forward an ecological framing for professional learning. We argue that thinking about professional learning ecologically helps to frame the value of professional development differently, which in turn may open up brighter and more sustainable ways of framing education in the future. We then offer an example of possibilities and challenges for nurturing intellectual wellbeing at the school level.

Teacher professional development: an enduring tension between theory and practice

In the well-established field of scholarship on the professional learning of teachers, there is a rich and flourishing vein of literature that explores the relationship between theory and practice in how teachers frame a sense of professional identity (Mutton *et al*. 2010). In the UK context, the debate about how teachers theorise their practice is closely linked to the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), first president of the British Educational Research Association, and to the work of Donald McIntyre (1995) on practical theorising. Most recently, Mutton *et al*. (2023) reinvigorate debate about the practical theorising in the professional lives of teachers, focusing on how teachers can engage in the deeper philosophical, sociological, and psychological questions of education while doing so in a way that attends to the practical realities and demands of the job. In a sector where evermore teachers are training *in situ*, and where the training period is rarely more than the vanishingly short period of 12 months, there remains and enduring tension between being trained in the *techne* of teaching – in the practical and technical skills that allow teachers to administer an existing curriculum or behaviour management system – and *phronesis*, or the practical wisdom that is derived both from experience in the classroom *and* from thoughtful, intellectual engagement in the underpinning theoretical and ethical propositions of education (Oancea and Furlong 2007, Ellis 2010). From Stenhouse to Mutton and colleagues, there is a consistent scholarly argument that teachers who hold both theory and practice together are capable of far deeper engagement with the essence of their professional lives and may endure in the profession much longer as a result. Acting as public intellectuals in this way (Heck 2022) – as visible, audible voices willing to celebrate innovation and critique ill-informed policy or practice – teachers may find a deeper, more profound connection with a sense of professional identity that is both practically and ethically grounded. It is perhaps the framing of teachers as intellectuals that gives them greater social status in contexts such as Finland where, incidentally, education is seen as world-leading in terms of outcomes for children and young people.

Wellbeing and professional development for teachers

Given the focus in the scholarly literature on the tension between theory and practice in the teaching profession, and given the strong claims for the benefits merging these two essential qualities of what it means to be an authentic teacher, it is surprising that this literature gives scant attention to the potential impact on wellbeing of an approach to teaching that is both practical or technical, and intellectual, ethical and theoretical. Wellbeing is, of course, an extremely well-travelled landscape in the world of professional development and learning. Research into wellbeing is extensive and extraordinarily broad in terms of scope, including everything from the more obvious domains of physical, emotional, relational, and psychological wellbeing through to more specific fields such as, for example, human-animal relations or seeking wellbeing through interactions with AI. As much as there is an extensive literature defining the 'what' of wellbeing, there is an equally if not larger trove of information available about *how* to do wellbeing well. This how-to

approach is often task- and time-oriented, in terms of helping individuals to find more peace through building a world around them that is ordered and organised towards achievable goals (Ryan and Deci 2000). Reflection is another core aspect of the kinds of wellbeing practices promoted in the public discussion about how we might create better, calmer, more centred versions of ourselves. Reflection on failure as well as success, for example, helps to focus on the immediate activities of one's life rather than creating anxiety around future goals or a fear of missing out on opportunities already passed. This suggests that many guides for how to effectively achieve wellbeing are often focused on individuals, and often focus on one's actions in the present.

It is interesting, disturbing even, that among more popular framings of wellbeing the specific field of *intellectual wellbeing* has received far less attention as a means of finding, if not balance, then greater fulfilment in one's life. This is not to say that intellectual wellbeing or wellness is not on the wellbeing radar – on the contrary, there are many public scholars who are beginning to expand this field by exploring how 'feeding your mind' is an important part of feeling better about yourself and the world around you. Whether labelled as intellectual 'wellbeing', 'wellness' or otherwise, the concept of remaining intellectually active is also a mainstay of psychological research into physical and mental good health in older age. As such, the current public discussion around intellectual wellbeing or wellness seems to frame intellectual activity as the pursuit of enjoyable activities and hobbies that are intellectually engaging, and which, as a result, produce feelings of happiness and wellbeing.

In the world of education, Carol Dweck's concept of growth mindset (2006) is perhaps most frequently deployed to engage in questions of what it means to be intellectually well. As opposed to a 'fixed' mindset (or as Sartre might put it, facticity in an existential framework) (1943), the lay interpretation of a 'growth' mindset is one that encourages individuals to feel confident and optimistic about their capacity to grow and develop, especially in the face of challenge or adversity. The temporal framing of this mindset is always oriented to some future point of achievement that is not yet quite here, but that will come one day. Initial or continued failure is framed as a positive experience in this sense because it is not seen as the end of the process (as may envisioned, one imagines, with a 'fixed' mindset) but rather as a bump in a much longer road towards future success and fulfilment. While Dweck does not employ the concept of intellectual wellbeing, it is clear how being intellectually well is essential to the 'growth' disposition that she and may others are championing.

While there are elements of this concept that appear intrinsically positive for thinking about intellectual wellbeing (for example, the idea of perseverance against adversity), it is also possible to see how growth mindset and similar concepts (for example, character education promoting 'grit' or 'resilience') may be misused in educational contexts in a way that detriments the intellectual wellbeing of school communities. Specifically, the individual focus of growth mindset and related concepts makes it very possible for individual students or teachers to lay blame solely on their own shoulders when they feel unable to achieve a given skill or master the teaching of a particular class. An individual and predominantly psychological framing of intellectual wellbeing in this sense can merge with broader discursive qualities of late neoliberal capitalism, within which the goals and achievements that build towards the 'good life' are also individually acquired, often in sharp competition with one's counterparts or colleagues over the scarce resources of success. Trapped in the cage of the individual human mind, a psychological framing of the concept of intellectual wellbeing fails to attend to the world outside, including its discursive and structural influences, to say nothing of its cultural and historical variation. Engaging individuals as collectives in this wider world of thought may help to move the discussion about intellectual wellbeing beyond metaphors of individual growth and resilience, and into a new and exciting realm where the nurturing of authentic selves can only be achieved in concert with others, and with the ideas of others. In this spirit we invoke the term *noetic syntonia* to capture the experience of intellctual wellbeing as a process of resonance (or dissonance) with others, resulting from deep, ethically-driven dialogue about the world. In diametric opposition to self-help, intellectual wellbeing may in fact be a matter

of helping selves, joined together by an ethical pursuit of making a better world beyond the limits one's own narrow personal *telos*, or trajectory through the life course.

Intellectual wellbeing

This brings us on to the components of the concept of intellectual wellbeing. In order to approximate a state of intellectual wellbeing in the context of professional development, we propose that it is first necessary to engage in an authentic consideration of self. By this, we do not mean that individuals (in this case teachers) should stare into the dark pool of consciousness in search of essential version of themselves which, once discovered, should serve as the image in which they will work. Doing so is at best spurious, and at worst narcissistic and symbolically violent in the arrogant assumption that within us all rests dormant an ideal version of the human condition, waiting to be animated. Rather, echoing the recent work of Cleary (2022) and following Simone de Beauvoir (1948), authenticity may be considered more productively as an intention towards deep reflexivity and self-making, through which one recognises the characteristics of one's condition and context, one recognises what one can and cannot change about one's condition, one recognises what one *should* change or act on to alter this condition, and then one goes about putting these ethical, philosophical, and sociological considerations into practice. Only through action, as Beauvoir might suggest, is it possible to transform an inert portension towards authenticity (one's inclination towards or vocalisation of the qualities that one believes to reflect authenticity) into authenticity itself. It is not enough to think about a better world: one must, to paraphrase a cliche, become changed action in order to make a better world. In the context of teaching, this would mean that one's professional essence is not a set of ethical qualities – what it means to be a 'good' teacher – but rather an ongoing flow or resonance of ethical dispositions articulated through action.

To complicate the picture slightly further, we might also suggest that authenticity is derived not only from recognising what one can change about oneself and one's context, but also recognising what structural forces are in place to inhibit change or constrain action. Clearly, the adaptation of the self is far less simple for those in minoritised or marginal positions from whose vantage point it is clear that the structure of society itself is predicated and reproduced not through facilitating change but through the brutal imposition of stasis. Recognising how sharp and unflinching are the rusted cogs in this machine offers a means not only to be authentic in one's reflections on the self, but to be active and authentic in one's reflections on the self-in-the-world. Doing so might be framed as a shift from thinking about individual resilience to productive, collective resistance. Such a shift is particularly important for those in positions of privilege, from whose vantage point the rusted cogs of the wider system are purposefully obscured, or are less regularly in the line of sight, or are simply easier to put out of focus. As Angela Davis suggests (2011), one must refuse to accept what one cannot change, and change the things that one cannot accept. We might add here that one might always need to see change as a process in concert with others, where the privileged can only experience an authentic sense of self if they are also willing to admit complicity in making others smaller, and then do something about it – what Foucault (1983) might call *parrhesia* — the act of speaking openly to confront the reality of power. It is in these actions that the resonance of *noetic syntonia* may be fully experienced. Kaustuv Roy (2022) articulates this as a change in the angle of vision: if we are able to tear ourselves away from our current view of the world, to refuse to be trapped like a deer in the headlights, then a new reality can be perceived. But we must look into the darkness in order to achieve this new angle of vision – and that is where intellectual wellbeing dwells.

This leads us to consider how it is possible to establish a new way of thinking more profoundly about professional learning in a time of uncertainty and change. In the carrying out of actions that reflect personal and professional ideals, we may see the representation of professional elegance, or a combination of ideals, beliefs, dispositions and habits that form a way of being that becomes instinctive, unthinking, and more than the sum of its parts. It is

important to note here that we are not using elegance and refinement as terms that give value to a particular aesthetic of practice – or, put differently, that professional elegance can only be seen in what at any given time is considered to be tasteful or even fashionable in practice. This speaks to a more superficial understanding of elegance that places form over function. Rather, professional elegance speaks to an aesthetic of beauty-in-motion – of the refinement of a craftsman or an artist at work, comfortable and confident in the messiness of the process. In this sense we can see elegance as articulated in the project of crafting one's professional essence as an artform, or as poetry, rather than as a simple matter of an end product defined by skills acquisition or by painting by the numbers of today's educational, technical, or professional fashions. The truly authentic professional self is an artform never quite completed, the resonance of a song without ending. Recognising this about professional learning can nurture a deep sense of intellectual wellbeing because it reminds us that it is the human process of professional learning that should drive our practice.

If it is in the process of authentic professional self-making that the art of professional learning is revealed, then we may also think about how this process is made visible to others, rather than existing as a backstage or a footnote to a more refined public performance of professional identity. This is where it is important to consider again the role of teachers as public intellectuals – that is, as inspiring, critical, intellectuals in their respective fields who have something important to say to the public of their classroom, their school, or their community. Engaging with others in intellectual dialogue can be a force for hope and positive change because it highlights that teaching is never either a solitary act or an action solely directed towards its outcomes. In dialogue and discussion, in disagreement and in dissonance, in deep engagement with the philosophical drivers of our actions, it may be possible to move closer to an authentic professional sense of self, articulated through professional practice, and always in visible, public dialogue with others.

Intellectual wellbeing in the professional development of teachers: thinking through ecology and value

Bell Hooks (1994) might argue that this framing of intellectual wellbeing is essential to what is feels like to be a good teacher, because 'good' teaching should be about transgression. Counter to the proposition that intellectual wellbeing is derived from feelings of sanctuary, or calm, or order, we suggest that true or authentic intellectual wellbeing must provide shock and uncertainty instead of consensus and the warm feeling of being on time or on task. Biesta (2013) has described this essential quality of intellectual wellbeing as an experience of transcendental violence – a rupture in one's view of the world that allows one to glimpse beyond the horizon of one's established knowledge, even if one must bloody one's knees to scramble to a new vantage point. Authentic intellectual wellbeing or *noetic syntonia* is achieved through the challenge of remaining awake and alert to new ideas, even or especially when they do not leave you with a greater sense of calm, order, or tranquillity. Thinking through uncomfortable ideas, grappling with difficult truths, and uncovering new intellectual landscapes is hard work; but, we contest, it is hard work that has a deep and lasting impact on overall wellbeing. Intellectual wellbeing is not a fast route to happiness, but rather represents a way of reconnecting with the essential ethical and vocational drivers of one's existence. For this reason, intellectual wellbeing should rest at the heart of professional learning for teachers, in order that they are able to facilitate and model a similar approach for the children and young people in their classrooms. This requires that schools become the kinds of places where intellectual wellbeing can thrive. While recognising the need for professional learning that attends to the technical demands of 'effective' teaching within the confines of current systems of mass education, our provocation is that new and more socially and ecologically just horizons of education can only be realised if we take a radical step beyond current practice. Fostering intellectual wellbeing is one way to start this process.

Ecological thinking

Of course, we have to recognise that this is much easier said than done. How is it possible to sustain this kind of practice? To better understand what intellectual wellbeing is and how it can be facilitated, here we propose that intellectual wellbeing must be thought about, and acted upon, within an ecological framework. Wellbeing focused only inwards on one's own feelings and status runs the risk of putting short-term, individualised psychological gains ahead of the big picture – namely, the more enduring project of seeking planetary or ecological wellbeing. Instead of focusing inwards, we propose that it is only through a deep sense of outward-looking intellectual wellbeing that we are able to connect with the professional essence that drives practice.

In the increasingly complex and interconnected world we inhabit, the need for a more holistic and integrated understanding of social, psychological, and environmental issues is becoming ever more evident. The French psychoanalyst, philosopher, and political activist Félix Guattari (2000) proposes his famous 'three ecologies' framework to address these challenges. Guattari's three ecologies consist of the mental, social, and environmental dimensions, which are interconnected and require equal consideration. The mental ecology refers to the subjective realm of thoughts, emotions, and desires; the social ecology encompasses collective relationships, institutions, and values; and the environmental ecology concerns the earth's natural systems, resources, and biodiversity. By emphasising the interdependence of these three spheres, Guattari's theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the multifaceted challenges that contemporary societies face. In the context of schools, this is a powerful point of departure for rethinking professional learning not as an individual exercise in development or upskilling, but rather as an ethical practice that generates intellectual wellbeing through a heightened awareness of one's connections with others and with the wider ecology that one inhabits.

Taking this perspective requires a little further engagement with Guattari's thinking. According to Guattari, the mental ecology is profoundly affected by the socio-political and economic systems in which individuals are embedded. In the contemporary neoliberal era, the pursuit of endless growth, productivity, and profit maximisation has led to an intensification of work demands, increased stress, and a disregard for workers' mental health. To counteract these negative effects, organisations must create environments that prioritise intellectual wellbeing. An important part of this process is to rethink the very parameters of what counts as the individual mind. Western notions of mind are highly individualistic and regularly assume that personal growth is limited to the fleshy containers that we inhabit. On the contrary, many other cultural perspectives would position the mind as something with boundaries that are much more diffuse. The anthropologist Gregory Bateson championed a more complex understanding of mind along these lines, emphasising that it is almost an essential quality of the human experience to project our minds out into the world, as much in our use of tools and technology as in our social networks and our ability to produce art, myths, symbols, and ideas (one of which happens to be the idea of the inviolate human individual).

Thinking about our existence as profoundly diffused, rather than hermetically sealed within the limits of the human body or life course, is an exciting way to expand how we can conceptualise the ways that we interact with others through education and learning. It means that we are inherently connected to the communities that we live in and the landscapes – professional, urban, virtual, natural – that we dwell in. What is best for us as individuals is what is best for the community, because essentially there is no clear distinction between one and the other. Imagining one's mind as one overlapping contrail in the rich swirling mosaic of life changes the focus by making it possible to think about oneself and one's community, and about the environment, all at the same time, not because they are interconnected, but because they are the same thing. Thinking in this way draws on the work of the French thinker Bruno Latour (1993), who famously argued that the distinction between nature and culture is not an essential reality of our world, but is rather simply an idea that

humans came up with quite recently to make sense of the world (not surprisingly, in a way that privileges *Homo Sapiens* in the natural pecking order). An integrated ecological understanding of intellectual wellbeing attends to this false distinction, with an important caveat being that recognising our place in the world does not absolve us of taking ethical action in it.

It might feel like we are getting some distance away from teacher professional learning here, but the essential point is that a radical change in the epistemology of professional life – a change in the ways we frame what we think we know about what it means to be, in this case, a 'good' teacher – opens up radical opportunities for thinking differently about how professional learning is done. It suggests that authentic professional learning really is the antithesis of professional learning as a process of developing discrete skills or technical aptitudes that offer opportunities for individual professional advancement. Certainly, in the field of teacher professional learning it remains important to expose practitioners to technical innovations in how teaching is done; but if we only attend to this kind of technical innovation we run the frightening risk of avoiding any deeper engagement with the ethical premise and challenge of education to offer up a better version of the world than the one we currently have.

Encouraging sustainable ecologies of mind also requires a focus on social ecology. Social ecology refers to the collective relationships, institutions, and values that shape individuals' experiences and actions. In a crude sense, in the workplace this dimension can be understood as the organisational culture, policies, and practices that influence the nature of human interactions and means of collaboration. Guattari argues that social ecology is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and collective agency (a kind of ecological empowerment, if you will). This raises an interesting practical question: in education systems that tend towards the atomisation of learning, whether for young people or teachers, how do we foster modes of collaboration, or social ecologies, that are self-sustaining because they remain clearly focused on a collective ambition? To create a supportive social ecology in the workplace, organisations must adopt policies and practices that promote diversity, inclusivity, and above all, collaboration. Our contention is that this is most powerfully evidenced where intellectual wellbeing remains at the heart of the matter – meaning that the process is not always comfortable or focused on consensus. Perhaps it is the most self-sustaining of social ecologies that recognise and embrace the inevitability of diverse and conflicting opinions and views. As much as we may entertain conflict and dissonance as part of our own meaning-making processes, so too can we expect and embrace this in our social ecologies (Wenger 2010).

We now finally turn our attention to the big picture: intellectual wellbeing as at once an individual mental activity, a means of collective professional action, and, ultimately, as a means to existing ethically and sustainably in a wider natural ecology. Environmental ecology is concerned with the natural systems, resources, and biodiversity that underpin human existence. In the context of the workplace, this dimension is closely related to the organisation's environmental impact and its commitment to sustainability. Guattari contends that environmental ecology is essential for ensuring the long-term survival of both human societies and the planet. Organisations must take responsibility for their environmental impact by adopting sustainable practices and promoting environmental awareness. Superficially, this can be achieved by reducing energy consumption, minimising waste, and sourcing materials responsibly.

On a deeper level, this means that seeking intellectual wellbeing through a critical appraisal of how education systems impact on the natural world – which leads to questions of our own complicity in these impacts, and a call to action for positive change. Rapleye and Komatsu (2021), for instance, argue convincingly that our current systems of mass education through schooling are profoundly unsustainable because they socialise future generations into the logic of late capitalism, which is by definition fuelled by practices of natural extraction and never-ending economic growth. Can we reasonably argue that, as practitioners, we are protecting the best interests of the children we teach, if we are complicit in the reproduction of what is

a demonstrably destructive, even extinctive mode of human existence? Engaging with these kinds of disquieting questions is the practice of *noetic syntonia* and is essential to radically and positively rethink how ethics and actions (mental ecology) link to communities (social ecology) in order to positively impact on wider ecosystems (environmental ecology).

Rethinking value

In order to adopt the ecological approach above, an essential part of the challenge of profound professional learning is the question of value. When professional learning is framed as a process of maximisation of teaching capacity, then its value is articulated in a transactional sense as being the means of teaching in the most effective way – which in turn is a way of saying that the value of professional learning for teachers is about the best outcome for students. In the current mode of mass education defined, above all else, by high stakes summative assessments, 'best' outcomes are about the transactional value of qualifications either for entry to work or Higher Education. Even in this framing of education, what exactly it means to cultivate 'effectiveness' remains mysterious (it is extremely difficult to measure the impact of professional learning on student outcomes), but it endures either as an explicit or implicit driver of why schools invest in professional learning. Added value and increased effectiveness are what so many professional learning consultants will promise from their content, as the transactional value of what is being bought and sold. What else would be the point of professional learning unless it improves our value as professionals, measured in student or consumer outcomes? Why would one invest increasingly tight school budgets in professional learning unless it offered the promise of this kind of currency?

The fact that the above questions appear on the surface to be so sensible reveals an enduring problem with current thinking about professional life: we are thinking about value in the wrong way. This takes us back to an ecological framing because it demands different thinking about how individuals are positioned not in, but as part of a wider ecology. If individuals are part of the ecology, rather than simply actors in it, then we are required to think differently about our relationship to our professional environment (to our work), and this, in turn, raises questions about value. If we are no longer individual actors seeking to extract the maximum yield from our resources (whether effective staff, or outcome-oriented children, or efficient school budgets), then it is possible to think about the value of our actions in very different terms.

One implication of this process is that it requires thinking differently about the self. Schooling has much to answer for as a process of encouraging children to imagine themselves as coherent, enduring individuals. The language of this process is extractive: children are encouraged to get as much out of school as they can. It is a system designed for profound self-improvement, the assumption behind which is that the value of schooling is capital value. Schooling, seen in this way, is the means by which one is able to gain the skills and dispositions, the social networks and means of being in the world, that will make one more valuable in the field of work and in the social and economic fields to which one aspires. Bernard Stiegler (2021) sums this up by saying, 'capitalism turns knowledge and its economic valuation into its primary element'. Time in school in this way becomes rarefied: school time becomes an extremely rare commodity that once passed, present made past, cannot be retrieved because it represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for self-making. Systems of high-stakes assessment and certification reify this thinking by turning the concept of time capital into social reality. Somewhat counter to the current science about neuroplasticity, this framing of time also underpins thinking about cognitive development in schools: we must ensure that learning is maximised in the fleeting, golden years of childhood and youth lest these children be left behind, bereft, unable to stretch and yaw to the demands of ever-increasing social mobility through the accrual of capital. We need only think back to the anxiety of 'lost learning' during the pandemic to be reminded that self-making through schooling takes place though the shrewd and prudent use of time during the school years, principally in the pursuit of skills, certificates, and dispositions of capital value.

Our values about value, as it were, are so central to our existence within capitalism that they are not merely seen as components of a historically specific system of political economy. Instead, and particularly in the guise of neoliberalism, they have become essentialised as qualities of human existence. The human self is thus imagined as *homo economicus*, a being that is driven by its very nature to maximise capital value through rational action in linear time. When it comes to articulating the value of education, to lose or waste time in school is therefore seen not only as irrational or uneconomical, but also morally objectionable or even socially deviant: it is presented as contrary to the very nature of human life.

Nail (2015) reminds us that Marx (1867) was asking these questions more than a century ago. Nail elucidates how Marx was not interested in a better or more accurate way of calculating value within a capitalist society, but rather in pointing to the absurdity of how exchange value works, because capital value is entirely imagined. Importantly, Nail reminds us via Marx that the very essence of capitalism is to always make the individual persons' experience of existence less valuable in capital terms than the benefits that are reaped by an employer. This can be a particularly depressing prospect if one is employed in what the anthropologist David Graeber calls 'bullshit jobs'(2018), or forms of employment that seem to have no real inherent value beyond turning the cogs of the machine for the ultimate capital benefit of another actor. In the context of teacher professional learning, the practice of intellectual wellbeing is to dwell on these hard questions in the context of schooling. In asking whether or not teaching has for some become a 'bullshit job', we prompt the vitally important question of how we bring teaching back to a professional essence that is vital, ethically driven, and alive with the intellctual challenge of what it means to make a positive difference on the lives that are crafted in classrooms.

Part III

Clearings: practical examples and reflections on cultivating intellectual wellbeing

In the final part of this article, we would like to offer some suggestions of how intellectual wellbeing can be nourished in school settings and specifically in professional learning provision for teachers. We conceptualise of these spaces as *clearings*, because they are intended to evoke thinking through ecological metaphor and to link this particular shift in practice with the wider ecologies of learning in which teachers work. Again invoking the work of Roy (2022) clearings can be seen as a connection between the self and one's position in an ecology that is historical and discursive, or made up of ideas from the past swirling together in the shifting meteorological patterns of human society in the present. Finding clearings from which one can view these messy, broiling systems of ideas can be helpful in order to make sense of one's own context, beliefs, ideas, and practices. It can also offer the space for using educational theory to interpret one's condition, and to reflect on what one can or should do to emancipate oneself and/or others from the rain and the cold outside. In short, we have intended to devise clearings within which teachers can experience professional learning which facilitates intellectual wellbeing through a deep consideration of professional authenticity.

For teachers working in school contexts that increasingly demand adherence to very specific means or techniques of instruction, or prescriptive approaches to what is learned and how, intellectual wellbeing can be difficult indeed to seek out. Through our work with teachers in international schools, since 2020 we have endeavoured to create spaces where intellectual wellbeing can flourish. Our challenge has been to find ways of engaging with teachers who are overworked and battling to keep up with the new and emerging demands of their jobs. The reactive mode of teaching to increasing stress makes finding time for professional learning extremely difficult. In devising professional learning activities for teachers during this time, we were acutely aware of these pressures, and expected low turn-out and unengaged participation. However, what happened was different. While sessions focusing on technical skills or problem-oriented workshops (how to

develop more effective strategies for assessment, or dealing with behaviour, for example) remained less well attended and were evaluated as less impactful for teachers, we saw an upturn in the interest of teachers in sessions that were aimed to be more philosophical, critical and intellectually challenging. We offered regular seminar sessions with scholars from the world of educational research, including Bev and Etienne Wenger-Trayner, Gert Biesta, Stephen Ball, and others including the anthropologist Tim Ingold and the developmental psychologist John Coleman. Connecting teachers directly with these scholars was a means of breaking the artificial wall between the professional learning landscape of teachers (so often associated primarily with 'fixing' practice through changes of technique) with the world of educational theory and research. We also offered a series of professional learning programmes where teachers were given the time and space to read research and theoretical academic scholarship, and to engage in thoughtful discussions about this literature as it relates to their own professional practice and sense of self. Professional learning sessions where we confronted abstract, 'big' questions were far better attended and received than sessions that, on paper, were more directly relevant to the problems emerging each day in the classroom. What, we wondered, could explain this seemingly incongruous engagement with the least practically applicable sessions, in a moment when teacher's time was at a particular premium?

The feedback from teachers was revealing: what they were getting from the sessions was an increased sense of intellectual wellbeing – a sense of brain 'space' or brain 'food' that reconnected them with the original reasons for their engagement with the teaching profession. Another way to frame this would be a reconnection with *telos*, or one's sense and pursuit of an authentic version of one's narrative arc through life. We may add to this the notion of *aidos*, or a sense of failing to live up to one's ideal path through existence. *Aidos* — a fear of missing out on what one should *really be doing* to live authentically – may be the wake-up call to readjust one's relationship to *telos*. Choosing to engage with deep thinking about professional life in the context of 'clearings' may be one way to start this process. While open discussions of theoretical or philosophical questions may in the short term seem like an inefficient use of time, particularly when daily stresses are mounting, we found that teachers instead found more intellectually challenging sessions to be a necessary pause and reset that was also an affirmation of professional identity. If teachers are not intellectuals, then they are merely technicians in the classroom. Reconnecting with a sense of intellectual identity was for these teachers an empowering and enlivening experience. This realisation prompted a reconsideration of what intellectual wellbeing can be in contexts of professional learning.

Conclusions

Developing an authentic sense of professional identity requires an active rather than a passive approach to discovering who we are as professionals. Rather than discovering professional identity as innate or essential, it is more valuable to think of how we actively shape the boundaries of our professional lives. Thinking in these terms offers us the opportunity to think clearly and carefully about what we can and cannot choose about our professional selves, and what we can and cannot change about our wider context. In becoming attentive to these conditions, it is possible to intentionally choose how our professional selves are shaped, and to make active decisions about our professional lives. In doing this, it is possible to develop a more authentic sense of professional identity, and this intellectual process yields a deep sense of wellbeing and empowerment. Linked to authenticity is the understanding that intellectual wellbeing comes not from being a 'consumer' of professional learning activities, but rather from participating in the production of professional learning and with an awareness of one's responsibility to participate actively in this process. Encouraging a productive approach to professional learning means championing the existing experience and expertise of teachers, but it also involves the challenge of developing new skills and knowledge that allow teachers to engage in collaboration and co-production. The sense of ownership over professional learning that comes with this process is another important part of intellectual wellbeing or *noetic syntonia*.

While wellbeing is often thought about as something that relates to individuals, intellectual wellbeing is created through dialogue *between* individuals. Linked in this way to relational wellbeing, intellectual wellbeing is about fostering relationships and community that encourage engagement and critical thinking about teaching, learning, knowledge, theory, and practice. Becoming an active participant in a professional learning community also encourages a greater sense of visibility in this community. Intellectual wellbeing can come from being recognised and seen by others as an important voice in a professional learning community. In this sense, teachers can be encouraged to become 'public intellectuals', or individuals who are respected and regarded for their intellectual expertise in the public domain of a school organisation. Intellectual wellbeing is closely aligned with a sense of stability in terms of professional expectations, trajectories, and outcomes. Intellectual wellbeing can be derived therefore from creating safe, sustainable spaces where teachers can refocus on the central challenges of the profession in terms of subject or disciplinary knowledge, questions of pedagogy, and broader ethical concerns about the purpose and future of education. Stability can be difficult to establish in times defined by volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (or VUCA) conditions. Where stability is elusive, it is equally vital to develop strategies for dealing with uncertainty. Moving beyond resilience, the practice of intellectual wellbeing through professional learning fosters productive resistance, because it provides teachers with the knowledge and confidence to respond critically, actively, and constructively to change.

Surfacing concerns about practice is difficult but necessary in order to then ask an equally important question: what are we going to do to make things better, more ethical, more just, more sustainable? This shift in thinking is fundamental to imagining a more sustainable future where professional learning and development education is not about the accrual of value nested in forms of capital but rather becomes a process of developing a kinder and more critical disposition in relation to the world (Sahlberg 2010). Engaging with an ecological understanding of intellectual wellbeing is the slow and thoughtful practice of making small changes that accrue into a different future social reality, enacted by individuals and communities, in their environments, in the present.

One simple practical activity that can enact intellectual wellbeing is to begin with dialectic, by which we mean to build a professional learning community that embraces diverse and divergent views. Expose teachers to cognitive science, to technically-oriented professional learning and to positions that challenge and critique the orthodoxy of evidence-based practice. Create spaces that normalise a plurality of professional views. Establish a high standard of critical intellectual engagement and disagreement for teachers and challenge teachers to model the same in their classrooms. Most importantly, for those in positions of leadership the challenge remains to create clearings and pose difficult questions so that colleagues can feel alive and visible in the day to day of their professional lives. To paraphrase the educational philosopher Gert Biesta, this by necessity and not coincidence involves trust and risk, but this beautiful risk is at the very heart of how we start to value education differently for the future.

Disclosure statement

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