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Book Review: Teacher identity: Harsh lessons learned from the micro-management of teachers and teacher education: A review of Tony Brown and Olwen McNamara's Becoming a mathematics teacher: Identity and identifications (2011)

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In the last three decades, poststructural theorists have deconstructed the concept of identity, troubling some of the tacit essentialist assumptions that underpin its use in describing lived experience. Structuralist concepts of identity rest on ideals of coherence, centering, singularity, and authenticity. In contrast, poststructural renderings of identity emphasize the fragmentation, multiplicity, contingency and partiality of identity. Poststructuralists propose that this form of identity better captures the ways in which we live our lives in a global and highly mediated world, where identity feels less fixed and more emergent, less permanent and more tactical, less essentialist and more performative.

Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted, and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshaled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and, on occasion, compelled to give way (Butler, 1993, p. 105).

Recent research on teacher identity in mathematics education has emphasized this post-structuralist approach, arguing that identity be seen as provisional, emergent, and conflicted (Black, Mendick, & Solomon, 2009; de Freitas, 2008; Walshaw, 2004).Tony Brown and Olwen McNamara expand on this approach in *Becoming a mathematics teacher: Identity and identifications*, focusing on the ways that teachers develop policy-inflected identities in relation to various managerial, professional, and personal discourses. The book examines how pre-service elementary teachers or "trainee" primary teachers conceptualize their own professional learning and practice, and how this kind of identity work shapes and indeed fixes cultural understandings of mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning. The research draws on two studies funded by the United Kingdom research councils over a five-year period. Two groups of around thirty trainees were interviewed at different stages of their four-year training, and again as they entered the field. Interview questions asked trainees to

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reflect on their experiences and to discuss the impact of various factors on their teaching, such as University tutors, school-based mentors, government policy, and curriculum materials. This research took place in the UK during a major policy overhaul, described by the authors as "an experiment on a grand scale into how much centralized control could be achieved" (p. 5), and in which the teaching of mathematics took centre stage. In particular, the book focuses on the impact of the *National Numeracy Strategy*, documenting the way in which this policy initiative was politically motivated, implemented, and internalized, and enacted by teachers.

The book examines the detailed ways in which teachers negotiate these demands, defining themselves in relation to the constraints they are able to recognize, altering their sense of agency and aspiration to accommodate the dependency demanded by state-sanctioned regulation. The authors discover that the trainee stories change significantly as the participants decide to leave out "the issues that they preferred not to confront," masking the ambivalence they feel towards mathematics, and decide instead to tell stories about their past and present selves as possessing qualities that serve them positively (p. 93). This is a fascinating shift that reveals the power of our desire to tell comforting stories about our actions and experiences. The trainees' happy resolutions, argue Brown and McNamara, relate primarily to qualities of affect and pedagogy (being sensitive, patient and supportive) and mask "the continuing anxieties" relating to their own "mathematical abilities" (p. 93). The authors argue that identity is constructed through this kind of narrative work, rather than revealed or exposed. There is no final identity, no correct story. There are just incessant acts of identification with, in this case, master and cover stories that circulate in the educational field. The trainees learn to tell cover stories so as to make their conflicted agency more bearable. The central role of emotion in these stories is hugely important. The stories went from mathematics as "scary" to being a fun activity with an emphasis on the teacher's capacity to empathize with students who found the subject difficult, and then finally to an identification with the rhetoric of the Numeracy Strategy. Trainees begin to speak the Numeracy Strategy without question, stating "It's sort of ingrained into my head" (p. 76).

Readers in the U.S. and elsewhere can learn considerable lessons from this study of the negative impact of micro-managing teachers and subjecting schools and other aspects of education to a highly intrusive policy apparatus. Not only was teacher capacity to make professional judgments greatly restricted, the authors argue that the actual scope of student achievement was narrowed and mathematics itself was confined to a set of commodified skills. The National Numeracy policy actually backfired and resulted in teachers emphasizing procedure rather than mathematical content, while mathematics itself was subsumed within broader conceptions of classroom administration. Those who consider teacher testing as a potential way of ensuring professional expertise would be wise to read this book and learn from the example of England, where the Numeracy Skills Test, introduced in 2000, and other teacher tests that followed, were expensive and time consuming exercises that failed to trigger professional growth and failed to weed out bad teachers. The authors discuss how the tests were enacted as very public theatrical events or spectacles of regulation whose purpose was to show the public that government was paying attention. Chapter four outlines the many regulative interventions imposed by the British government as they attempted to respond to the apparent low ranking in international comparisons like PISA. Although there is yet to be a cost-benefit analysis of all these policy initiatives, this study and others cited in the book (see chapter four), point to how limited and even detrimental these changes were in terms of their impact on teacher quality.

The strengths of this book are in its detailed portrait and powerful analysis of how teachers are subjected to (and subjects of) various discursive habits by which identity and identification emerge. This book is a powerful example of how psychoanalytic and

poststructuralist theories of identity shed considerable light on experiences in mathematics education. Chapter one consists of a brief overview of four competing hermeneutic frameworks for studying the relation between individual and collective, or agency and structure. Using Gallagher's (1992) terms, the variants range from conservative and moderate, to critical and radical hermeneutics. The authors associate the last with post-structuralism and the work of Foucault and Derrida on de-centering humanist notions of the subject as a rational, self-knowing, autonomous center of will and action. But they point out that critical hermeneutics does not furnish them with the tools they need to study the deeply psychological nature of identification, and they push onward into Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of discourse in order to speak more directly to the complexities of narrative and interview research data. Drawing on Lacan, they argue that the human subject is involved in a never-ending attempt to capture an understanding of his or her self, but that the stories that they tell about themselves—the discourses by which subjectivity is both asserted and confined—are never adequate nor satisfying to the teller. The stories we tell about ourselves never catch up to us, but we face the risk of believing they are true in some final definitive way (de Freitas & Paton, 2009). The teller identifies with a cover story, or in the language of Lacan, an image—indeed the teller *must* identify with an image in order to enter the world of language and relative autonomy—but there is an inherent misrecognition in this act of identification, since the image or cover story never reflects the self exactly as one would anticipate or hope for.

It is the gap between our cover stories and our lived or felt experience, the gap between our aspirations and our "outcomes", which opens up a space, the authors argue, for troubling the rigid regulation of classroom and curriculum. The stories will never capture the lived experience; the actual "emotional content" of personalities will always be somewhat out of reach to both the teller and the interviewer. The authors cite Zizek on this point, suggesting that we can only ever hint at these "fragile elements" of our identity. This gap between 'life' and how we make sense of it is precisely where alteration and invention might emerge. Moving away from critical theorists who bemoan the misrecognition between social program and personal identity, the Lacanian approach claims that misrecognition is in fact the engine of identity: "the stuff of personal construction is an attempt to reconcile one's view of oneself with the views one supposes others have of you… For Lacan, it is the gap that defines identity" (p. 100). It is through the gap that I am able to step outside of the world, or to act as though I could step outside the world, and begin to imagine acting differently.

When, decades ago, I learned about Lacanian theories of subject formation, I recall being intrigued but suspicious. I did not appreciate the relevance to education of a psychoanalytic discourse, concerned that it seemed to betray feminist and other critical approaches to subjectivity, and that the notions of therapy and cure were problematic in themselves and even more disturbing when used in the context of educational policy. But as I followed the work of Deborah Britzman (2003, 2009) and other scholars in education (Todd, 2003), I began to grasp how powerful this theoretical discourse was in addressing the complexity of identification and identity. And although I am still concerned that much of this literature fails to reckon with the particularity of gender or class or other situated experiences, and there is little in this book that addresses this concern, the authors nonetheless claim that Zizek develops the work of Lacan in this direction, making links to broader social relations, and pointing to how this approach speaks to projects of "social improvement" (p. 101).

One of the more controversial and interesting claims of this book is that "Primary school mathematics *is* what primary teachers make happen" (p. 13). Indeed, the authors state that the central task of this book is establishing "the reality of mathematics and its teaching as a function of how it is enacted by people in the field." (p. 97). This claim is made more

ambitious in such statements as: "Mathematics is generally a function of the social agendas relating to the circumstances of its practice…To locate under the surface of these discourses any sort of a 'real' mathematics that might better anchor our understanding seems to be a spurious task" (p. 107), and "Mathematics as such does not exist in any material sense. Nevertheless it produces tangible effects in psychic, social and physical activity" (p. 123). Citing Shulman (1986) and others on "pedagogic content knowledge," they argue that the last few decades have seen a shift towards a discourse of mathematics as something entirely mediated through pedagogy. They argue that the instruments of curriculum reform have indeed become part of mathematics itself. The question "what is mathematics?" was asked of all research participants in each of the four years of training. Their answers, at the outset of their studies, are clipped and numerically oriented, but these broaden during their university training, when they state that mathematics is "exploring number, exploring shape" and comparing multiple solution strategies. Finally, for students at the later stages of training and those in the first year of their teaching, their statements reveal a conception of mathematics that is primarily about good management of activity and commodified curricular performance standards. Thus, in the end, the National Numeracy Strategy made it easier to teach mathematics, but, in doing so, it stripped the subject of all creative adventure. The authors make the insightful observation that pedagogical forms (be they about the use of manipulatives or line graphs or drill sheets) came to stand in for the mathematics itself: "The presentation of the activity seems to provide a way of locating mathematics, yet the activity seems to be clouding the teacher from alternatives. The pedagogical form becomes the mathematics itself such that it is otherwise 'impossible to teach'" (p. 113). And it is in this way that mathematics becomes a set of skills and competencies, a set of "commodities exchanged in the educational marketplace" directly linked to particular forms of social regulation (p. 126). The authors ask: Why these forms and not others? How does our investment in these forms of activity—or the particular performance standards and skills we now take for granted—map onto a discourse of ability? How does the discourse of mathematics always insert itself into assessments of student ability?

In the final analysis, it seems that the regulation implicit in the Numeracy policy tamed "the beast of mathematics" by radically confining teachers' emotional engagement with the subject: "They confined it to certain linguistic modes that kept it in check as a threat to their psyche" (p. 138). In line with Butler's reading and Lacanian theory, the subordination to the regulation was precisely that which seemed to furnish a form of agency for the teachers. Although the authors acknowledge that they are dealing with interview data and not "real life as it were"(p. 82), there is a nagging feeling like we are missing parts of the picture that might help us better grasp the ways in which these stories truly are "lived by". I was disappointed with the examples of teacher responses to the question "what is mathematics?", not because they did not support the thesis, but because there was something in the way the researchers asked, possibly something about the question itself, that made me think they were destined to get the answers they did. I wonder if a mixed research methodology, possibly more ethnographic, might have fleshed out and further substantiated this important claim.

This book is an important contribution to the field because of the way it radically disrupts the cover stories that many teachers and teacher educators tell as they internalize and begin to take for granted the policy initiatives that shape their voice, agency, and identity. Most of the teachers in this study learn to speak the language of the Numeracy Strategy (almost) fluently, accepting and often embracing their own policing through the inspection regime. When a trainee inserts, optimistically, at the end of a long retinue of government expectations regarding their performance, that "you can still fit in your own style in that," the

authors suggest that "it seemed impossible for this new teacher to appreciate fully and then reconcile all the alternative discourses acting through her" (p. 104). In the final chapter, the authors ask, "whether policy should be targeted at maximizing autonomous professionalism amongst the teaching force or at providing an easy to follow framework that guides trainee and new teachers through territory in which they are susceptible to anxiety" (p. 152). They conclude that "encouraging teachers to stay in the job longer to gain experience, trusting and nurturing teacher professionalism, may have greater longer-term benefits than prescribing how they might do the job better within the current framework …" (p. 152).

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