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Comforting narratives of compliance: Psychoanalytic perspectives on new teacher responses to mathematics policy reform

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Tony Brown

Mathematics is a subject that filled many trainee primary teachers with horror in their own schooling. Yet, despite a history of ambivalence towards the subject of mathematics, trainees in a study did not continue to present themselves as mathematical failures once they had become teachers. Rather, they offered an account of themselves that omitted to mention the issues that had previously troubled them. This chapter considers some psychoanalytical aspects of the study that has been reported in full by Brown and McNamara (2005). The wider study examined how initial training students make this transition and concluded that such trainees 'story' themselves so as to sideline mathematics but to present their own perceived qualities in a positive light. It also suggested that governmental regulative apparatus provided a language that could be readily embraced, a set of rules that could be loved. This chapter focuses on the trainee teachers as they progress through university into their first year of teaching mathematics in primary schools. It suggests that trainee accounts of themselves are produced at the intersection of their personal aspirations of what it is to be a teacher and the external demands they encounter *en route* to formal accreditation. It also suggests that participation in the institutions of teaching results in the production of discourses that serve to conceal difficulties encountered in reconciling these demands with each other. It urges caution in inspecting the trainee accounts of this experience, by suggesting that the accounts mask anxieties emerging in a difficult transition. The chapter commences with an introduction to the empirical studies from which data is drawn. It then proceeds to consider a theoretical reading of this study, using an approach derived from psychoanalysis, on how trainees produce accounts of their experience. The final section discusses how these accounts are woven into the discourse of government regulation.

The Empirical Study

The chapter draws on two government-funded studies (Economic and Social Research Council) undertaken within the B.Ed. (Primary) program at Manchester Metropolitan University. The empirical material produced provided a cumulative account of student transition from the first year of training to the end of the first year of teaching. The specific interest in the discussion which follows is on how the students'/teachers' conceptions of school mathematics and its teaching are derived. In particular, it explores the impact that government policy initiatives relating to mathematics and Initial Teacher Training, as manifest in college and school practices, have on the way in which primary students and first year teachers describe themselves.

The first study spanned one academic year (Brown, McNamara, Jones and Hanley, 1999). The team interviewed seven/eight students from each year of a four-year initial training course from a total cohort of some 200 students. Each student was interviewed three times at strategic points during the academic year; at the beginning of the year, whilst on school experience, and at the end of the year. The study took the form of a collaborative inquiry between researcher and student/teacher generating narrative accounts within the evolving students'/teachers' understandings of mathematics and pedagogy in the context of their past, present and future lives. Only one of the team was involved in teaching the trainees (Hanley). The second study followed a similar format, but without any teaching staff, and spanned two academic years. In the first year of the study a sample of 37 4th year students was identified. Each student was interviewed three times during this year. The sample included seven students involved in the earlier project, five of whom were tracked for a total of four years. In the second year of the study eleven of these students were tracked into their first teaching appointment. Each of these students was interviewed on two further occasions. These interviews monitored how aspects of their induction to the profession through initial training manifested itself in their practice as new teachers.

Specifically, students involved in the research were those who were training to be primary teachers and who, as part of their professional brief, would have to teach mathematics. Significantly, whilst all the students who were interviewed held a 16+ mathematics qualification as required for entry to college, none had pursued mathematics beyond this. Nor had any of the students elected to study mathematics as either a first or second subject as part of their university course. The research set out to investigate the ways in which such non-specialist students conceptualised mathematics and its teaching and how their views evolved as they progressed through an initial training course.

These studies took place at a time of great change in English schools. This change comprised a major program of curriculum reform in which new regulative policies for the teaching of mathematics took centre stage. The *National Numeracy Strategy* (DfEE, 1998), for example, offered a radical re-conception of classroom practice in mathematics in which specific guidance was offered and checked through rigorous school inspections. The studies pointed to this being seen in a positive light by new teachers in primary schools, since it provided clear guidance in an area where many such teachers experienced their own anxieties in relation to the subject (Brown et al, 1999; McNamara and Corbin, 2001).

Narratives of recovery

For the trainee teacher building a sense of self, there is inevitably a gap between how she 'is' and how she 'might be'. A resolution between supposed and desired states I shall suggest is not easily achieved without compromise in which certain desires will be re-routed. There are multiple stories of what it is to be a teacher to be negotiated. These stories do not necessarily lend themselves to final resolution in relation to each other. Conceptions may be both idealistic and unachievable in themselves and impossible to reconcile with other conceptions. The teacher, however, may nevertheless experience this apparent need for reconciliation as a requirement being made of her in a school setting. That is, images of what constitutes a 'competent' teacher may be circulated and influence the teacher's understanding of the multiple demands she needs to meet. She may feel obliged to respond to this requirement with some account of her success in achieving reconciliation, or otherwise feel disappointed as a result of failure. But in which ways would this account be offered? As Convery (1999, p. 139) suggests 'identity is created rather than

revealed through narrative' (cf. Gergen, 1989). Convery continues (p. 142) by suggesting that perhaps teachers

> feel that they are deficient in relation to their stereotype of how teachers behave, and conceal this inadequacy… by reconstructing a morally prestigious self-description that they can use for public display. However, in so doing we reinforce an unrealistic stereotype and become complicit in our own alienation. Such reconstructions may act as short term therapy for the individual, whilst contributing to a collective repression, to which the only response is this ultimately disabling palliative of further self reconstruction.

That is, the failure to reconcile is understood as a personal failure to achieve a particular image of teaching and activates a perceived need to change oneself yet again.

At the commencement of the study the trainees were asked to recount their mathematical experience during their school days. According to the majority of the interviewees, mathematics was a subject that caused many difficulties, sometimes real emotional turbulence. The interviews then followed them through transitions from school to university training courses and from thence to attaining their first teaching appointment as a new teacher and 'supposed' mathematics authority. It then considered how their understandings of themselves shifted in response to the different positions they adopted, as trainee/ new teacher, and the different roles they assumed (learner, teacher, assessor, assessed, carer, employee). The trainee/new teacher may feel the need to attempt a reconciliation of these various roles in order to have some account of her achievement and satisfy her need to narrate a coherent narrative of self (cf. Harre, 1989, Sokefeld, 1999).

What does this sort of account look like in the data? Consider these concerns in relation to some typical comments from fourth year students about the skills they feel they need in order to be a teacher of mathematics: 'I like to give as much support as possible in maths because I found it hard, I try to give the tasks and we have different groups and I try to make sure each group has activities which are at their level. Because of my own experience.' Another student commented: 'The first one that springs to mind which I believe that I've got and which I thinks very important particularly in maths as well, would be patience'. A recently qualified teacher was more expansive:

> Well I'm sensitive towards children who might have difficulty with maths because I know how it might feel and I don't want children to not feel confident with maths ... I use an encouraging and positive approach with them and ... because I think if you're struggling in maths the last thing you want is your confidence being knocked in it, you want someone to use different strategies in trying to explain something to you and use a very positive, encouraging approach and not make the child feel quite - Oh they can't do maths never ... you know, so, yeah, I think my own experience in maths has allowed me to use a certain approach with children.

Such happy resolutions to the supposed skills required to teach mathematics (being 'sensitive', 'patient', 'supportive') it seems, can provide effective masks to the continuing anxieties relating to the students' own mathematical abilities. The evidence in the interviews pointed to such anxieties being side stepped rather than removed since they were still apparent in relation to more explicitly mathematical aspects of the enquiry, such as mathematical concept mapping exercises carried out, or, to a lesser extent, in relation to government mathematics skills test for teachers.

The truth of the training experience

There is also a need, however, to be cautious in relation to how data is being read. Which truth are the interviewees telling? In an informal conversation Rom Harre described how he often asked a lot of neutral questions in the first half an hour of any interview he was conducting since he felt the interviewees did not really relax until later. However, can we be sure that the state of being relaxed would produce a better truth? Lacan, to be discussed shortly, thought the reverse, conducting short consultations of undefined length to keep his clients on their toes. Perhaps the state of being more relaxed might enable the trainee to move more easily around her habitual mode of describing themselves. That is, she might merely occupy the depictions of self with which she has learnt to live, which may, or may not, paint her in a positive light ('shy', 'bad at maths', 'caring towards children'). By inspecting the last interview extract it might be suggested that there are various forms of concealment evident. Apart from the masking of mathematical anxiety that I have identified there is an uneasy mix of moral and causal explanations. These have been combined to produce a 'preferred identity' (Convery, 1999, p. 137) that uses moral platitudes to endorse a style of operation that she has been obliged to choose as result of her mathematical shortcomings. This sort of strategy has been discussed more fully by Harre (1989). For Convery (1999, p. 137), responding to Harre's work, 'individuals use metaphors of struggle to create an impression of an essential self'. The 'truth' of experience is processed through a story frame in which the individual portrays herself as struggling. This story provides the subjective fantasy through which reality is structured (Žižek, 1989). But how might the truth beneath be accessed? Clearly such a notion of a singular truth is problematic. And is it concealed? In Žižek's account, we live the fantasy, where the Real sometimes interferes.

The content of our interviews was clearly touching on some personal stuff yet the media through which this is accessed precludes any sort of neutrality. The unconscious is pressing upon the things the interviewees say yet there can be no definitive manifestation of this unconscious (Lacan, 1977). Successive stories are tried out for size as the interviewees negotiate the trust they feel able to offer to others and the preparedness they have to accept a particular version themselves. Yet as indicated, identity is constructed rather than revealed through such narrative processes. There is not an innate truth to locate. But the question remains of how interviews enable access to versions of reality and what those versions reveal. Žižek (2001) has explored the difficulties of identifying and accessing this sort of 'truth' or 'reality'. In his analysis of the Polish film director Krzysztof Kieslowski he touches upon what Derrida has called 'fictive devices' (Derrida, 1994). Kieslowski started out his career as a social documentary filmmaker, examining the lives of people in Poland in the politically turbulent nineteen eighties. Yet in touching on the emotional lives of his subjects Kieslowski was uneasy about the portrayal of these lives on film. Insofar as genuine emotions were revealed his work as filmmaker became intrusive. Such emotions need to be recast and read as fictive material and in a sense be made unreal to work in the filmic medium. Kieslowski's resolution was to move into fiction films rather than documentaries as the former enabled him to get at a better truth of the emotional content of lives that he wished to explore. Žižek (2001, p. 75) argues that for an actor in Kieslowski's documentaries, 'he does not immediately display his innermost stance; it is rather that, in a reflective attitude, he 'plays himself' by way of imitating what he perceives as his own ideal image'. In the case of our study the emotional content of personalities was only partially accessed in interviews and that element then further needed to be fitted within a discourse (story frame) appropriate to the research domain. The study found itself obliged to retain the limitations of the documentary form. And there is a necessary distancing of the story told from the life it seeks to capture. The reality of that life can only, Žižek argues, be mediated through a subjectively produced fantasy of it. And as Žižek (2001, p. 73) further advises 'the only proper thing to do is

to maintain a distance towards the intimate, idiosyncratic, fantasy domain – one can only circumscribe, hint at, these fragile elements that bear witness to a human personality.' Personalities can only be read against certain backdrops where researchers and perhaps the personalities themselves seek to understand how personalities and research perspectives and backdrops and discourses and external demands and personal aspirations, intermingle in the accounts offered of this process.

Regulating Consensus

Trainee teachers in the study were unable to synthesise all of the demands encountered. A Lacanian perspective on how a human constructs his or her self as a subject rests on the inevitability of mis-recognitions resulting from attempts at achieving resolution of disparate concerns. In meeting the impossibility of a full reconciliation between conflicting demands faced in the early stages of teaching, it would appear that the trainee or new teacher presents an unachievable fantasy of her own personal and professional identity or, at least, they remain content with a partial picture. In this section I shall suggest that this cover story is often expressed through a language provided within the official training discourse. The discourse provides a camouflage for issues that seem to remain complex and irreconcilable. The trainees' subscribe to various social programs relating to the classroom. These, I suggest, can be seen as being governed by mis-recognitions of effective participation that enable the trainees to suppress some of the more difficult issues arising in their training. Whilst they do identify with many of the external demands that they encounter, their articulation of their engagement often seemed to build the very gap that keeps them away from 'antagonistic' discourses (Žižek, 1989), or conflicting stories. Any attempted resolution of the conflicting demands cannot be achieved without some compromises. It is not possible to achieve a unifying structure upon which everyone will agree. Certain desires will always be left out, no matter how pluralist or attentive to diversity we may be. The only consensual frameworks that seem to claim a unifying agenda in English mathematics education at present are governmental policy instruments. Such instruments succeed in hegemonic control, in that they appear to achieve governance through fairly widespread common consent (McNamara and Corbin, 2001).

As a key example in the study, the National Numeracy Strategy, it seemed, provided a pragmatic approach to facilitating the trainees' participation in the professional enterprise of teaching. Some trainees found it over-prescriptive with its tight guidelines, Numeracy Hour, etc, but relatively few seemed to be wholly opposed. It was accepted as a centralised unifying structure given the relative weakness of any other frame. It had also become a generally popular social programme to which many could subscribe. Delusional or not, the trainee teacher perceived himself or herself as part of some social program designed for the common good (Althusser, 1971). This seemed to be based on some faith that if the National Numeracy Strategy were to be administered effectively then children would learn mathematics more effectively. As one final-year student put it:

> I think maths was one area where it did prepare us well, better than other subjects ... we spent a lot of time in maths ... making the links between the different areas and we had quite thorough training about the numeracy strategy, about mental maths, getting children to talk about maths, so maths and literacy were probably the areas where I was most prepared.

The Strategy provided practical guidelines for effective participation in collectively conceived social programmes. Participation in such a program was seen as a key aspect of professionalism.

The supposition seemed to be that the programme had become a benchmark of 'effective practice'. If you followed the National Numeracy Strategy you bought in to a specific trajectory that supposed a particular approach to improving mathematics for children. The trainees' conception of mathematics was then a function of how they understood their social participation. Their conception of being a teacher was shaped by perceived expectations of this participation and one's success in complying with its demands.

Trainees were tugged in many different directions along the way as there were many agencies (e.g. university tutors, schools) seeking to mediate their agenda through the broader governing programme. Trainees, for example, were required to inhabit other government constructions of teachers and of mathematics, in which personal discourses and practices were squeezed into shape: 'I thought OK, just for the sake of argument, and say for the next three weeks, I would do as she asks but I know that that is not right' but also by their perception of how they are living up to these expectations: 'we are being (inspected) in maths, we are scared that if they come and see us and we are not, this, this and this'. This also arose through prescriptive curriculum documentation regulating the training process:

> Where gaps in trainees' subject knowledge are identified, providers of ITT must make arrangements to ensure that trainees gain that knowledge during the course and that, **by the end of that course**, they are competent in using their knowledge of mathematics in their teaching (Department for Education and Employment, 1998, p. 48, DfEE emphasis).

University tutors concerned about their own inspections further added to this. One student made some observations of her tutor:

> She (the tutor) was probably exceptionally nervous, just like teachers are, I mean, you're being watched and, you know you're being observed and you're going to have comments made upon your teaching approach or teaching style, the level of teaching, ... inspections are the same in schools, it's just completely false, you don't get a proper idea of the school and it's like when we were on school experience and the planning that we had to do for maths for numeracy and it was like rigorously checked and we weren't allowed to go into schools unless the plans were good enough and that was all for the benefit of (the inspectors).

There was considerable evidence that students still in university demonstrated a keen awareness of the frameworks governing the course and their imminent accreditation. There was an air of a strongly regulatory climate with a host of government initiatives supplementing the demands students faced in university and on school placements. The trainee's professional identity seemed to be a function of a partial reconciliation anchored in some assumption about what constituted correct behaviour, or practices that would result in their accreditation. As such there was a sense of having to get it right according to official agendas although the data suggested that the partiality of the students' perspectives resulted in immediate tasks being privileged over any broader reconciliation. The data, unsurprisingly, pointed to trainees being more anxious about the various requirements they faced prior to their accreditation and being more concerned with achieving what was expected of them. Certainly for such students the external demands ensured a compliant attitude, but a compliance with an approach that was generally seen as supporting the common good, namely the generally accepted need for mathematics to be taught: 'it's something we need to participate fully in life from a very early age'. The apparent hegemonic grip of government policy would not appear to be easily displaced. It was offering one version of governance supported largely through popular consent.

The Myth of Emergent Autonomy

Meanwhile, however, once released from university in to the relative responsibility of being a teacher in school there was a greater sense of autonomy expressed with the individual teacher in the driving seat governed more by personal motivations and ideals. Here the new teacher might more readily have recognised that the antagonisms were irreconcilable but at the same time also recognised that looser interpretations could be sufficient as a more pragmatic attitude evolved. This offered more scope for making individual decisions. By the time they had begun work as a teacher he or she recognised that the various demands could be met and integrated more with his or her own personal aspirations ('you have more autonomy'). As another new teacher put it: 'you can be more spontaneous ... even though you've got to follow the demands of the ... numeracy hour'. This then might be seen as a frame privileging the teacher seeking to recover his or her 'own voice'. Although a harmonious and complete social perspective may not easily be achieved, the individual, having negotiated entry in to the profession, could now seek to juggle the external demands from a position of greater assumed personal control.

A Lacanian reading of the induction process, I suggest, contests the assumption that teachers' transition from compliance with external demands to a more autonomous state of affairs. As they shift from pre-service to in-service, teachers continue to embrace cover stories of compliance. Rather, it seems more realistic to suggest that in both environments the demands are so great that reconciliation is not possible in any actual sense. The trainee or new teacher's account provides a cover story for a situation that is complex and does not lend itself to clear representation. For example, it seems unlikely that the new teacher could juggle the various demands (e.g. meeting government requirements, enabling children to find mathematics interesting, maintaining classroom control, reconciling school and university demands, fitting into school structures, being liked by the children, etc) in to a clear story. It is just that the demands on teachers to do this are less pressing once employed. As a new teacher put it: 'what you teach and how you teach it and the actual set-up of the lesson is restricted to sort of government requirements and school requirements and local education authority requirements and (school inspectors) requirements and everyone else but you can still fit in your own style in that'. Despite the optimism of this quote it seemed impossible for this new teacher to appreciate fully and then reconcile all of the alternative discourses acting through her. The statement might be seen as an image that the new teacher wants to have of herself. The teacher might buy into official story lines and see (misguidedly or not) her 'own' actions in those terms. This does not have to be seen as a problem. But it may mean that new teachers like her subscribe to intellectual package deals laid on for them rather than see the development of their own professional practice in terms of further intellectual and emotional work to do with resolving the contradictory messages encountered.

Professional development more broadly was, it seems, seen in terms of better achieving curriculum objectives such as those framed within the National Numeracy Strategy, a Strategy that the new teachers seemed comfortable with as a framework for organising practice. It seemed to be that the Strategy provided the consensual frameworks that could claim some sort of unifying agenda, at least partly because it had become the new orthodoxy: 'I find the numeracy and literacy strategies quite useful but I've never known any different'. It appeared to succeed in hegemonic control where trainee's capacity to be critical was limited by their need to comply.

> The thing with government policies is really whether you agree with them or not and you think they're beneficial or not, you've got to adapt and change to go with them, so it's just

> a case of experimenting with them, trying them out and then adapting them to suit you, so ... I mean, you've got to use them, so if you can adapt it to suit you then it's going to be beneficial.

The Strategy seems to have provided a language that can be learnt and spoken by most new teachers interviewed. In this sense the official language spanning the National Numeracy Strategy and the inspectorial regulation of this seemed to have been a success. Many trainees, it would seem, saw the Strategy as a pragmatic approach that facilitated their participation in the professional enterprise of teaching a subject where previously many trainees had some uncertainties. One new teacher commented: 'I think largely it's the way that it's structured rather than my own - my own personal experience of maths since I left primary school has not been good, ... it was never my most enjoyed subject so I definitely think it's the way that it's structured. Meanwhile another says: 'I quite actually quite like the structure of the numeracy, the mental maths, the section at the end, the plenary I quite like that structure because it's quite sort of easy to follow'. Any ambivalence towards the Strategy seems measured with an acceptance that others know better. After all: 'obviously somebody somewhere with a lot of authority has actually sat down and written this Numeracy Strategy, well a number of people, so they ... it's not like they don't know what they're talking about'. It has thus become a generally popular social program with which many can identify.

This does however perhaps point to a need to find ways of adopting a critical attitude in relation to the parameters of this discourse in that certain difficult issues are being suppressed rather than removed. For example, when confronted with mathematics of a more sophisticated nature from the school curriculum the new teachers remained anxious. Mathematics had been masked by the administrative performances that shaped it. The National Numeracy Strategy and university training however had between them provided an effective language for administering mathematics in the classroom in which confrontation with more challenging aspects of mathematics could be avoided. If true this points to certain limits in the teachers' capacity to engage creatively with the children's own mathematical constructions. The National Numeracy Strategy hints at the 'ready-made' or 'fast-food' fantasy of teacher training which is preferred to the more difficult task of responding creatively to children's individual fantasies of mathematical constructing. The problem is that the National Numeracy Strategy presents a clearly inscribed object whereas the task of responding to the individual fantasies of mathematics that might arise in more student-centred conceptions of education would place the teacher in a much more unstable position. Yet whilst for so many of the trainee's interviewed this instability was an element to be ejected, this is not necessarily in the interests of valuing children's emerging thinking.

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