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Workshop report: Using data from a history of Smile to overcome ‘historic loneliness’

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In England, the neoliberal political agenda has created an environment in which teachers are constantly subjected to a discourse of marketisation, managerialism and performativity. It is also part of the neoliberal project to cut us adrift from our past and to de-historicise our lived experience of the present. We are suffering from what John Berger has called a sense of ‘historic loneliness’. Many teachers are engaged in re-storying themselves against this audit culture. We are currently exploring using stories from the past – in this case, recollections of Smile, a teacher-led mathematics curriculum project with roots in inner London in the 1970s – to combat this ‘historic loneliness’ and to create a space in which to understand, interrogate and oppose the dominant discourses. We have conducted extended interviews with groups of Smile teachers from an earlier era and are now looking at ways to make these data perform this potentially transformative function. In this workshop, we presented a small part of the data in three different ways – as edited transcript, as story and as aphoristic fragment – and invited participants to compare and contrast the effectiveness or otherwise of these forms of presentation.

Keywords: using data; transcripts; neoliberalism

Background

This paper provides an overview of a workshop presenting data from an ongoing research project examining a historic mathematics curriculum project. The project ‘A study of teacher led curriculum change: the case of Smile Mathematics, 1972-1990’ aims to

- record an historical example of teacher-led curriculum change in mathematics in England
- analyse how and under what social, political and cultural circumstances such teacher autonomy becomes possible
- provide a public resource through which teachers may ‘re-story’ themselves.

The Secondary Mathematics Individualised Learning Experiment (Smile), a teacher-led curriculum development project with a commitment to all attainment teaching, teacher creativity and an investigative, problem-solving pedagogy, began in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in 1972. Although based in London and supported by the ILEA, it influenced thinking about mathematics teaching in the UK and elsewhere. Individual accounts of Smile by some of those involved contribute to our understanding of the origins and practice of this project (see, for example, Gibbons (2007) and Povey (2014)). However, as yet there is no socio-historical study exploring Smile mathematics.

Theoretical framing

In England, the neoliberal political agenda has created an environment in which teachers are constantly subjected to a discourse of marketisation, managerialism and performativity. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act education has been subject to an ‘epidemic of reform’ (Ball, 2003, p.215). It is also part of the neoliberal project to cut us adrift from our past and to de-historicise our lived experience of the present. We are suffering from what John Berger (2016) has called a sense of ‘historic loneliness’.

Globalisation and neoliberal agendas create an ‘audit ideology’ (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009, p.5) together with a reduction in teachers’ autonomy (Day & Smethem, 2009). A study of Smile mathematics aims to provide a contrast with mathematics teaching today, enabling teachers to re-examine current policy and practice to alleviate this ‘historic loneliness’.

Researching curriculum change: Smile mathematics

Public archive

The creation of a public archive is a key part of the project; this archive aims to complement the established archive of Smile resources (available from <https://www.stem.org.uk/elibrary/collection/2765/smile-cards>) and provide teachers with accounts of mathematics curriculum development in other times. Our hope is that such accounts will support teachers to contextualise current practice, providing support for teachers to re-envision what they are, what they might be and what they might become in their professional lives through two interrelated narratives: a ‘systemic narrative’ of a mathematics curriculum initiative (Smile mathematics) based on analysis of historical documents (Goodson, 2014, p.34-35) and narratives of individual teachers' stories. We identify the archive as lying within the radical histories tradition, placing hidden and forgotten stories ‘on the record’ (<http://on-the-record.org.uk/>) in order to ‘deepen understanding of the past ... reflect upon present day issues and agitate for change in the world we live in now’ (History Workshop Online, n.d.).

It is proposed that accounts of engagement with Smile will take the following forms:

- newspaper and newsletter articles, letters, photos from 1972-1990



Figure 1: How 'anti-racist' maths is taught, (nd).

- recent accounts constructed from group conversations and personal commentaries from some of those involved in Smile mathematics
- reflections of recently qualified teachers focussed on their experience of Smile during their initial teacher education (Povey & Adams, 2016)
- academic research contributions
- an annotated bibliography

This paper focuses on the recent accounts of those involved in Smile mathematics.

Data collection and analysis

Participants were identified through existing networks, including through the Smile action group (SAG), a group which had formed itself when the Smile Centre was closed by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea which had inherited the project at the demise of the ILEA. The SAG had successfully fought to have the Borough recognise that the copyright to the materials was not held by them as the (almost entirely anonymous) authors had given their own time freely to create the resources. The SAG continued to function as a pressure and action group until the materials were successfully archived at the National STEM Centre (as above) to which they remain extremely grateful.

Many of those initially identified suggested others who had been involved in Smile mathematics; in this way a total of 24 potential participants were contacted with information about the project. Of these, a few failed to respond and some were unable to join the group conversations. Although the plan was for two groups of five participants, interest was such that this round of data collection comprised four distinct group conversations with a total of 19 participants (including both researchers). The groups ranged in size from two to eight participants with conversations lasting between one and a half to three hours. Both researchers were/are Smile teachers. The conversations were audio recorded and transcribed. The process of checking and returning transcripts to participants for validation is ongoing and we are in the early stages of data analysis.

Working with the data

The workshop focused on data from the transcript of one of the group conversations, offering three possible ways of presenting the data for use in the archive and inviting feedback: edited transcript, story and aphoristic fragment. The sections of transcript presented were only minimally edited (for clarity and to remove clearly identifying features, either of the participants themselves or of others) in order to preserve the participants' voices. Time constraints in planning for the workshop did not allow us to have the transcripts fully validated and approved by the participants nor for them to decide whether or not to be identified. This meant that we needed to remove the names of the participants too, although they may choose to have their comments attributed in the archive. The participants were consulted about this approach for the workshop. Short stories were identified in the data in a highly personal and unsystematic way: what leapt out of the data for each of us on a first reading. Aphoristic fragments are short expressions providing a glimpse of an experience; they are telling excerpts which create a space for imagining (Morson, 2003). Segments of data that particularly resonated with the researchers were identified, those that told part of the story of Smile. In the workshop, we were interested in participants' first

thoughts, any questions raised by the data and how the data as presented provoked thinking/discussion.

Edited transcript

We present below an edited transcript comprising part of an extended discussion of the conferences and working weekends which were a key part of Smile, providing opportunities for teachers to work on mathematics together, to lead or participate in sessions exploring creative approaches to teaching and learning mathematics and to work collaboratively to develop and review Smile activities and resources. An extract from the transcript is included below.

B: Weekends were very much people who really wanted to work together and develop things. The conferences were a bit lighter than that because ILEA funded so many places. You could take your entire maths department and I think it actually got to that point. You did take a big number of people to the conference, so they were being imbibed with the same sort of feeling about it.

[...]

H: I think it was really important, what you're talking about T, about some people coming along from your department who were willing and engaged but really, and they found out, oh, it's not just T, actually there are a lot of people who have this same kind of involvement, passion and commitment. I think that was very healthy as well, because it made people realise that there was a community, even if they were peripheral to it. It didn't make them more involved necessarily – they would still remain peripheral – but they would see it as a community, rather than something curious that T was doing. I think that was important actually. I'm thinking about people in my department.

Workshop participants noted the camaraderie and sense of ownership that the Smile teachers reported, the spaces for teachers to talk about teaching and the importance of doing so with colleagues from outside their own schools. They were struck by the differences between the accounts of the Smile events and what they described as the 'current CPD offensive' in England. Participants recalled occasions, albeit rare occasions, when they had similar experiences of working closely with teachers from different schools, for example on a MaST course, 'a really special space'. The freedom that teachers had to develop the curriculum and their ownership of this was remarked upon, particularly as participants found it hard to imagine having such power over what is taught today.

Stories

We identified several short stories in the transcript and share one of these, 'Maths Mag', below.

Maths Mag

The other thing is a lot of the theory that's being forced out now is this idea that children progress like this. If you've taught any length of time you get a kid who's sat there like this and you think for goodness' sake make some progress. It can be for ages, and then suddenly things seem to fall into place and they go shooting up. ... one of the things I came across not long ago reminded me, it's called Maths Mag, and this was a boy ... who said I don't like maths. I'm artistic, I'm arty. I don't like maths. He used to come back after school in Year 8 and he produced Maths Mag. This was all his work and they were little maths problems, sequencing problems and he'd do the diagrams and this, that and the other. I don't know, I suppose it would be a stencil on a Banda machine or something,

would run it off and it would go out to the students. This was something again with the flexibility. There was nothing to stop you, you weren't holding up a class or anything to do that. It was maths and yes, you made sure he was still doing some sort of other work, but this is what he enjoyed doing, he wanted to publish Maths Mag. I think he did something like three versions of it, although I've only found one of them. But for him to come back after school and doing something that, as he said, 'I hate maths.' He didn't see that as maths.

The notion of student progress stalling for a prolonged period before suddenly 'shooting up' resonated with participants, yet the flexibility to respond to individual needs in the way described appeared more challenging today. The idea that 'there was nothing to stop you' provoked one of the teachers participating in the workshop to remark 'now there's everything to stop you'.

Fragments

The final data presentation took the form of aphoristic fragments. The considerably shorter text extracts provide more immediate access to the data.

“What a wonderful time we had, we really did. Didn't we enjoy ourselves ... Nobody thinks about making teachers' jobs enjoyable these days.”

“What we were teaching, I think, before anything else, was how to live in a society peaceably and productively ... All that business of living in a community was learnt really in the way that we were working.”

“The key thing I learnt through working with other people and through Smile is it's the questions you ask that are the important thing.”

“...maths was largely about failure. You couldn't do some things so you were failing and you didn't get the right answers so you were failing. Smile brought in the idea of success, because you were able to, if they couldn't get something, you could give them backup work, you could find ways round it. So they weren't sitting in a class thinking I don't understand what's going on in this classroom.”

The final fragment ('maths was largely about failure...') provides an insight into a key aspect of Smile mathematics, the flexibility to support individual students, to tailor the curriculum to their needs.

Discussion

Our purpose in the workshop was to compare and contrast the effectiveness or otherwise for the participants of the three forms of presentation. It seemed to us that all three of them - edited transcript, story and aphoristic fragment - spoke, in different ways, effectively to them. This will inform our continuing work with the archive and its website. The authenticity of the transcripts appealed to workshop participants, providing them with a sense of a community. Discussion focussed on how the fragments might be used to access other archive materials, including stories and transcripts. For example, the fragment 'what a wonderful time we had...' might be linked to resources exploring teachers' lives.

We are currently exploring the idea of enchantment as a way of thinking about our engagement with our "data" which we feel lies outside our habituated responses as researchers:

Approaching empirical materials in a mood of enchantment involves a self-consciously affective engagement rather than aspiring to the objective stance often associated with analysis ... it allows recognition of the excessive, the ebullient, the vivid and the felt. (Burnett & Merchant, 2016, p.30)

The workshop allowed a space to explore such a way of working with the interview material and the conversations in the group and afterwards acknowledged the affective dimension. We hope to preserve this as we progress in our work with the website.

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