A SOCIOCULTURAL STUDY OF MATHEMATICAL AND OTHER IDENTITIES
OF ‘STRUGGLING’ TEENAGE BOYS

Submitted by Melinda Evelyn Browne, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for
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this or any other University.

Melinda Evelyn Browne
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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to gather and describe case studies of ‘struggling’ teenage boys, focusing on their identities, which are mediated by the discursive practices associated with school mathematics and other activities. The sociocultural model of identity unites an individual’s psychodynamic continuity with the roles and positions that emerge from his/her social interactions. The setting for the investigation is a small single-sex, non-traditional secondary school, in which the sample is seven boys, ages sixteen to eighteen, who have lost interest in the academic mainstream. Qualitative data were collected on individual boys, and then matched in a table to the theoretical framework. The study raised five issues about identity, struggling teenage boys, and school mathematics. To negotiate the dialectic of opposing identity norms, struggling teenage boys employed identities as expressive tools that held desirable positions for them in school mathematics. In the organization of multiple identities, salience depended upon the intrinsic and extrinsic gratification associated with knowledge of mathematics. Positive mathematical identities clustered with compatible social identities that were also supported by these rewards. The sociohistorical availability of identities increased in nontraditional mathematics courses that provided the boys with opportunities to enact positive roles. Many of the boys communicated positive attitudes towards school mathematics in relation to their future career goals. Though they may have struggled, they expected to achieve conventional success in the adult world. The issue of identity and emotions was illustrated by the shame and mistrust that accompanied the loss of a former identity such as a “gifted” level in school mathematics. For some struggling teenage boys, mistrustfulness was evident in their discussions about money. They expressed an affinity for simple arithmetic, which they
could easily master with repetitive practice. Implications for teaching include cultivating future-oriented identities, incorporating ‘money’ themes, and offering customized courses.
# List of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction ..................................................................................................................8

  Research Focus ..........................................................................................................................8
  School Mathematics ..................................................................................................................10
  Research Questions ...................................................................................................................12
  Research Subjects ...................................................................................................................13
  An Emphasis on Identity ..........................................................................................................14

Chapter 2 Literature Review .........................................................................................................16

  Introduction ...............................................................................................................................16
  Part I: Theoretical Background ................................................................................................16
    ‘Ego’ and ‘Ego Identity’ ............................................................................................................16
    Emotional Subjectivity ...........................................................................................................22
    The Reflexive Process ............................................................................................................23
    Social Interaction ....................................................................................................................25
    Identity ....................................................................................................................................33
    Developmental Concepts ........................................................................................................37
  Part II: Empirical Research .......................................................................................................39
    Mathematical Identity in a Sociocultural Framework ............................................................39
    Mathematics and Other Activities .........................................................................................46
    Mediated Identities ................................................................................................................49
    A Sociocultural View of Learning Mathematics ..................................................................52
    Learning and Identity .............................................................................................................54
    Struggling Learners ................................................................................................................57
    Summary ...................................................................................................................................58

Chapter 3 Methodology ................................................................................................................60

  Introduction ................................................................................................................................60
  Part I: Interpretive Research Paradigm .....................................................................................60
    Ontology, Epistemology, and a Notion of Truth .....................................................................60
    Identity as a Means of Mediated Action .................................................................................65
    Methodological Means ..........................................................................................................67
    Working Theory .....................................................................................................................68
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Data Presentation and Analysis</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Raymond</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>James</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overview Comment</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How Doing School Mathematics Mediates the Identities of ‘Struggling’ Teenage Boys</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Structural Tensions and Institutionally Imposed Identities</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New Mathematical Identities</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual Appropriations</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How ‘Struggling’ Teenage Boys Mediate Their Identities in School Mathematics</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematical Identities and Positions</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematical Identities and Mastery</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mathematical Identities and Emotions</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How ‘Struggling’ Teenage Boys Mediate Their Identities in School Mathematics and Their Identities Shaped by Other Social Practices ..........................................................138

Numerous and Concurrent Strategies .................................................................138
Mathematical Identities and Exchange Resources ..............................................141
Mathematical Identities and Physical Activities ..................................................144

How the Boys’ Past Experiences Mediate Their Present Identities in School Mathematics .................................................................................................................146

Emerging Issues ....................................................................................................149
Subjective and Objective Identity .........................................................................149
Availability of Identities .......................................................................................150
Multiple Identities ..............................................................................................151
Identity Continuity ...............................................................................................152
Emotions Related to Identity ..............................................................................152

Chapter 6 Conclusion ............................................................................................154

Introduction ..........................................................................................................154
Summary Regarding Purpose ................................................................................154
Results of the Study .............................................................................................156
Limitations of the Study .......................................................................................158
Original Contribution ..........................................................................................159
Emergent Questions, Potential Improvements, and Implications for Teaching ....160

Appendix ..............................................................................................................164

References ............................................................................................................172