Chapter 13
The Emotional Labor of Imagining Otherwise: Undoing the Mastery Model of Mathematics Teacher Identity

Elizabeth de Freitas
Adelphi University, USA

ABSTRACT
The concept of emotional resistance is often used to describe student reluctance to grapple with difficult facts regarding inequity and injustice, especially if the students themselves are implicated in these facts by way of their privilege or advantage. Many successful students are reluctant to acknowledge how they are tacitly invested in a governing hegemonic system that has afforded them particular socio-cultural and economic status. Dorsey (2002), for instance, follows her largely white students’ resistance to anti-racist pedagogy through a series of stages - discovery, dismay, denial, and dismissal - all of which indicate their reluctance to realize how their own positioning is enabled through hegemonic systems of oppression. Similarly, Boler and Zembylas (2003) note that students often refuse to recognize “race/ethnicity” differences as significant contributing factors of social capital, arguing for a benign tolerance of difference or denying difference as a significant factor.

INTRODUCTION
Students who invest in this resistance often do so with a great deal of emotional attachment to neo-liberal beliefs about merit-based success and status. In the context of school mathematics, where persistent misconceptions about intrinsic ability and merit-based mastery continue to dominate, the need to trouble these beliefs is all the more pronounced. Mathematics teachers function as pivotal agents in re-inscribing these beliefs through classroom discourse and through the enactment of particular professional identities.
In this paper, I argue that identity work with pre-service mathematics teachers remains a crucial method for disrupting these patterns, and I offer evidence from a critical literacy course for pre-service mathematics teachers to show how this identity work unfolds.

MATHEMATICS TEACHER IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE

Rodriguez and Kitchen (2005) suggest that reluctance to see success in school mathematics through a sociocultural lens may be related to a sense of entitlement – granted and validated through previous school success – and may be the source of pre-service teachers’ resistance to using mathematics as a social justice advocacy tool. This sense of entitlement, according to Rodriguez and Kitchen, is “a potential reason why they may resist efforts to prepare them to teach for diversity” (p. 35). I want to suggest that what is at stake in this apparent entitlement is a deep-seated fear of ambiguity and a deep-seated belief in and desire for the transparency of language. Indeed, I argue that many mathematics students – and here I am speaking of those who have already declared their intention to become mathematics teachers - are drawn to mathematics precisely because of their uncomfortable relationship with ambiguity in language. I am using the term “language” to refer to both the everyday language that students and teachers use to speak their identity, and through which their identity is spoken, and the esoteric discourse of school mathematics – a discourse which is highly symbolic, impersonal, acontextual, instrumental, and atemporal.

The everyday and the esoteric intersect in school mathematics discourse, since everyday language is used to frame mathematical activity. Moreover, the two are overlaid in word problems which enlist everyday language to describe application contexts, and one can find small words in even the most abstract mathematical statements - such as “and”, “of”, “but”, “at”, “or” – which take on highly precise logical meaning once embedded in the esoteric discourse. It is important to note that the esoteric discourse, despite its rhetorical style of impersonal abstraction, also speaks an identity that is constituted in the bodies that deploy this discourse. Elsewhere, I have named this an “identity of mastery” (de Freitas, 2008a, 2009), and have argued that classrooms dominated by procedural facility tasks – in which teachers model algorithms and students mimic them – contribute to the entrenchment of this kind of teacher identity.

My pre-service mathematics teachers often think of language in purely functional terms, as though it were exhaustively determined by way of its function or purpose in conveying an unfettered intended meaning. In the survey that I distribute on the first day of the course, I ask them about their reading and writing habits, and their reasons for studying mathematics. The vast majority state unapologetically that they hate reading and writing and that they have chosen mathematics partially to avoid writing papers. They are disinclined to enjoy what Roland Barthes called the “decentration” of language, which marks, in his terms, the supplementarity or impertinent overflow of language in the face of our attempts to pin it to reality. More than other pre-service teachers in other disciplines, many in mathematics are frustrated by readings that use unfamiliar vocabulary and demand a nuanced or contradictory truth (Wallowitz, 2009).

A sentence, however, is “never saturable” with meaning, but rather “catalyzable, to use the accepted term, by successive fillings according to a theoretically infinite process: the center is infinitely displaceable” (Barthes, 1985, p. 103). According to Barthes, there is always play in the language apparatus – always some wiggle room in the tiny crevices and joints, where one witnesses the slippage of meaning. And thankfully it is this irresolvable asignifying play in language that brooks all our attempts to use it as an entirely deterministic instrument of control.