

## **Learning to listen in new ways: Using a Social Identity Map to examine the impact of my positionality when working with the narrative of a student from a mathematics resit classroom.**

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For students who are labelled as low attaining in mathematics, stories about their identity work are often interpreted through the lens of others. However, the positionality of the researcher can impact on how these stories are analyzed. This report discusses the using of a Social Identity Map as a device to explicitly examine my positionality as part of a small-scale project in the context of post-16 mathematics. By acknowledging the impact of my assumptions and subjectivities, as facets of positionality, I was able to listen in new ways to the student's data and hear a counter narrative of *finally able* with regard to the teaching and learning of mathematics.

**Keywords: post-16; low attainment; positionality; Social Identity Map**

### **Introduction**



I have chosen this image because for me my paths was not straight at all there was mistakes and a very long way to go to achieve my grades and it wasn't easy for me as I struggles to understand maths therefore this image is a perfect example of how I felt about my experiences of maths however during the college period that I am in I am finally understanding maths and being able to recognise and interpret maths. Maths did annoy me at times and it made me feel like I couldn't understand maths but as I kept trying and trying to understand maths it got a lot clearer to me and I felt like I could finally answer questions and be able to get maths it just would of taken me longer to do so.

(Claire: email interview response 25/12/20)

In research involving student participants who have been labelled as low attaining in mathematics, stories about their identity work are often interpreted though the lens of another, with the dominant discourse seeming to use the language of deficiency around struggle and disengagement (Darragh, 2016; Helme, 2019, 2021). However, the assumptions and subjectivities, facets of researcher positionality, can impact the process of interpretation, influencing what is noticed and concluded (Foote & Gau Bartell, 2011). Therefore, an explicit reflexivity is necessary to acknowledge and understand the impact of your own positionality as a researcher on the analysis process. The discussion that follows is a result of the introduction of a Social Identity (SI) Map to explicitly examine my own researcher positionality within a study that examines identity work in the context of low attainment in mathematics. More

specifically, I consider my analysis of the email response, seen above, from a student called Claire who attended a mathematics resit class and the impact of my assumptions on the ways in which I listened to her data.

### ***Reflexive positionality***

Positionality within field work is said to be a mode of seeing which both informs and constrains what you notice and conclude (Foote & Gau Bartell, 2011) and is said to be influenced by the values and beliefs found in the socio-historical situations of a researcher (Day, 2012; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Hennick et al., 2011). However, the concept of positionality has been described as relational rather than individual; transient markers rather than fixed qualities that are located within, and travelling across, multiple social and political contexts (Hoskins, 2015; Foote & Gau Bartell, 2011; Roegman et al., 2016). For the critical researcher, it is important to overtly locate yourself in the research process (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019) by explicitly examining, as an ongoing process, the impact of positionality and interrogating the role in knowledge production through all stages of the research life cycle, from conception to completion (Day, 2012; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). However, the self-awareness found in reflexivity can be challenging, potentially revealing “that which hitherto may have remained hidden, assumed, or denied” (Pole & Morrison, 2003, p.103). As a researcher, examining the impact of positionality can expose and explicitly reappraise facets of your life course and, however uneasy this may be, can influence the relational quality of your research lens.

### ***Social Identity Map***

The Social Identity (SI) Map is a device for explicitly examining the impact of your social identities on research practice (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). The first tier of the SI Map involves identifying and recording your social identities, and the authors suggest the follow categories: *Class, Citizenship, Ability, Age/Generation, Race, Sexual orientation, Cis/Trans, and Gender*. The second tier reflects on how these social positions impact our lives, and the third and final tier considers the emotional or other context specific responses relative to your research (see figure 1: Blank SI Map).

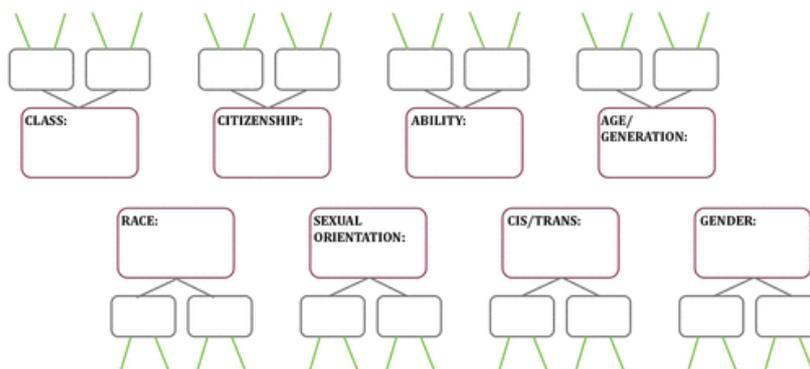


Figure 1: Blank SI Map

The authors state that the SI Map should not be considered to be a fixed device, in category design or application, but as a flexible starting point to recognise the impact of positionality in research. Hence, the responses in the third tier should be seen as situated and relational in that they are dependent on the circumstances in which the SI

Map is being used. When competing the third tier, Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) suggest asking the following questions:

- How do facets of my identity (in combination with other facets) impact the way I approach, interact with, and interpret my research?
- How do these facets impact the way I understand and interact with my participants? (p.4)

Keeping in mind the flexibility of the SI Map, below I discuss the introduction and adaptation of an SI Map within my small scale, qualitative research project and the impact of using this device on my ways of listening to Claire's data.

### **Context of the study**

The focus of the study are the stories told about identity work in the context of low attainment in mathematics. As researcher, I sought to foreground the student voice in the interpretation of stories about their own identity work through the use of an extension of the Listening Guide process of analysis (Gilligan et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2018; Helme, 2021); in this process explicitly examining the subjectivity of the researcher as instrument is an important factor. Located in a post-16 college and the class of one teacher, and working remotely due to Covid-19 restrictions, I engaged in an email conversation with a student, Claire, who was a member of the class. Before attending the post-16 college, Claire had been allocated a grade 3 in the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exam in summer 2020 at the end of compulsory schooling when she was 16 years of age. (Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the exams in the summer of 2020 were cancelled and therefore students received grades through an assessment process called Centre Assessed Grades (CAG) allocated by their schools). As is the practice in the United Kingdom (UK), when a student receives a grade 1, 2, or 3 they are considered to have not passed the exam and therefore must attend mathematics resit lessons in college, retaking the exam in an attempt to improve their grade.

The section of narrative at the start of this article is from my first email conversation with Claire, where she is discussing the image of a maze (shown above) that she had chosen to represent her past experiences of learning mathematics. Before introducing the SI Map, in the first listening of this data, I identified a dominant theme of *struggle* found in phrases that directly or implicitly indicated struggle, for example “I struggle to understand maths” and “it made me feel like I couldn't understand maths”. It was using this theme that I continued the conversation by responded to her email with follow up questions about this struggle and her need to “keep trying and trying”. However, in her reply she attempted to redirect me to the positive of her present experience compared to her past, something I had not noticed in her original email response shown above. It was in that moment that I began to question my ways of listening to her data and how this was being impacted by my positionality. It was at this stage that I found the article by Jacobson and Mustafa where they developed the Social Identity Map.

### ***My social Identity Map - an iterative process***

As previously discussed, the SI Map should be seen as fluid, adapting to the context in which it is applied (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). When I began creating the first iteration of my SI Map, I noted that there were categories in the original SI Map to which I was having the same tier 2 response, and therefore choose for this project,

without the implication that they are not significant, to amalgamate into single categories. Therefore, responses to the tier 1 social identities of *Race*, *Sexual orientation*, and *Cis/Trans* were amalgamated under *Race*, and to *Class* and *Citizenship* under *Class*. In addition, it became evident that for me there were other social identities that seemed to impact my positionality, namely my family role as a *Mother*, my presentation in the field site as a *Researcher*, and my identity of a (former) mathematics *Teacher* and, in line with the fluid nature of the device, these additional categories were added to the SI Map. Finally, being uncomfortable with the term *Ability*, this was replaced with the term *Attainment*.

For the first iteration, I took an inward-looking stance, focusing on how my social identities impacted on my own internal dialogue (shown in figure 2, unboxed and in black). The process revealed an imbalance between my private, and somewhat uncertain, view of myself and who I seemed to believe I should be. This stance could be described as similar to the analogy of a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, on the assumption that the round hole is the standard. Furthermore, it highlighted the impact that the assumptions of others have had on the lens through which I view myself and my world. In line with the comments by Pole and Morrison (2003), I found the process challenging and uneasy within some areas, but as a result there was some sense of catharsis. Certainly, reflecting on the impact of past experiences and internal dialogue is a personal journey and takes you beyond the research at hand, but as such lays the foundations to examine, and to some extent accept, the complex history that influences your current and presented positionality.

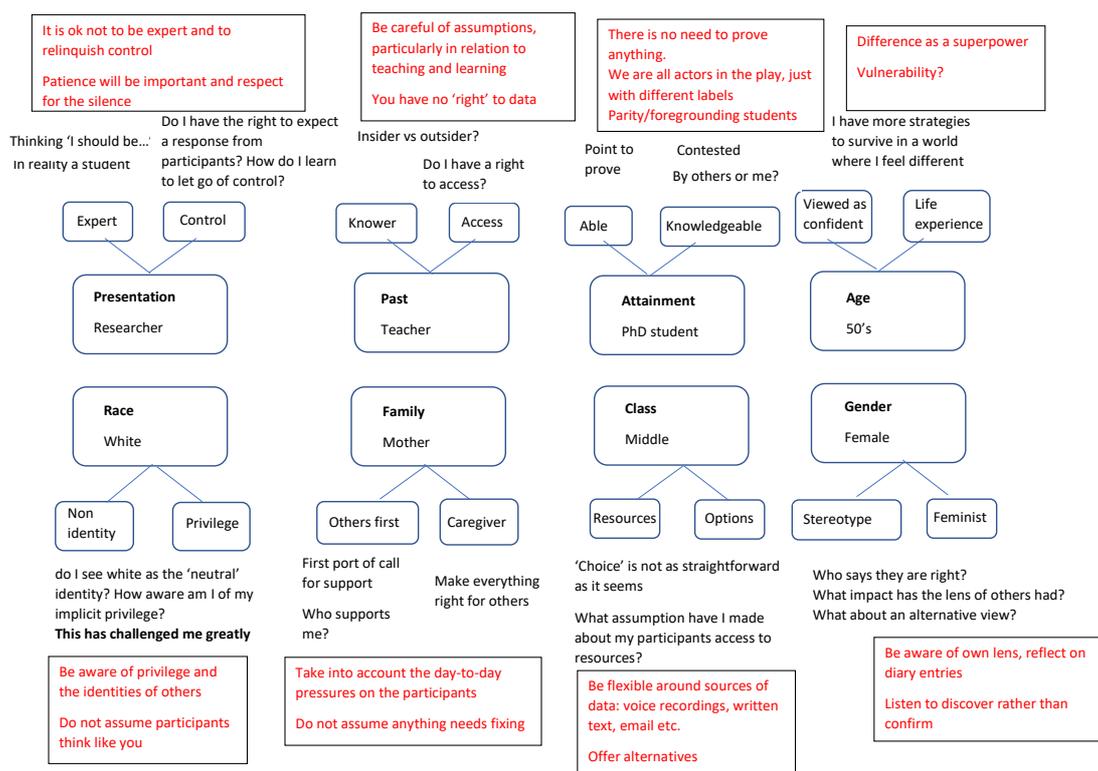


Figure 2: My SI Map after the second iteration

Aligning with positionality as reworked and negotiated in context (Sultana, 2007; Wilson et al., 2020), I moved on to a second iteration that considered the impact of my social identities, and the internal dialogues, on my interactions within the field site, both with participants and the topic of study. This fourth layer (shown in figure 2 as boxed and in red) could be seen as a reworking of tier 3, however I choose to

illustrate as it was an extension rather than a replacement of the previous positionality work from the first iteration. The process highlighted the importance of recognising how my social identities, such as race and social class, can impact on assumptions around the social view of others; that is various participants will access resources and understand the world in the same way as both myself and each other. By celebrating difference as a superpower, recognising the mosaic of actors that coexist in any context, the opportunity was afforded to challenge the hierarchical assumptions that have been hidden or denied (Pole & Morrison, 2003); that is to say, any one actor (researcher, student, teacher) has significance over another. Furthermore, by exposing my need to be in control as protection, and reflecting on the vulnerability of relinquishing control, allowed me to recognise the importance allowing the participants to be expert in their own lived experience.

### ***Listening in new ways***

The themes that were exposed by the positionality work of the SI Map can be grouped under two headings, namely *Control issues* and *Assumptions*. I noted that I had to learn to be uncomfortable and relinquish control of aspects of the project, that Claire would respond both when and how she chooses and furthermore, I did not have the right to expect her to respond in my timeframes. However, most significant was the realization of my assumptions around the findings that I was (unconsciously) anticipating, namely that of mathematics learning as a struggle. I reflected on how my past experiences of a (former) mathematics teacher, and previous pilot work for this study, had led to the ill-conceived notion that I had some knowledge what would be identified in Claire's data and hence, this influenced what I did notice in the initial listening. However, returning to the email response, with the notion to discover and not confirm, I realised that I had missed some key words, namely "however", "but", and "finally", and it seemed that Claire was trying to guide me away from her past experiences. By listening new ways, with an awareness of the impact of my positionality, I was able to listen to the data for the positive, present experiences that she was sharing with me. Claire was "finally understanding maths" and "finally able to answer questions and be able to get maths". While she acknowledges her past experiences, it seemed that she was telling me that this was not longer the same issue in her present.

### **Conclusion**

For students who are labelled as low attaining, their identity work is often viewed through the lens of others (Darragh, 2016; Helme, 2019, 2021) and hence, as a researcher listener, it is important to understand the impact of your assumptions and subjectivities within positionality that may influence the process of interpretation. By explicitly examining the facets of your social identities using a SI Map, the opportunity is afforded to acknowledge the impact on the design, delivery, and dissemination of research. As I have discussed, for Claire, a student who was labelled as low attaining, new ways of listening foregrounded her own voice and illuminated a counternarrative of *finally able* to the theme of *struggle*. Further research is needed, but for students labelled as low attaining, it seems there may be an alternative tale to the dominant themes of struggle and disengagement in the context of learning mathematics.

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