Identity, Narrative and Practitioner Research: A Lacanian perspective

Tony Brown* **& Janice England**
Manchester Metropolitan University

This paper sets out to show how some theoretical concepts derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis might be put to work in the business of reflective practitioner research in education. It seeks to offer a more sophisticated, reflexively produced account of researcher identity built out of the narrative generated within a research enquiry. It illustrates, with reference to examples of writing from a specific research project, carried out within the context of a higher degree, how one teacher-researcher has used the concepts in forging a more productive understanding of her own evolving identity as a researcher through a process predicated on developing her own professional functioning. Shifting perspectives are provided on what the researcher wants from the enquiry as the researcher herself unfolds and analyses the successive phases of her narrative.

Introduction

"Reflective practice", like "critical thinking", Britzman (1998) has argued, is premised on curative conceptions of educational thought that seek to banish doubt and ambivalence. She suggests that reflective thinking reduces "to the utility of correcting practices and devotes itself to propping up the practitioner's control and mastery" whilst "critical thinking skills valorise the quest for a rationality that can settle the trouble that inaugurates thought" (1998, p. 32). The very desire for such control, however, and the difficulties encountered in documenting this, can cloud our vision from the very complexities we seek to capture (Lather, 2003). Elsewhere, as an alternative, we have suggested that reflective writings by practitioner researchers might still be seen productively as the creation of "a reflective/ constructive narrative layer that feeds whilst growing alongside the life it seeks to portray" (Brown & Jones, 2001). This narrative layer, however, can also be seen as providing a mask for the supposed life behind it, a life with attendant drives that will always evade or resist full description within the narrative (Jagodzinski, 1996; Pitt, 1998) and a life that cannot know much of itself until later and then still only partially (Felman, 1987; Britzman, 2003).

* Corresponding author: Tony Brown, Institute of Education, Manchester Metropolitan University. 799 Wilmslow Road, Manchester, M20 3GD, United Kingdom. Email: a.m.brown@mmu.ac.uk

Moreover, this life resists being depicted un-problematically in research constructions as a singular or tangible entity. Pitt and Britzman (2003) argue that recent moves towards poststructuralist methods in research have heightened:

> … the problem of verisimilitude embedded in such foundational concepts in qualitative studies as voice, identity, agency, and experience while still expecting to offer some contingent observations about how individuals—including the researcher—make knowledge in and of the world. This methodology offers a new tension to educational studies by bringing to bear on participant narratives the very problem of narrating experience and by asking what conditions or structures the narrative impulse. (p. 756)

Meanwhile, they go further in suggesting that a growing body of psychoanalytic educational research, through its emphasis on concepts such as the unconscious, phantasy, affect and sexuality, has worked "to unseat the authorial capabilities of expression to account exhaustively for qualities of experience, to view history as a causal process, and to separate reality from phantasy" (p. 756).

The difficulty of capturing and expressing experience is addressed in the psychoanalytic work of Lacan (e.g. 1977). For an individual building a picture of herself, the territory of the unconscious will always prevent the individual from being entirely visible to herself. In Lacan's writings the human subject is always incomplete and self-identifications are captured in a supposed image. It is Lacan's work, and related work by his current day successor Slavoj Zizek, that will inform this paper. Following this work in the context of practitioner enquiry, we shall suggest that it is this necessary failure of narrative and of the symbolic realm more generally that provides the motivation to renew the narrative and, through this, the teacher's conception of who she is and what she wants from the research she is conducting.

The paper will draw on a practitioner research oriented doctoral study carried out by a teacher, the second author of this paper (England, 2004), with the first author acting as the supervisor. The paper itself comprises collaborative work between the two authors. The teacher's study commenced with an engagement with alternative hermeneutic (Schön, 1983; Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Elliott, 1991) and poststructuralist (Stronach & MacLure, 1997, Brown & Jones, 2001) models for constructing practitioner research within the frame of a university course. She had a particular concern with how emancipatory approaches with consensual understandings of improvement could be reconciled with the textual mulitiplicity of poststructuralist perspectives (Shapiro, 1991; Kemmis, 1996). She was keen to examine how her own speech and actions were *interpellated* by alternative and perhaps conflicting discourses (Althusser, 1971), yet she was also wanting to address how she might warrant her own professional practices in a more immediate way. Methodologically, she was informed and guided by narrative conceptions of educational research (e.g. Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Adler, 1991; Weber, 1993; Winter, 1996; Beattie, 1995; Olson, 1995; O'Connell-Rust, 1999; Rushton, 2000). There was a tendency in these studies to see the focus in terms of researchers telling stories about themselves, but without a critical examination of the ideological apparatus through which these stories, and the human subjects implicated in them, are produced. Although this concern has been addressed theoretically by some authors (e.g. McLaren, 1995; Parker, 1997) the teacher was keen to make this work in her own everyday practice.

Earlier work by the first author (Brown & Jones, 2001) considered such approaches to practitioner research against the theoretical work of Ricoeur on time and narrative (e.g. Ricoeur, 1984). How does the researcher understand his or her self in time and through narrative? A key point of entry for this work was Ricoeur's assertion that temporality defies phenomenology except at the level of narrative. That is, for example, processes of history cannot be fully captured in the stories about

them. We cannot agree on the existence of key characters, places or events, let alone the relationships between them. We may, however, *mythologise* (Barthes, 1972) certain expressions or points of reference which contribute to socially constructed *phenomenologies* which serve as anchorages or frameworks for given communities. Whilst remaining convinced by Ricoeur's approach, there were practical difficulties, within the specific empirical studies being conducted, in pinning particular narratives to particular people. How might one delineate the narratives? Who was choosing the narrative? How might we depict the researcher through the narratives he or she offers?

This difficulty in locating the subject has been encountered in attempts to mediate between two alternative models of the ego introduced by Freud (e.g. Grosz, 1989). The first model is a self-contained ego "that is a biological result of the interaction of psychical and social relations" (1990, p. 31) that can be objectively described. The second "narcissistic" ego "depends on the subject's relations with others" and "is governed by fantasy, and modes of identification, and introjection" (p. 31). Lacan firmly chose the latter path whilst Freud seemingly remained ambivalent until his death (p. 31). In another study (Brown & McNamara, 2005), we considered this second understanding of ego in comparing our own analyses of how trainee teachers spoke about the process of becoming a teacher, recorded at different stages of their training course, with their own accounts of those personal histories. Needless to say, the stagings of the two systems, of who the person was and how they progressed, were quite impossible to combine. The premise that an individual could construct his or her own history was flawed insofar as this history always depended on from where it was told, and how one looked at it. It also presupposed that the individual is fully visible to his or her self. These difficulties loosened our assumption that narrative could be tied to tangible people and events and projected us in to a world where fantasy had a more prominent role to play in structuring reality.

Our own collaborative work began by exploring how the teacher researcher's emerging ideas about psychoanalytic theory, also derived from the university course, could be put into the context of her specific enquiry. A number of authors have explored teacher student relationships through the lens of psychoanalytic models (Britzman, 1998, 2003; Pitt, 1998; Robertson, 1997; Todd, 1997.) Some such studies have been centred on Lacan (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, and Walkerdine, 1984; Felman, 1987; Appel, 1996, 1999; Briton, 1997; Jagodzinski, 1996, 2001, Brown and England, 2004). Meanwhile, Hollway and Jefferson (2001) have used a psychoanalytic lens in qualitative research methodology more generally to consider how research subjects defend themselves against anxieties arising from information provided in a research context. Our own present work meanwhile focuses on how particular assertions of self, or identity claims, can be created and validated through narrative within a practitioner research context where there is an additional need to acknowledge the self disclosure of researchers themselves and how this will be shaped by unconscious (or unacknowledged) as well as conscious forces.

After describing the theoretical study we shall consider how the approach offers an alternative to curative conceptions of research. We then show how identity formation is linked to the on-going narrative production. We conclude by showing how this might be seen as a pragmatic alternative to post-structuralist methods.

The Empirical Study

The empirical aspects of the study were carried out in a large inner-city secondary school where the teacher was a senior member of staff. It focused, initially at least, on 11 year-old black boys in a top set French group to find ways of increasing their motivation and to consider possible improvements to teacher practice. This was

designed to ensure that they remained in that top set, rather than conform to the apparent trend of black boys becoming "disaffected" and "falling down the sets" as they progressed through school. The project sought to achieve this, at least initially, through better understanding how oppressive teacher-pupil relationships might be disrupted in an interventionist research process. A key aspect of the broader project was the interface of the images the school and black pupils had of each other. For a school attentive to idealised notions of learning (e.g. National Numeracy Strategy, DfEE, 1999a; National Literacy Strategy, DfEE, 1999b), teaching (e.g. TTA, 1998; DfEE, 1998a, 1998b), schooling (e.g. Excellence in Cities programme) and social inclusion (DfEE, 1999c*)*, there appeared to be occasional dissonance with the boys' own self-image. Whilst there have been many studies addressing such cultural dissonance, in the context of schooling (Connolly & Troyna, 1998; Connolly, 1998; Sewell, 1997; Pearce, 2003), or more theoretically (e.g. Bhabha, 1994), theoretisation of cultural themes has less often been combined in practitioner research. A paper discussing this aspect of the work has been published elsewhere (England & Brown, 2001).

The data collection procedure was shaped primarily around the teacher writing reflectively over a period of time. This writing was seen as providing declarations by the teacher of who she was and of what she was trying to achieve at different points in time and in different situations. More specifically, empirical data was collected in the form of lesson plans, materials and resources used, examples of pupils' work and scripts of interactions between the teacher and the pupils and between the pupils themselves. Journal entries were kept throughout the project. With the school's consent, everyday classroom events were regularly recorded and impressions noted which seemed relevant to the concerns surrounding the research interest. At the end of each week, observations were made and initial analysis begun and then the approach was modified for the next week. This analysis was based on the researcher's current understanding and interpretation of the data. In the later stages of the project, this analysis impacted on teaching strategies and classroom interactions. Thus the project loosely followed a cyclical model of action research where each cycle consisted of a *plan*, the implementation of the plan (*action* and *observation*) and the *reflection* on the results of the evaluation which leads to a revised plan and the second cycle and so on (Winter, 1996). As the research project developed the teacher narrative itself text was studied. The researcher looked in particular for elements of the narrative that challenged, destabilised or disrupted the initial conception of the research. It was at this point that the research became transformational insofar as it seized the disruptive elements from the data and sought to build a new narrative to move the research forwards.

To conclude this section some reflective diary extracts are provided. All names have been changed. These extracts comprise the teacher examining teacher-pupil relations. In the following sections these extracts will be referred to in introducing some Lacanian concepts and showing how these open up certain analytical opportunities. The journal entries relate to interactions with one boy for one week:

> *Tuesday 16 May 2000:*
> Lloyd came back from exclusion today. In the previous week I had decided to work on a class display and include some music and work on a song. I had decided to include Lloyd in this. When Lloyd came into the lesson I was busy organising the class and he was just a few minutes late. He came in messing about, poking and prodding, kicking and annoying and went up to his friends and began teasing and distracting them. I began to get annoyed, not least of all because he was not fitting into my positive framework of him. I told him to be quiet and listen and he started to mess about some more. I realised that I would have to deal with him alone and abandon my plans temporarily. I took him outside the room and started reasonably to explain how I wanted him to behave, but he began to argue with me and deny

he was being irritating and disruptive. So I had to start from the beginning again. I eventually raised my voice with him and was far sterner. I threatened him with not joining in with the display work and he said he didn't care and he didn't want to be in Set One anyway. I've heard this before and recognised it, as I understood it, as a copping out for fear of failure before I got the chance to fail him. I left him for a few minutes to think things over and I started the class off in groups, put on some music and then returned to him. I was gentler this time. I told him quietly that I believed in him, that I had promised his dad that I would keep an eye on him and that he had a choice: to start the lesson again and be co-operative or to give up if he wanted to. He said, "But it's too hard, I can't do it, I've missed too much now". I told him I'd help him to catch up and would he prefer to work alone and copy up what he'd missed. He agreed, came in quietly, sat alone at the front next to my desk and copied up the work he had missed.

I felt that he was like a young fragile child. His identity seemed to me to be so vulnerable and easily bruised. He needed to throw his weight about and act tough whereas all the time he was afraid of being seen to look stupid or to fail and so lose esteem in the eyes of his friends. His vulnerability was a secret between us. I did not talk gently to him in front of the class because that would have betrayed him as the child.

Wednesday 17 May:
I have read what I wrote yesterday and thought about it more. It echoes some of my thoughts from last week about my own vulnerability. I am finding a way to identify with the child through my own weaknesses. I recognise the need in him to appear tough as a need I share. In today's lesson Lloyd just came in and carried on working alone. He needed to sit apart because I think he wanted to appear disapproved of by me. That role preserved his image intact and allowed him to work at the same time. That is my present understanding.

Thursday 18 May:
The display is finished and the class were putting it up outside the classroom. Some children also tidied up the other displays along the corridor and in the classroom. There was a good atmosphere of working together. Lloyd would not help though and I was disappointed. He said "It's dumb sticking up pictures. I'll do my work thanks". So my plans to include him were jettisoned.

Friday 19 May:
Reading back over the week's diary entries I can see a picture emerging of Lloyd as a very isolated and sad figure. He is in fact a lively and cheerful, cheeky boy. Why have I written about him in this way? I have painted him with the colours of my own feelings of sadness. The picture is distorted.

Locating the Truth of Desire

Shortly, we shall see how the teacher researcher herself analysed these earlier writings during the research period, and how she then in turn examined this newer teacher analysis as research material at a slightly later stage. Specifically, we shall examine the account of self provided by the researcher to the reader and question the suppositions and fantasies constructed around the researcher and the context within which the research is grounded. We will show how the teacher employed some key Lacanian concepts in assessing her engagements with pupils in her class with view to redefining her professional trajectory. Before commencing with this discussion, however, there is a need to emphasise that this redefinition cannot simply be about re-setting the ideals to be aimed for.

As indicated above, Freudian psychoanalytic sessions were predicated on a supposed cure achieved "by helping the subject to overcome the distortions that are the source of self-misunderstanding" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 265). The sessions supposed the possibility of an end point at which resolution was achieved. Is it possible, we may ask, to usefully draw an analogy between psychoanalytic cure and successful practitioner research? A teacher researcher might imagine that her actions are

premised on a particular understanding of how she might improve her practice and that her actions are based on strategies seen as being within such a frame. This image of herself, however, is inevitably a caricature that she uses as some sort of referential framework. Further, a teaching situation may not necessarily become "better" through the research process, since "better" depends on who decides. For example, if some teaching is assessed as functioning in an officially sanctioned manner, is this "better"?

An alternative is offered by Lacan who focuses on the subject's *identifications* with images of himself and his social relations. Analysis of these identifications is privileged over any notion of encouraging movement to a harmonised *identity* through a process of analysis. In this scenario the "analyst asks neither that the subject get better nor that he become normal; the analyst requires nothing, imposes nothing. He is there so that the subject may gain access to the truth of his desire, his own desire, and not so that he may respond to the Other's demand" (Lacan, 2004). "Identity" itself is seen as a somewhat fragmented enterprise formed through a disconnected amalgam of identifications (see also Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Against this sort of frame the task of research is not to seek truth or to find a final resolution but rather to ask how the discursive formulations have taken the shape that they have. In the example presented here a teacher becomes trapped within particular conceptions of her professional environment but then uses her research as an analytical process through which she creates new ways of understanding her actions that open up alternative courses of action.

Lacan depicts the individual's formation as being caught between a fantasy of herself and a fantasy of the world in which she is operating. But neither fantasy succeeds in offering a "full" picture. The result of this is that some things are left out of both pictures yet remain present in the background and disturb the functioning of the accounts presented. In addressing these issues Lacan refers to the notions of the *Imaginary*, the *Symbolic* and the *Real*. The account of these terms provided here will not be overly technical but instead focuses more on how they might shape researcher conceptions of the research space. It should also be noted that Lacan's usage of these terms evolved radically over the years of his writing. Some of the details and implications of these shifts have been explored by Briton (1997). Our own interpretation is derived primarily from the early writings of Zizek (e.g. 1989), a major present day commentator, who focuses more on the later work of Lacan.

Imaginary

The Imaginary might be seen as self-identification, or rather, the creation of images of oneself. Lacan (1977, pp. 1-7) encapsulates this in the notion of a young child looking into a mirror and seeing a whole self, an image of completeness, which gives the child a sense of mastery. But this has some cost since the child is identifying with an image outside of himself. As Zizek (1989, p. 104) puts it, to "achieve self-identity, the subject must identify himself with the imaginary other, he must alienate himself—put his identity outside himself, so to speak, into the image of his double". The crucial point here is that the individual, looking in on himself, sees an image (a fantasy) of himself, not the "real me" as it were. For Lacan this gap is never closed. This identification however lays a foundation for a more symbolic engagement with the world. Bhabha (1994, p. 77) pinpoints this: "The Imaginary is the transformation that takes place in the subject at the formative mirror phase, when it assumes a *discrete* image which allows it to postulate a series of equivalences, samenesses, identities, between the objects of the surrounding world".

In terms of the research project being discussed, this is concerned with the teacher-researcher's self-identification. As seen, the researcher identifies with an image outside of herself. Although this image is fundamentally alien to her, it is an image that in some ways defines her identity, stands in for her, and defines her relation to her supposed situation. The data in the last section and the following extract from the teacher's research diary can be seen as reflective analysis situated within this Imaginary level:

> After the first cycle I began to question the benefits of the competitive elements in my lesson planning. I also challenged my way of planning that I saw as framed within the current OfSTED (government inspectorate) driven model and allowing me little flexibility. I modified my approach slightly to foster more collaboration and co-operation and I made my planning more open ended.

The teacher sees herself as "this sort of teacher" doing "that sort of job" for "that sort of reason". At the outset, she assumed that the boys constructed their identity in one way and that the school and government inspectorate defined their expectations of the pupils in another way, and that her job as teacher was to attempt some sort of mediation. Here this takes the form of a more collaborative approach where she softens some of the competitive aspects of her teaching. The teacher's research task is built around an assumption that the boys had become "alienated" by school and that she can distance herself from her professional school role in examining this alienation. Then, from this vantage point, she can enquire as to how images of the pupils are created by the school, the teacher/researcher herself and the pupils themselves. And as a result of this examination she will be in a better position to effect change. This unexpressed *a priori* construction of the researcher then becomes fleshed out as the teacher seeks to provide an explicit narrative of her actions. This sort of move is present in the following extract insofar as the researcher's awareness of the limits of her own research perspective get acknowledged within the reflective accounts.

> At the end of the second cycle I became more conscious of the limitations of my influence in the wider context of the boys' lives. I also started to think more about the text and how I was telling the story. At the end of the third cycle I felt that the project wasn't really going in the direction I wanted it to as far as Lloyd was concerned at least. This has led me to wish to stand back from the project and evaluate it as a whole.
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> In the terms of my research methodology, the first two cycles were working on the level of the Imaginary. I was reflecting on the data and considering my own subjectivity within it. I was looking at issues surrounding the boys' identities and my own identity as a researcher.

This recognition then sets the scene for a rather different sort of analysis that will be encapsulated as part of a discussion of the symbolic level.

Symbolic

The Symbolic relates in some respects to the notion of "interpellation" (Althusser, 1971, p. 174). Althusser sees interpellation as akin to "hailing" someone. He offers the example of a policeman calling "Hey you there" to a man in the street, with the man then turning in recognition that he is being called. "By this mere one hundred and eighty degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*" (p. 174, Althusser's emphasis). That is, this act of turning signifies his entry into, or acceptance of participation in, a particular discourse. Here "there is no pre-existing subject on whom interpellation is performed, interpellation brings the subject into being" (Atkinson, 2004). He is defined by his positioning and by his mode of participation in the

discourse. But is interpellation always a calling up or is it sometimes about volunteering, or recognising a place for oneself? For Foucault the play between being called into discourse or volunteering is the very process through which the subject is formed (Butler, 1997, pp. 97-98). Butler (1997, p. 95) suggests that, in Lacanian terms, interpellation might be seen "as the call of symbolic constitution". Any such acceptance of subordination carries with it a particular assertion of agency within a given frame. Individuals can only define themselves in relation to the constraints they see themselves as having accepted. Whilst the Imaginary might be seen as the individual looking in on a fantasy self, the Symbolic encapsulates this individual looking out to a fantasy world filtered through the ideological framings brought to it. These two fantasies continue to impact on each other yet the identification with each of these fantasies remains alienating as they each operate within a "previously formed language" (Althusser, 1971, p. 213). Easthope (1992, p. 68) pinpoints this:

> Though the subject may speak, it does so only within the terms which the laws of language allow. Just as Saussure had argued that language does not simply name a reality which pre-exists it, but rather *produces* the concept of reality through the system of differences which *is* language so Lacan argues that the position of the "I" within language does not simply represent the presence of a subject which pre-exists it, but rather produces the concept of the subject through a process of differentiation between the "I" and "not-I" of discourse.

The Symbolic involves on-going examination of the imaginary. Yet the "paths to the symbolic … are *in* the imaginary" (Gallop, 1985, p. 60, Gallop's emphasis). Zizek (1989, p. 56) puts it thus: "As soon as we enter the symbolic order, the past is always present in the form of historical tradition (but) the meaning of these traces is not given". The meaning of these traces "is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively—the analysis produces the truth" (p. 56). And this analysis is always carried out against ideologically defined parameters. The Imaginary then is "something which will be realized in the Symbolic" (Lacan, quoted by Zizek, 1989, p. 55). In this way the Symbolic is constitutive of the Imaginary, which, in a sense, was already there, but previously unaware of the social demands to be encountered later.

This level addresses the teacher narrative as text and how that text creates a lens through which the teacher herself is then seen. The symbolic is concerned with how the imaginary self-identification is realised in analysis and shaped ideologically through that analysis. Here we may ask questions such as: How is the teacher researcher account constructed as a narrative? How is the researcher subjectified within this account? The teacher researcher learns who she is through the story she has told. Speech and writing are acts that generate meaning and give identity to the speaker and listener; they both locate and signify the speaker and listener. The speech and writing also point to the existence of the Other and a place from which the researcher is heard and is recognised. Such a shift of focus became present in the teacher's reflective diary:

> Towards the end of the second cycle and by the time I arrived at the third cycle I was becoming increasingly aware of the Symbolic level of the analytical process and was concerned with the text and the way my story was framed within it.
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> I am struck by a strong sense that I am telling a particular version of events for a specific audience and that this is distorting the outcomes. The cyclical action research process itself is beginning to feel like a net around the story which pushes it forwards in time via an understanding of progress or development which is in fact imposed from outside by the process and is in fact artificial. At the end of the third week despite my insistence in the narrative towards review, evaluation and modification and so on, Lloyd in particular seemed to want to break free of my narrative. (As the author I too began to weary of its repetitive

> insistence on progression. I felt compelled by my own narrative to find a suitably convincing thesis at the end even if there wasn't one.)

This recognition that the script is not necessarily working as envisaged alerts the teacher to the possibility of the space outside of the script, those aspects of the research situation not mopped up by the story being told. It also makes her aware of the script itself and the way in which that script construction points to her and her perspective on life. It also highlights it as something that she herself produced and thus something that she could modify. Felman (1987, pp. 100-102), for example, has examined some autobiographical writing by Freud in which he discussed how his own personal histories were crafted according to need at different times. Here the teacher faces a similar quandary:

> To the extent that I am caught within my own story, my own research narrative, how am I blinded from other ways of seeing things? I am reminded of a film that I have seen recently called *The Truman Show*. The question of everyday reality and identity is raised. In the film, the lead character Truman was born and continues to live in a movie set depicted in the film, quite unaware that all those around him are actors working to make his life appear real to him. Truman's identity is a construct of a movie director, another character depicted in the film, and Truman struggles, in the way Lloyd struggles within my research narrative, to break free from this construct. The text of his life, which is like a veil surrounding him, is powerfully lifted at the end when the yacht he is sailing away from the show on bangs into the glass dome that surrounds his understood reality. As viewers, even though we had known all along that his world was a movie set, we were still shocked by the thud as he met the wall of the dome. It reminds us of the way in which, although we recognise the artificiality of our narrative we still find it inescapable because we are symbolically knitted into it so completely.

Real

The Real might be seen as the space in which the Imaginary and Symbolic are enacted. Yet as Zizek (1989, pp. 168-169) puts it, "the Real (is) an act which never took place in reality but which must nevertheless be presupposed, 'constructed', afterwards to account for the present state of things". It is characterised by the "hard, core resisting symbolisation" (p. 162), yet at the same time it is "a paradoxical chimerical entity which, although it does not exist, has a series of properties and can produce a series of effects" (p. 164). In different sub-domains of the "society" alternative discourses may prevail but these various discourses do not manage to mop up everything. The fantasies built within the Imaginary and the Symbolic fail to capture, respectively, the signified self and the signified world. This brings into play a space for desire motivated by the supposed possibility of closing the gaps.

> I identify now strongly with the movie director who addresses Truman at the end of the film and I wonder who is in fact freer of the imaginary and symbolic veils over reality; Truman was able to walk off the movie whilst the director still believed in his story.
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> In this film, emancipation for Truman is possible once the veil concealing the Real is lifted. The veil in the context of my research might be that of the narrative offered in respect of it and the framework of the cyclical action research project. Once that is shattered, perhaps I might be able to use the constructs, which I can then see as merely distorting images, to my own ends powerfully to emancipate myself as a researcher and the object of my research too. Isn't the relationship between Truman and the director a little like that between Lloyd and me? He doesn't know he's in my movie. And I have become a little over-committed to my originally proposed script even though the turn of events has made me aware of its decreasing viability. (N.B. Atkinson (2001) also discussed the Real in relation to *The Truman Show* at the time of the film's release.)

With respect to the study, this level recognises that research accounts are always incomplete. There is always part of us, and a part of the world, that cannot, be uncovered, be made sense of, or be symbolised. For the researcher it will be a point of horror, frustration or disappointment. This part is linked to the fantasy/ideal by the provocative question of what does the researcher really want? Such fantasies haunt the background to the accounts that are offered.

Meanwhile data will be inspected against particular ideological readings. Data that challenges the supposed symbolic framework may be either discounted or re-examined in order to find new meanings. But in this process some of the ideologies underpinning the earlier readings may be threatened by the findings. Hidden drives may be challenged or re-routed. As a result the researcher is driven to assess and then change the situation she finds herself in. Through this sort of disruption the project might aspire to becoming transformational, but a transformation still held in place by some sort of narrative intent, and perhaps still shaped around movement to a supposed ideal. That is, the project is still shaped by what the researcher explicitly says she wants to do based on her current conceptions of herself (motivations, drives etc) and her current conception of the situation she faces. Stories, or elements of these stories, survive through their continued viability rather than through an establishment of their truth.

> I now want to move towards the Real stage of my analysis which will involve seizing the disruptive elements in the narrative in order to move the research forwards. The disruptive elements are those that challenge my research narrative and the account I have given above of the film are a way into this disruption for me. I have come to the edge of the dome and I need to walk through the door with my object, Lloyd or Truman, and not remain set in the movie as the director was. In this sense I am learning from my research object and he is emancipating me. I need to stand outside of my created world and walk into the world of the boys' understanding. Instead of dragging them into my research project, I need to step through the curtain into the Real in order to discover whether emancipation is possible in this research. It will not be found within my previous constructed understandings of reality. … I have also found useful ways of disrupting my narrative in order to un-pick the text and gain fuller understandings of the issues. … The identity of the individual is shifting in these accounts. I am still concerned with the question of how to empower the boys and myself in this situation of the school context so that we are not puppets within the text but individuals that might have more control over our destinies. I want to enable us to break free of the limitations imposed by the school context as well as my own narrative. … If I change the boundaries or frames, which define this space, the players might be able to act differently. This project might then become more about creating different spaces.

Concluding Comments

In the approach described above, the Lacanian concepts may be seen as helping the researcher dismantle and restructure the prevalent symbolic order guiding current teacher practice and understanding, particularly her own entrapment within specific discourses and identity constructs. It allows for a reformatting of the researcher's sense of her identity and a distancing from those discourses. The individual's agency is a function of the constraints that she has accepted (Butler, 1997) and as such is renewed as constraints are redefined through the research process. In the account provided, Lloyd, the pupil, would not fit into the original script set out for him, built, as it was, between the teacher's construction of herself and of the world she saw herself inhabiting ("He doesn't know he's in my movie. And I have become a little over-committed to my originally proposed script").

In this case then, at the Imaginary level, the teacher's own struggle for control might be a result of a self-image in which she is attempting to "liberate" the pupils.

This, however, may also be a cover for her own desires, perhaps relating to her own ambivalence to the school's motivations and the way in which those motivations shape her own professional situation. The lack in her storyline activates dissatisfaction and a certain amount of self-criticism. She now wants something else. As the teacher puts it: "My need to change the lives of my pupils might in fact be read now as a passionate need for me to feel good about myself, to appease the will of the Other, as I perceive it". As the teacher continues:

> At the level of the Real, what is it that I can't see in the image, what is it that I lack in my image of myself—and what is it that is missing and has no meaning in the language I use? The whole point is that this is unknowable and what is more interesting and revealing is in fact the veil, which hides the Real, not, what lies behind it. What do I use to restore my self-image and make myself feel complete and in control? What do I use to attempt to provide meaning and sense to the world? These are the veils I use to hide the Real. In my attempt to make sense of my situation I use reason, my knowledge of time, my notion of progression in my project, the systematic research methodology. I refer to the big Other of the government, OFSTED, the school context in my attempt to shift the lack of the Real and to scapegoat it. This restores my self-image because although I feel I lack control in the situation, I have located the reason for this elsewhere, in the school, the government etc, and I also provide myself with an emancipatory quest against my oppressor which makes me feel better about myself.

In this instance then it may be conjectured that the research narrative's failure to encapsulate a sufficiently expansive space for the construction of the teacher researcher resulted not only in a shift in the research frame but also in the teacher questioning her own sense of self in relation to the pupils she was teaching. And such failures surely cannot be avoided and might be understood as healthy components of sincere research enterprises that are designed to provide frameworks from which one sees the world. Our assertions about the world, and the roles that these assertions imply for us, constantly redefine who we are. As such we are always destined to miss our target in pinpointing our purpose. We can never quite capture ourselves in language but it is this "surplus of the Real over every symbolisation that functions as the object-cause of desire" (Zizek, 1989, p. 3).

It is the Real that distinguishes Lacan's approach to post-structuralism. Zizek (1989, p. 174) argues that in poststructuralist analysis, the subject is reduced to "subjectivation, he is conceived as an effect of a fundamentally non-subjective process", interpellated without awareness of this interpellation. This closes down the space for subjective intervention, albeit intervention that might be motivated by failures in the narratives produced. Whilst post-structuralist accounts of educational research advocate deconstruction and the "mobilisation of meaning" (Stronach & Maclure, 1997), a Lacanian approach as described foregrounds one's own subjective immersion in discourses, the possibility of a seditious attitude, and a practical mechanism for digging.

In practitioner research the narrative can never catch up with us, but that does not stop us from trying. And our misses can nevertheless be informative. Narratives hold our desires in place even if they do not take us to the place that satisfies them. They can also disrupt our desires and re-educate us about what we want. The task of teacher-research is not to pin down life for inspection but rather to stimulate this life for future growth. As part of this the teacher researcher builds an evolving sense of professional self and perhaps then works with others in a different way. And in turn those who work with her may encounter their shared space differently.

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