ABSTRACT

TELLING CHOICES: AN EXPLORATION OF THE GENDER IMBALANCE IN PARTICIPATION IN ADVANCED MATHEMATICS COURSES IN ENGLAND

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In this paper I address the question: how is it that people come to choose mathematics and in what ways is this process gendered? I draw on the findings of a qualitative research project, involving interviews with 42 young people (aged between 16 and 19) and observations of their mathematics classes in England. The project focuses on the reasons for the gendered pattern of participation in mathematics beyond compulsory education. Working within a post-structuralist framework, I argue that gender is a project and one that is achieved in interaction with others. I then move on to look at the ways in which choosing to do or to reject mathematics can become part of this project; that is how this choice can be read as a way of doing gender. I analyse the ways that students work the socio-cultural stories about mathematics (as ‘hard’, a signifier of intelligence, useful, and so on) into their own narratives of self. I look in detail at two young women, Toni and Claudia and argue that doing mathematics is doing masculinity and so this creates tensions for the young women who are (understandably) invested in producing themselves as female.