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1 ‘Teachers are Meant to be Orthodox’: Counter-Narratives in the Development of a Professional Identity in Teaching

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Narrative and Counter Narrative

Counter-narratives have been defined as ‘the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives’ (Andrews, 2004:1). Telling a story is power to oppose master narratives and represents a potentially subversive positioning of self. McQuillan (2000) regards the production of counter-narratives as a necessary condition of narrativity and argues that the direction of the relationship between the narrative and its counter is an effect of power. The narrative and its counter therefore create a site of contest, but should not be thought of as binary opposites. Rather, the relationship is aporetic. Any narrative is necessarily selective, a way of not saying something. Potentially there are limitless ways of not saying something each of which constitutes a counter-narrative, and each of which is related, not as an opposite, but as a simultaneous presence occupying, indeed productive of, the contested site. In this way counter-narratives do not seek simply to oppose the dominant narrative but offer both resistance and complicity to it.

Narratives are important to us not only or even primarily because they tell about our past lives but because they make sense of the present. We attempt to create coherence and give meaning to our lives by learning to read time backwards. As Ricoeur (1981:170) puts it, ‘looking back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, we have to be able to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions’. Narrative gifts us this construction of the experience of time enabling us to conceive of an illusory point-like present which is in fact ‘always already past and always already still to happen’ in an exchange with and for a narrated past (McQuillan, 2000:15). In this way we tell ourselves into existence and our identities emerge in and through this process (Hinchman and Hinchman, 2001). As Currie (1998)

observes, we learn how to narrate from the outside, narratives at large teach us how to organise experience and how to conceive of ourselves. Narrative thus positions us enabling identification with subject positions within the discourse. In this way we both agentically situate ourselves and are positioned through interpellatory processes into discourse (Althusser, 1971).

This paper examines a counter-narrative of entry into the teaching profession showing how the construction of one teacher's identity ('Roddy') is presented as an autobiographical narrative of the self that *he assumes* to be at odds with an 'orthodox' narrative of becoming a teacher but which conforms to a master narrative of Western culture ie. redemption, in which, 'the protagonist encounters many setbacks and experiences a great deal of pain in life, but over time these negative scenes lead to especially positive outcomes, outcomes that might not have occurred had the suffering never happened in the first place' (McAdams, 2005:8) - a familiar story told in a counter context, then. Indeed, while Roddy feels that this is counter to normal expectations, it is not a story uncommonly told by teachers (Karpiak, 2006). These personal narratives thus conform to a recognizable narrative structure and hence 'tell about a culture' at the same time as they tell about a life (Roth, 2005: 4). But there is another dimension to Roddy's narrative that is related to the ideological function of master/counter-narratives in educational discourses. The personal narrative occupies the contested site of two key narratives, viz, education as instrument of oppression and as means for transformation (Ross, 2000). The ambivalence that this gives rise to is a fulcrum around which the narrative turns. The aim of the paper is to explore these twin aspects of the narrative. Firstly, it offers an interpretation of the personal narrative, told as counter to an assumed 'orthodox' story of entry into teaching; secondly, it examines the narrative as the means by which the individual identifies with subject positions within discourses.

Research Context

The extracts presented here are taken from an interview with 'Roddy' who has taught English in a rural secondary school for over 20 years. In this paper I focus on his biographical narrative which I have presented in stanza form, not altering the order of the words but compressing it. The purpose of this is not to 'boil' the narrative 'into core meanings rendering their essence' as Poindexter (2002:70) suggests. Rather, it is to convey the complexity contained within the narrative, to expose the polyphonic, intertextuality of the text - the connection to other narratives and the 'semantic vibration' of the text (Barthes, 1981). Richardson (1993:695) says that poetic representations may enable us to see 'beyond sociological naturalisms' while Langer and Furman (2004, [15]) suggest that 'the condensed form of the research poem leads to a more

powerful presentation of data'. Rendering the data in this fashion however means it is not available for analysis in terms of the 'how' it has been said. Instead, it has to be analyzed as text, recognising that all texts 'contain within them the ideological structure and struggles expressed in society through discourse' (Allen, 2000:36). (Deletions in the transcript are indicated by /.)

Roddy's Narrative

As a child I was bad/
it has to do with my parents and their religious beliefs
and it has to do/
I have - had
an older brother who died long before I was born
he was run over by a bus

My parents
at that time father was an engineer
he was, very, very well read/
and even my mother was well read
she taught herself to read Greek

Intelligent parents
but the loss of the son
had been a tragedy/

In these stanzas Roddy grounds an identity claim as being different in his early childhood experiences, straightaway challenging a master narrative of childhood innocence while a range of narrative positions surrounding parenthood, religion and other narratives about the natural wickedness of children reverberate unspoken in the text. The juxtaposition of 'Greek' and 'tragedy' in the next stanzas emphasises the familial tensions played out in response to events. How this blighted his parents' life emerges in the line 'the loss of the son', transcribed as 'son' but which could also refer to a metaphoric darkness descending.

The narrative resists closure. Instead, the intertextual references to other narratives opens it up. An unhappy childhood marked by guilt and personal tragedy runs counter to a narrative of childhood innocence, but plays to a familiar narrative of the unhappy, brutalized childhood. Neustadter (2004) suggests that the memoir of childhood hell is a pervasive motif in biographical narrative. The references to a dead brother and Greek tragedy carry a semantic allusion to fratricide and set up the idea of guilt. The next stanzas deal with the impact this had on the family.

That's why they became Jehovah's witnesses
there was a huge gap between him and the rest of the family/
so they become Jehovah's witnesses

My mother would speak about Jack sometimes
and the one thing she would say to me was
how like him I was

And this is the important bit
it didn't dawn on me then
my father couldn't stand to have me there
and it was because I was like Jack

I didn't just look like him
I spoke like him
all my characteristics were the same as his
and I didn't realize the significance of this/

The metaphor of the 'gap' creates an image of emptiness at the heart of the family. A gap that Roddy might be expected to fill, being like Jack, but which instead he experiences as a gulf between himself and his parents. Roddy reflects on this stage of his life with phrases such as, 'It didn't dawn on me then', 'I didn't realize the significance of this'. As the narrative emerges, it becomes clear that Roddy grounds a salient identity as being different from other teachers in these early childhood experiences. In this way, as Culler (2001) says, we retroactively construct cause and effect as part of an aporetic process in which each seems simultaneously to bring about the other. In other words, an effect requires a cause which then becomes an effect of the effect.

At several points the narrative suggests a tension between sameness and difference. Roddy's sense of being treated differently is because he was like Jack. Roddy's sameness with Jack renders him different, and he is treated differently because of this sameness. The ambiguity between sameness and difference becomes a fulcrum around which the narrative is balanced.

In the stanzas that follow the ramifications of this tragic event are played out in Roddy's childhood experiences.

In the primary school I was always frightened of the teachers
none of the other kids seemed to be frightened of the teachers
but I was
I didn't realize it then but I was being treated differently/

When I was -

I can't remember the age –
early primary/
I couldn't do a sum
and I remember the teacher getting so angry at me
and I couldn't do the sum

She took me into the class with the younger children
and asked the whole class what the answer to the sum was
to which they shouted it out

Took me down to the next class
did exactly the same
took me down to the next class
did exactly the same
took me back to the classroom
asked me what the answer was and I still couldn't do it
that stuck in my mind/

I don't remember much about primary except the 11+ exam.
I didn't know what it was until after I'd sat it
and failed that pretty badly obviously
and got into a level C class/
I was an abject utter failure

These stanzas relate to Roddy's early schooling, in which he tells of being victimized for being different and in which he is punished for his sinfulness, until a glimpse of redemption is offered in his final term in the form of a kindly teacher who takes an interest in him.

Our secondary school was rough
it was one of the roughest schools in the country
and one of the roughest classes and
I was bullied stupid both by staff and pupils
and I started playing truant
I started running away
I started stealing
and my life was quite honestly just a mess

Until about my last year
(well the last term of the school)
we had this teacher
an English teacher
and she seemed to take an interest in me
(and it was too late by that time)
but I came top of the class
it was enough to tell me there was more to me than I'd realized

This teacher represents a character present in many narratives from Cinderella onwards. Although Roddy says 'it was far too late by that time' this is represented as a turning point, so that even while Roddy and his wife are struggling in poverty Roddy is taking an interest in poetry. A rather unexpected turn in the narrative sees Roddy reading his poetry in the company of celebrated poets. A turning point which again draws on a sense of being 'different'. Vi is also represented as a saviour in the narrative, rescuing Roddy from his father as well as being the agent through whom he is able to grasp salvation in the form of education.

Then I left school/
was married when I was 17
(got away from my father)
and went through a period of just sort of labouring jobs
anything at all that came up
building sites
working on the roads
first job was in the rope factory in Kinraddie/

So Vi and I struggled on poverty-stricken
and we just managed hand to mouth for many many years
I'd be what 28
Vi (that's my wife)
because I was out of work and jobs were becoming hard to find
she'd enrolled me at Kinraddie Tech
and I had to go down and do an intelligence test
and I wasn't going to go
Vi says 'go you got nothing to lose'/
so I sat the test
the next thing I knew I was enrolled at Kinraddie Tech /

Before I went to Kinraddie Tech
while I was still a bus conductor
I'd started writing poetry/

and I became involved with a group called Words/
and I often went to readings
and did readings of my own poetry
and I've done it alongside MacDiarmid and MacCaig/
I developed a love for language
I'd already started writing
when I got to the Kinraddie Tech/

At this point I ask a question that Roddy draws on to evaluate his narrative: 'So when you look back on your school experience then what's your feeling about all that?' He replies,

It's what made me want to become a teacher
it's as fact that I wanted to become a teacher
to be different and to provide kids
with a different experience to the one I had/

Roddy wants to 'put something back', a key aspect of the redemption narrative (McAdams, 2005). The binary of sameness and difference that occurs throughout the narrative can be deconstructed to show how difference arises in the desire to become the same i.e. to become a teacher.

The next stanzas bring the narrative into the more recent past. This is introduced by a question I ask Roddy as to what enabled him to be a successful learner at the Tech. He replies

Having lived in poverty
and I mean poverty
it was poverty
it was hand to mouth
having lived like that with a family for ten years or so –
a determination not to fail
a determination to say
ah, this is a chance
I will take it this time/

This draws on a notion of time as *chairoi*, time as opportunity to be grasped, a key feature of narrative. In Roddy's narrative education is cast both as a means of repression and as a route out of poverty and to success. Roddy contrasts his earlier experiences of poverty with his present situation by referring to

... a family up beside us/
and the whole community were shocked to discover

they'd burned the floorboards for heating

I didn't say anything at the time
(they were actually talking about it in the staff room)
I didn't say anything
they were shocked at this

And yet where Vi and I lived
that was quite a regular occurrence
often we've sat with no coal
and just sat with a blanket around us/

And this is the way we lived
this was normal/

This is where Roddy's roots are – this is what education has delivered him from. Roddy's positioning of self as different creates a distance between himself and his colleagues.

At this point Roddy paused and said,

I've missed out the most important thing
the reason I chose to become a teacher
was because I'd failed so badly at school
I wanted to win
I wanted to beat the system
beat you
that's all I wanted to do/

Here an alternative reason for becoming a teacher is offered, not about providing a different experience to the one Roddy had, but about beating the system. Beating it by joining it – the ambivalence between sameness and difference emerges again.

Narrative and Identity

It is not only the content of Roddy's narrative which evokes familiar narratives but the form of it too. Narratives seek to impose order on chaos, but narratives also seek to undermine that order. It is the unexpected from which the narrative emerges. From the outset, Roddy sets up his narrative as counter to one which says that teachers were successful at school. The narrative he presents of his teaching career is framed by this counter-narrative of school failure.

However, while this may be counter to our expectations, it draws on a familiar cultural story-line. Overall, the narrative conforms to one of the most pervasive cultural narratives, redemption, evident in each of the turning points. According to Mishler (1999) turning points are often characterized as having arisen by chance, of not being planned. What might be characterized as an overall narrative of progress, triumph over adversity, is marked by discontinuities. While theories of identity construction have, according to Mishler (1999:61), focused on the necessity of producing coherence, actual narratives highlight these nodal points. However, if narrative is itself defined as being suspended between the expected and the unexpected, as Todorov (1971) and Propp (2000 [1944], p.61) suggest, then such discontinuities would be demanded of the narrative structure. This raises questions about the function of narratives in organizing our lives. Narratives contain an inherent instability, imposing an order that is always threatened. So, there is a conflict between a desire to make sense of our lives and impose closure on our narratives and the desire to highlight the place of chance which undermines that very coherence and rationality.

So, the excluded and marginalized pupil becomes a teacher – an unexpected twist – but there is a certain irony in this. Roddy becomes part of and perpetuates the very systems that were responsible for his own failure. Personal counter-narratives have to be seen as not in opposition to dominant cultural narratives but as both complicit with and resistant to them. Master narratives, bound up with power and hegemony as they are, cannot close down meaning, though each ‘attempts to naturalize what is, at bottom, an ideological stance.’ (Rimmon-Keenan, 2006:12). The personal counter-narrative perhaps enables a dis-identification with school as an institution for the reproduction of inequalities (though it cannot escape it), while at the same time enabling identification with a counter-narrative of education as having transformative power. We learn to narrate from the outside and our narratives are shaped by the contested sites of the grander narratives or discourses we are subject to. These narratives constitute a site of struggle in which we wrestle with the apparently contradictory nature of these forces and construct for ourselves personal narratives which constitute our identification within these discourses. Thus Roddy talks about giving pupils a better experience ie. education as transformation; and also about beating the system by becoming a part of the repressive apparatus.

Concluding Remarks

Roddy's early experiences of educational failure are the resource for a potent 'creation myth' for himself as a teacher. Roddy emplots this as formatively significant leading him to want to be a teacher in order to provide a better

educational experience for his pupils than the one he had. Roddy's desire to 'beat the system' is a response to the inequalities inherent within the educational system which was – and in Roddy's eyes still is – set up to create failure. This is clearly an important part of Roddy's professional identity, but it contains ambivalences with respect to the master/counter-narrative of education as reproduction/transformation which also emerge in his narratives of practice (Watson, 2006). Thus, Roddy regards himself as subversive within the system, and recognises the dangers of this, because, 'the school is a place that is .. for orthodox people to be working. Teachers *are meant to be* orthodox', while at the same time he draws on the authority available to him in that role.

While the narrative may be counter to the normal expectations of teachers, the redemption narrative in which, through suffering something better emerges, and through which something is given back to society, is a potent one in Western culture (McAdams, 2005). Moreover, it can be argued that the personal narrative conjures a 'usual story' in order to create a space within which the counter-story can emerge, thereby conforming to the demands of narrative structure. Indeed, the assumed 'usual story' here is hardly a narrative at all. Where is the mileage in a narrative that tells a story of a pupil who is good at school and becomes a teacher? As Kölbl (2004:31) notes, 'Do we not always tell stories which, on the one hand, take up acknowledged common cultural ends...and on the other hand challenge these ends? Otherwise our interactive contributions would come across as dull and stupid.'

However, noticeable too, is the invisibility of the processes by which we create our stories in response to the contested sites of master narratives and their counters, 'Thus we experience these selves as if they were entirely our own production. We take on the discursive practices and story lines as if they were our own and make sense of them in terms of our own particular experiences' (Davies and Harré, 1990:59). But identification is always a political process. The tensions and ambiguities in our personal narratives reflect the contested sites of bigger narratives and position us at these points. It is the impossibility of narrative closure that creates these sites of contest giving rise to an ambivalence in praxis, but it is also this that allows a sense of resistance to emerge.

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