

## **Multi Layered Narratives and Changing Identities: Making Sense of Student Experience.**

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### **Abstract**

Despite decades of research, inequalities still exist in the Australian education system, as in Western countries in general. Research into the matter has taken many directions with parents, teachers and children themselves all coming under close scrutiny (Hore and Ballantyne 2006, Darian-Smith and Factor 2005, Chin and Phillips 2004, Taylor et al 2004, Dodici et al 2003, Rowe 2003, Divine 2002, Edwards and Aldred 2002). When a child fails to thrive in the classroom cause is often sourced to an individual such as the teacher, the parent or the child itself. I suggest a narrow focus on the individual is perhaps one of the reasons for continued educational inequality and is the direct result of peoples' theories or beliefs about the 'self'.

Many people think of themselves and others as a relatively fixed 'personality', composed of characteristics that determine how they respond to life experiences, including experiences in the education system. The layman therefore comes to believe that some children are more suited to academic pursuits than others, because of their 'individual' characteristics. For example, it is not uncommon to hear a parent state that their teenager is 'not the academic type' or 'not the studying kind'. Dweck, a psychologist with an interest in motivation, found that children who held a view of themselves as a fixed personality had the tendency to give up on a task when it became difficult, yet were quite happy and motivated when tasks were easy. Their fear was one of failure and looking unintelligent and it was the very core of their being that was threatened by failure. On the other hand, there are children who are even more motivated in the face of failure because they hold a view of the self as something which is more fluid. They do not feel personally threatened by failure and see it as a greater challenge. These children grow up retaining these views of the self

and pass them on to their own children or, in the case of a teacher, their students (Dweck 2000). Taylor, C. and Polkinghorne provide histories of ideas about the self (Polkinghorne 1988, Taylor C. 1989). However, the work of Ricoeur, has offered a valuable way of thinking about the self as being a narrative identity, created in our attempts to make sense of life experience (Ricoeur 1992). Ezzy also makes the important point that people try to make sense of life events in a 'meaningful and dignified' way (Ezzy 2001)). Higgins argues that people will negotiate the 'true' account of events very often for psychological reasons ignoring more likely interpretations (Higgins et al 1999)

Ezzy states that:

'narrative identities are very much in-process and unfinished, continuously being made and remade' in accordance with interpretations of life events' (Ezzy 2001: 32).

'Self narratives are not the acts of individuals but inter-subjective creations of mutual coordination' (Ezzy 2001: 32)

Viewing the human being as someone created in the narratives of the time, at both the personal and public level; constantly being created and re-created in narrative, flows on from the long sociological/social psychological tradition of ideas stemming from Mead through to symbolic interaction and then through to present day social construction. Somer and Gibson note, however, that a narrative identity does not sit well with feminist sociology, for example, there are those who believe that women are socially conditioned and therefore can be thought of as people who can be lifted out of the social condition of their lives and exist independently. However, a narrative identity does not exist outside of the story and yet it imposes ways to act in the world and, in doing so, creates the world in which that identity is a part (Somer and Gibson in Calhoun (ed)1994). Therefore, the view of people as narrative expressions is

different from the more common view of thinking about participants in research. I concur with Somer and Gibson who state that the concept of narrative identity has ontological and epistemological implications (Somer and Gibson in Calhoun (ed)1994). I contend that people are never really sure of who they are, as history is littered with attempts to identify ‘types’ of people. Paul points out that the internet is a rich source of tests that will reveal who you really are, in exchange for a credit card number, and that a certain young man behind many of these web-sites has become very rich, financially speaking (Paul 2004). I argue that this is the result of the constantly changing aspects of the self as a narrative identity.

It has been argued by McAdams that a person needs an underlying identity to pull together all of the aspects of their life. He argues that a part of the identity of a person can be carried from one area of life into other areas (McAdams 1993). For example, the child who becomes the classroom clown entertaining his or her peers and who works on developing this identity, because it compensates for feeling shy, can then carry that aspect of identity into the workplace, where he or she becomes the office joker or the ‘life of the party’. This aspect of identity can be worked on and maintained by the individual and, perhaps, family and friends. This maintenance work takes place through story telling.

In this paper I am examining educational achievement from a view of the self as being one created through story telling, that is the ‘narrative self’ or ‘identity’ (Bruner 1986, Polkinghorne 1988, McAdams 1993, Ricoeur 2002). However, Somers and Gibson emphasise that an individual life history needs to be set in the multi-layered narratives that shape our social and political lives and that these narratives change as time passes (Somers and Gibson in Calhoun (ed) 1994).

What follows is an excerpt from a story collected as part of my data for a larger project on inequality in education. As Polkinghorne points out, there is a need to think of the self as an expression and not a set of characteristics. But he also reminds us that Ricoeur argued '*life is lived and stories are told*' (Polkinghorne 1988) (Ricoeur 2002). In other words, we are not merely a storied text; we experience life and make sense of those experiences in narrative form. What is more, Ricoeur saw that we are embodied creatures, something that we share with the rest of the animal kingdom. In recognising and acknowledging this fact, Ricoeur opened up an avenue for discussion with the physical sciences, such as neurology for example, and this avenue of discussion may become increasingly more important as the 21<sup>st</sup> century moves on.

The story of George, a middle aged man looking back and reflecting on his experiences with the education system in the 1950s and 1960s and his life that followed on from those early experiences, makes for an interesting study. However, while George was flesh and blood, his narrative identity only lives on as long as the story is told and this is very different from more traditional qualitative thought where a participant in research exists in his own right, regardless of the story gathered from the participant that is then re-interpreted by the researcher.

While people are free to tell whatever stories they feel worth telling, they are still constrained in their choice of theme and plot by the world around them. In this respect, Hore and Ballantyne reported findings on the early stage of research into peoples' experiences in formal educational settings and found that parents tell stories of their own experiences that will influence in complex ways how their child will interpret life experiences in the stories they themselves will tell (Hore and Ballantyne 2006).

Many people to-day recognise that formal education is a pathway to higher paid jobs, greater financial comfort, job satisfaction and, perhaps, a higher social standing. Yet, it is still the case that not every child has an equal chance in the education stakes, as success is still inter-generational in nature and follows socio-economic lines. George came from a low socio-economic background and from a single parent family. However, he beat the odds and eventually went on to obtain a university education and was privileged to watch his daughter and son gain high levels of tertiary education. By studying George's experience and particularly listening to his story; making sense of his experiences in growing up on a housing commission estate and attending the local technical school with many other disadvantaged youth, it is possible to see how George, while still constrained by social structures, political and social conditions and historical influences on the culture into which he was born, was able to break the generational and socio-economic chain. To do this requires a sociological imagination and the ability to move from the psychological to the social, or the private to the public, and back again with ease.

George decided to study bio-chemistry but many of the other boys from the housing commission estate left school at the end of years nine or ten. George was perhaps fortunate to have had an influential politician for an uncle and that uncle sat on the school council where he would have been able, during informal as well as formal chats with fellow members, to narrate positive stories about his young nephew, ensuring a likeable narrative identity for his nephew while at the same time discouraging stories that he might perhaps think as mis-representing his nephew's identity. This is not to suggest that simple stories make the person, but rather emphasises that all children need someone who can represent and stand up to tell

positive stories with positive identities about them that the child can incorporate into its own stories.

Unfortunately, some parents because of their own negative stories cannot confront the teacher and act as their child's representative. It is not all children who are fortunate enough to have someone with the ability and authority to tell positive stories and help create successful, confident student identities. What is more, to then help maintain those identities through positive narratives. My own experience taught me that anyone can instil in a child a positive narrative identity, it does not have to be a family member. A teacher for example, can have a very positive impact on a child's stories about him or her self.

George was clearly able to tell positive stories about school and felt good about himself as a student. His story went on to reveal he had gained a scholarship to senior technical college where he commenced a diploma in bio-chemistry but failed his major subject and consequently lost government funding. He pointed out that money was tight at home (as was the case in most homes in the housing commission estate where George lived with his mother and siblings) and so he was forced to leave school and find employment. We can think of George as being in a position whereby he could no longer tell his story as the narrative identity of a student. He was forced to assume another identity and act accordingly. In other words, because of the structure of the education system at the time and local and wider economic conditions, many young people were restricted in the stories they could draw upon.

People are not free to choose any story they wish and Ricoeur recognised this in his early work. Ricoeur (1992) saw a tension between freedom and constraint and George's story exemplifies this. George was forced to re-write his ambitions and notion of himself which, in turn, dictated how he would act in the world. His story is

an example of the hermeneutical circle Ricoeur saw so clearly. It permits moving from the complexity of the macro world to the complexity of the individual and back again with a degree of ease missing in many qualitative approaches.

George was living at a period in history when young men were being called up to do time in the army, the story being one of '*service to the nation*' from the middle 1960s to 1972. National Service was abolished in Australia in 1972 as one of the first acts of the brief Whitlam government. Prior to its abolishment, young men could be called to do compulsory time in the army and as Australian armed forces were actively involved at the time in the Vietnam War, young men undertaking their National Service had every chance of being expected to actively engage in that war.

On the surface, all seemed fair and above board as every young man had an equal chance of being called up because it was simply the result of a ballot. However, on closer inspection, if a young man happened to be from a low socio-economic background he had a higher probability of ending up in jungle greens and carrying a gun. The working class youth then, as now, were not well represented in tertiary institutions and were much more likely to leave school at an earlier age, making returning to education much more difficult. National Service could also be deferred indefinitely if a young man was studying at a recognised educational institution and almost all of the young men in Australian universities were comfortably middle class young people. So, working class young men found themselves in a public narrative with the theme of '*service to the nation*', a narrative that arose in response to the experience of war in the living memory of many people, including those in power.

The higher socio-economic young men in universities or other tertiary institutions were not caught up in this particular narrative and could choose an alternative. The class structure was such that middle class and working class youth came to tell very

different stories for this period in their lives. The young working class men also had alternative narratives, but they were far from being good stories in that they had the option of conscientiously objecting to entering the army which would have resulted in two years in gaol. Very different personal and public narratives and narrative identities would consequently have resulted for these young men. Most young men at this time simply accepted the public narrative identity 'soldier' rather than 'jail bird' and acted accordingly, given the time and place. Their higher socio-economic peers could also consciously object to the war but, because they were caught in a very different public narrative around the theme of 'the meritocracy of education', their action as a result of objection was to march in the streets of the city, a far cry from two years in gaol.

George was one young man called to do National Service in Australia during the Vietnam War years. George did seem to have come out of the education system with a positive sense of himself as a student and he held a strong belief in a work ethic, which he claimed to have picked up from his mother and had been reinforced in his life as a result of losing his scholarship due to spending too much time in the student recreational area (hence his belief in students taking a gap year between school and tertiary study).

George's story reveals that he was able to create a positive identity for himself in the way he interpreted his failure in the education system. Another young student may have made sense of such an experience in a very different way to George and it may not have had a positive impact because they would have a very different bank of stories to draw upon. Somer and Gibson note that just because two people share the same narrative identity, in the present case the identity of student, it does not mean

that they will interpret life experiences and tell similar stories (Somer and Gibson in Calhoun (ed)1994).

George was experiencing changing times and different stories were emerging with the end of the Vietnam War era as he re-entered the workforce and he claimed he became aware that a university education was becoming more important for career purposes in his area of employment. Clearly, these changes noted by George at the time reflected changes in social regimes such as the class structure, political thought, ideologies, the education system, family structure, the workforce, and re-interpretations of history.

George applied to study at university part-time and this was made possible by changing educational structures, partly in response to the narratives stemming from researchers regarding inequality and the theme of merit in education. However, there was also a greater need for more highly educated people in the workforce that was a major factor aided by stories at the political level of '*Australia - the Clever Country*' filtering down to the aspiring classes. Adult education and mature age entry into universities offered many people disadvantaged in their youth the opportunity to gain an education; but their personal stories needed to permit them the confidence to have a go.

To-day, governments and educators (among others) are concerned to promote 'life long learning' in the face of rapidly changing work places in a rapidly changing world. The challenge will be to allow every child to grow up believing in themselves and telling positive experiences of themselves in an educational setting, much as George was able to do despite the class structure and living in comparative poverty as a child.

George was asked to sum up his belief about educational success and he responded with two simple points – believing in your own ability and recognising that it takes

effort. To this, one must also add ‘opportunity’, permitted by the right social and cultural milieu, wider social structures, historical influences, and, hopefully, an embracing of the ideals of social equality in the stories we tell. However, in an expanding world of capitalism, global and national economies will no doubt be important factors shaping social structures such as the education system, thereby influencing the lives of children, their educational experiences, their narratives with plot lines, themes of romance, tragedy, humour and so forth and, of course, their narrative identities.

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