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‘Teachers are meant to be orthodox’: narrative and counter narrative in the discursive construction of ‘identity’ in teaching¹

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Narratives are important to us not only or even primarily because they tell about our past lives, but because they enable us to make sense of the present. We attempt to create coherence and give meaning to our lives by learning to read time backwards. This paper examines a counter narrative of entry into the teaching profession showing how the construction of one teacher’s identity is presented as a biographical narrative that he assumes to be at odds with an ‘orthodox’ narrative of becoming a teacher. The paper offers an interpretation of the personal narrative, told as counter to an assumed ‘orthodox’ story of entry into teaching. It also examines the relationship between the personal narrative and the contested site of the master narrative and its counter as the point at which the individual both positions themselves and is positioned within the discourse of teaching.

Keywords: narrative; counter narrative; identity; professional identity; institutional identity; transcription

Narrative, counter narrative, and identity

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 such master narratives and represents a potentially subversive strategic positioning of self. Bamberg (2005, 287) defines a master narrative as a ‘pre-existent sociocultural form of representation’ intended to ‘delineate and confine local interpretation strategies and agency constellations in individual subjects as well as social institutions.’ While originally applied by Lyotard (1984) to the all-encompassing narratives of projects such as the Enlightenment and Science, Bamberg (2005, 288) argues that in the postmodern era ‘the term master narrative has been extended to all sorts of legitimization strategies for the preservation of the status quo with regard to power relations and difference in general.’ Defined in this way master narrative can be likened to hegemonic discourse, in which elements of the discursive field are disposed in a particular way in order to tell a particular story.

McQuillan (2000) regards the production of counter narratives as a necessary condition of narrativity. Since the generative narrative matrix is itself structured like a narrative and since narrative is, as Todorov (1971, 111) tells us, an unstable structure which ‘consists in the passage from one equilibrium to another’ it follows that ‘the

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contest between narrative and counter narrative is in fact the very action which structures the narrative matrix' (McQuillan 2000, 23). It also follows from this that every narrative is also a counter narrative and therefore the direction of the relationship between the narrative and its counter is an effect of power. The narrative and its counter create a site of contest, but should not be thought of as binary opposites. Rather McQuillan (2000) argues 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 as 'activities that go hand in hand' (Bamberg 2004, 353).

At a personal level, narratives are important to us not only or even primarily because they tell about our past lives but because they enable us to make sense of the present. In this way 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 our personal narratives create the illusion of a continuing core of 'I,' giving rise, as Pynchon (1975 [1963], 306) says, to 'the fiction of continuity, the fiction of cause and effect, the fiction of a humanized history endowed with 'reason'.' Yet the illusory character of this continuity is sometimes evident when we look at old photographs uncomprehending or think about the past as a 'foreign country' where they do things differently (Hartley 2004 [1953], 1). As Currie (1998) says, we learn how to narrate from the outside. Narratives at large teach us how to organize experience and how to conceive of ourselves. In this way, the structure and content of our personal narratives can be seen to conform to familiar cultural and literary narratives. In the telling of our personal narratives we draw on these familiar storylines almost as templates, making sense of our lives and giving meaning to the vicissitudes of existence, in which form they give rise to the sense of an ending (Kermode 1966). This sense of self emerges as the result of identification, as an imaginary metaphysics of presence, arising out of our interpellation, as Althusser (1971) puts it, into subject positions within discourses. The narrative performance of this relational link constitutes the process of 'identification' (Watson 2006a). Identity is thus played out as the performance of self, which creates the 'illusion of an interior and organising ... core' as the outcome of the processes through which we identify (Butler 1990, 337).

In this way 'identity' can be understood as the product of attachment to available subject positions within the discursive field. As Mouffe (1992, 2) says:

The social agent is constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation but a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement. The 'identity' of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious, temporarily fixed at the intersection of those subject positions and dependent on specific forms of identification.

In this theoretical framework, as expounded by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), political forces attempt to impose closure and so achieve control, limiting subject positions for

identification within discourse. The effect of power in all this is to establish control in order to articulate the elements of the field in a particular way and hence to fix meaning around a 'nodal point', though this can only ever be partial. In Lacanian terms this nodal point is a *point-de-capiton*, a quilting point, 'a signifier which stops the otherwise endless movement of signification' (Lacan, quoted in Stavrakakis 1999, 59). The impossibility of complete closure renders the discursive field open to multiple meanings among competing discourses but hegemony is achieved when forces are able to articulate and stabilize the discursive field through 'articulating as many available elements – floating signifiers – as possible' (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 15). In this way, a 'professional identity' can be theorized as arising in the subject positions available within a specific historically and socially situated dominant articulation of the discursive field. In order to perform a 'professional identity' the subject must be positioned within this articulation. However, Laclau and Mouffe also discuss the concepts of antagonism and dislocation as the means by which discursive articulations are disrupted and reformed in new ways to give new meanings as the result of political subjectivity, the basis for agency and resistance. In this way we both simultaneously and aporetically situate ourselves, and are positioned through interpellatory processes into professional discourses. It is the inherent inability of the discursive field to achieve fixity of meaning which gives rise to contested sites within discourses.

This paper concerns Roddy's personal narrative of entry into the teaching profession, presented as a counter narrative that he assumes to be at odds with what he calls an 'orthodox' narrative of becoming a teacher but which nevertheless conforms to a familiar Western cultural narrative, i.e., 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, in fact a story uncommonly told by teachers (see, e.g., Karpiak 2006). (My own narrative of becoming a teacher is very similar.) In this way our personal narratives can be seen to conform to recognizable narratives 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 which is related to the ideological function of master/counter narratives in educational discourses. The personal narrative occupies the contested site of two key narratives in educational discourse viz. education as instrument of oppression and education as means for transformation (Ross 2000). The narrative turns on the ambivalence that this gives rise to. The aim of the paper is to explore these twin aspects of the narrative. Firstly, it offers my reading of Roddy's personal narrative, told as counter to an assumed 'orthodox' story of entry into teaching; secondly, it examines Roddy's narrative as the relational link constituting identification with subject positions within discourses of education, showing how the contested sites of these educational discourses give rise to ambivalence in the discursive construction of an identity in teaching.

Research context

The auto/biographical narrative extracts presented here are based on an interview I held with Roddy which formed part of my doctoral research on institutional

identifications. This research was an autoethnographic study examining the production of texts which performatively position me as a researcher within the academy (Watson 2007). As part of this performance of self I conducted research with teachers about *their* institutional identities, and this interview was conducted as part of that process. Roddy, who I had previously met while tutoring a course in which he was a participant, teaches English in a rural secondary school and has done so for over 20 years. In this interview I first gathered some autobiographical information about his own experiences as a learner before asking him about his current practice, in order to get a sense of his personal narrative of becoming a teacher – his ‘creation myth’ if you like – and it is this section of the interview I focus on in this paper and which I have transcribed in stanza form.

All transcription is a translation. There is a tendency to regard the transcript as inferior somehow to the ‘real’ situation of the interview, seeing it as rather sad and lifeless, with all the vibrancy bleached out. However, the transcript should instead be treated as an opportunity to disrupt the problematic notion of ‘data’ as representational metonym. In this paper I have transformed the transcript into stanzas, not altering the order of the words as they were spoken, but cutting out bits. The purpose of this is not to ‘boil’ the narrative ‘into core meanings, rendering their essence’ as Poindexter (2002, 70) suggests. Rather, it is the opposite, to convey the complexity contained within the narrative, to expose the intertextuality of the text – opening up the connection to other narratives and allowing the ‘semantic vibration’ of the text (Barthes 1981). Richardson (1993, 695) suggests that poetic representations may enable us to see ‘beyond sociological naturalisms.’ Langer and Furman (2004, 15) argue that ‘the condensed form of the research poem leads to a more powerful presentation of data’ and that ‘the research poem may be useful when the researcher wishes to present the subject’s voice as the primary transmitter of data, yet wishes to present this data in compressed form’ (Langer and Furman 2004, 19). In other words there are pragmatic as well as aesthetic and rhetorical reasons for presenting the data in this form. It is true, however, that rendering the transcript in this fashion means it is no longer available for analysis in terms of the ‘how’ it has been said. Instead, it has to be analyzed more as a literary text, recognizing that all texts ‘contain within them the ideological structure and struggles expressed in society through discourse’ (Allen 2000, 36).

Reissman (1993, 45) defines a stanza as ‘a series of lines on a single topic that have a parallel structure and sound as if they go together by tending to be said at the same rate and with little hesitation between the lines.’ In identifying stanzas I have not gone down the structural linguistic route of Gee (1997), but instead, as Langer and Furman (2004, 9) do I rely on ‘the sense of the data for the creation of lines and stanzas.’ In order to allow the reader to make some kind of judgment about this process I have presented an extract from the first ‘rough transcript’ followed by the stanza form. (Deletions in the transcript are indicated by /.)

Rough transcript

Cate: Perhaps if I could just start off with asking about yourself as a learner, what was school like for you? Take as long as you like and start where you like.

Roddy: Right. Before talking about school I think the most important learning experience now at 57 years old is my childhood, which was strange to say the least. Um how,

you would describe it is, as a child I was bad, in actual fact that was how I viewed myself. It's very complex, it has to do with my parents and their religious beliefs. And it has to do, and I did not realize this, until I was about 48–49 years old exactly what had been going on. 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 I know that by looking at his bookshelves later on, you know John Ruskin and stuff like that 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.

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 the first three stanzas Roddy grounds an identity claim as being different in his early childhood experiences, straight off challenging a master narrative of childhood innocence: 'as a child I was bad.' The next line 'it has to do with my parents and their religious beliefs' condenses a range of narrative positions surrounding parenthood, religion, and other narratives about the natural wickedness of children that reverberate unspoken in the text. The stanza ends with the hauntingly tragi-comic line 'He was run over by a bus.' This scene setting is alluded to in the next stanza with the juxtaposition of 'Greek' and 'tragedy' which emphasize the familial tensions played out in response to the events. How this blighted his parents' lives is brought out in the line 'the loss of the son,' which I have transcribed as 'son' but which could also be read as referring to a metaphoric darkness descending, with 'the loss of the sun.'

The narrative resists closure. Instead the intertextual references to a number of recognizable narratives open 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 in stories from the Brothers Grimm to Brönte, Dickens, and beyond. 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/*

Religion is presented as a source of madness: the intelligent, rational, well-read parents unhinged by their tragic loss turn to religion. 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 who have become Jehovah's Witnesses, an explanation which, however, remains largely unexplained. Roddy fills this gap with not being Jack. Roddy reflects on this stage of his life using 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 currently salient identity as being different from other teachers in these early childhood experiences (see Watson 2006b). 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 in a way that evokes for me the young Jane Eyre being humiliated in front of the other pupils (Brönte 1953 [1847]). Roddy's experience of secondary school evokes another narrative familiar from literature, one portrayed vividly in Tom Brown's Schooldays (Hughes 1999 [1905]), with Roddy being 'bullied stupid' by staff and pupils until a glimpse of redemption is offered in his final term in the form of a kindly teacher who takes an interest in him, as the following stanzas show:

*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 fairy tales such as Cinderella onwards. Although Roddy says 'it was far too late by that time' this is represented as a turning point, one of several in the narrative. Ochs and Capps (2001, 224) suggest that individuals 'who recount turning point experiences cast themselves

in transition from one cultural image to another,' as is shown in following stanzas as Roddy leaves school:

*Then I left school/
was married when I was 17
(got away from my father)
and went through a period of just sort of laboring 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/*

A rather unexpected turn in the narrative sees Roddy starting to take an interest in poetry and 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 savior in the narrative, rescuing Roddy from his father (and, as Roddy later makes clear, from his sinful self), as well as being the agent through whom he is able to grasp salvation in the form of education.

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 *chairo*s, time as opportunity to be grasped, a key feature of narrative. But, it also introduces a note of tension into the narrative – ‘I will take it *this* time.’ Implying perhaps that previous opportunities have been missed. 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 where he and Vi have come from – this is what education has delivered them from. Roddy’s positioning of self as different creates a distance between himself and his colleagues.

The final group of stanzas deals with university. The historical situatedness of these stanzas is important. The 1970s was a politically unstable period in British history from which Thatcherism² emerged. Teacher training institutions were reckoned, at least by the incoming Conservative government, to be hotbeds of radicalism.

It was this perception of a Marxist infiltration of schools that Thatcher was concerned to root out, paving the way for today's centralized control and managerialist discourses of education. This experience was clearly formative for Roddy.

*University was the strangest thing.
I wandered about there for three and a half, four years
saying 'what the hell am I doing here?'*

At this point Roddy paused and then 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. (Though I have always wondered to what extent this was aimed at me – did Roddy see me, not as I saw myself, a kindred spirit who had also failed at school and overcome adversity to end up where I was – but instead as the very epitome of the middle class teacher, a mainstay of the system he was determined to beat?) But Roddy is beating the system by joining it – the ambivalence between sameness and difference emerges again. He then goes on:

*The actual university course it was absolutely fantastic
the education side of it
because what happened was the majority of students
the first year was spent basically destroying their preconceptions of what school
was
they were all successful at school
on the other hand/
in my case
it was a confirmation of what I'd begun to think about school and schools/*

*In the main
in the main they were younger
but even the older ones there
were very very middle class
they were from the housing estates up the road
and they were coming to do education*

*They came into the university
and I was the only one
In fact I remember one of my lecturers
I forget his name
he said that people from my particular environment
the odds were about 1 in every 32,000*

*he'd been working on this
little things like that stick in your head /*

Roddy positions himself as different from his fellow students, 'I was the only one,' constructing the other students as being mainly younger, 'very, very middle class' and 'from the housing estates up the road.' 'Housing estates' does not perhaps convey an idea of being 'very very middle class.' Perhaps this emphasizes just how different Roddy was from them. Crucially, Roddy positions these others as being successful at school – the key driving force for Roddy's narrative of difference. They were successful at *school*, but they came to the university 'to do education'. Indeed, they needed to have their cosy illusions about school destroyed in order to see school as it really is, as Roddy, through his experience *knows it*, in order to do education. These are the successful products of the system that failed Roddy. They are likely to perpetuate its values and therefore they need to have their 'illusions' destroyed. A Marxist notion of ideology as false consciousness is evoked in these stanzas. Roddy creates a sense of objectivity in relation to being different by quoting his tutor who says the chances of someone like Roddy getting to University are one in 32,000. Roddy has triumphed against those odds. This part of the narrative relates to the contested site of a key narrative and counter narrative in education viz., education as reproduction of social structures and education as social transformation (Ross 2000). The narrative is constructed around this ambivalence at the heart of educational discourses.

Another question again prompts an evaluation:

But if you can point to one thing that happened to you that you say – that was important in terms of my development as a good teacher – is there something that you actually...

*One thing?
Failure at secondary school
leaving and walking out the gate of that school
having had the most miserable experience under the sun
I used to dream of being made a foreman or a charge hand
I used to dream of maybe getting an 'O'Grade
it was a dream
total impossibility for someone like me*

*And it was that sense of failure
I had a view of myself as a bad person
(until I met my wife that was)
and it was that badness that I felt about myself
that sense of guilt and failure that was the driving force
of everything that came after it
there's nothing nothing surer than that*

Narrative, discourse, and identity

It is not only the content of Roddy's narrative which draws on or evokes familiar cultural narratives – but also the form of it too. Narratives seek to impose order on chaos, but narratives also seek to undermine that order. It is the unexpected, the twist, from which narrative emerges, 'from collision, from the contradiction of structures

which displace one another' as Propp (2000 [1944], 61) says. The unexpected emerges in the form of 'turning points' in the narrative. According to Mishler (1999) turning points are often characterized as having arisen by chance, of not being planned. This is also the case in Roddy's narrative. What might be characterized as an overall narrative of progress, triumph over adversity, is marked by discontinuities. While traditional theories of identity construction have, according to Mishler (1999, 61), focused on the necessity of producing coherence, actual narratives highlight these nodal points:

The frequency [of these discontinuities] is certainly more than we would expect if we think of identity formation as a progressive development from childhood to adulthood, and of personal narratives as functioning primarily to provide a sense of continuity by reframing and smoothing over the impact of discontinuities and disruptive events.

However, if narrative is itself defined as being suspended between the expected and the unexpected, a process of destabilization and re-establishment of equilibrium, as Todorov (1971) and Propp (2000 [1944], 61) suggest, then such discontinuities would be demanded of our narrative constructions of self. This raises questions about the function of narratives in organizing our lives. Narratives contain an inherent instability. A narrative imposes order, but that order is always threatened. So, when we tell our narratives there is a conflict between a desire to make sense of our lives and impose closure and the desire to highlight the place of chance which undermines that very coherence and rationality.

From the outset, Roddy is setting up his narrative as counter to a narrative which he assumes says that most 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 an expectation that teachers were good at school, it draws on a familiar cultural story-line. Overall, the narrative conforms to probably the most potent and pervasive of all Western cultural narratives: redemption from sin. Redemption features in each of the turning points: in Roddy's final year of school a new teacher appears who recognizes his potential, Vi rescues Roddy from his sinful self, and education saves them both from poverty.

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 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 narrative arises within the contested site of educational discourse reproducing the aporetic ambivalence of this contest in which Roddy identifies with a narrative of education as having transformative power yet he cannot escape an identification with school as an institution for the reproduction of inequalities. 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, as teachers, wrestle with the apparently contradictory, but in effect aporetic 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, i.e., 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 aspect of Roddy's narration of self as a teacher, but it contains ambivalences with respect to the master/counter narrative of education as reproduction/transformation which also emerge later in the interview in his narratives of practice (Watson 2006b). Thus, Roddy regards himself as subversive within the system, and recognizes the dangers of this, because as he says, 'the school is a place that is ... for orthodox people to be working. Teachers *are meant to be* orthodox,' yet at the same time he draws on the authority available to him in that role.

While Roddy may feel his narrative runs 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 or hegemonic discourses 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.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper appeared in *Narrative and Memory*, 2007 (ed. D. Robinson, N. Kelly, and K. Milnes), the collected papers of the 6th one-day conference hosted by the Narrative and Memory Research Group, University of Huddersfield.
2. Derived from Margaret Thatcher, Neoliberal British Premier, 1979–1990.

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