

# The Person Who Teaches? Narrative Identity and Teachers' Experience at an International Conference

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**ABSTRACT** This article reflects on an approach designed to facilitate teachers' learning through responsive narratives. Analysing participants' interaction during a case study of an international conference, we highlight the significance of teachers engaging directly with each other's life stories and using their own voices to re-shape their professional-personal identity, especially with regard to renegotiating what it means to be a teacher.

## **Introduction**

Teachers' professional development is seen as important in educational innovation. However, when professional development is planned for teachers, it often takes the form of being told about or shown good practice (or even 'best practice') that they might appropriate and implement in their own settings. Sometimes it includes a practical element of simulating classroom activities. Yet it rarely involves critical reflection on practice, or opportunities to engage with educational theory. Even less frequently does it look beyond a cognitive agenda to consider the wider aspects of what it means to be a teacher.

Some authors have argued for a much more holistic approach to teachers' development (e.g. Little, 1994; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). Professional development activities would ideally engage teachers both professionally and personally, implicating those issues beyond the classroom that are fundamental to teachers' identity and practices. Such professional development would concern itself with the premises that underlie actions, articulating with teachers' educational values and worldviews, and involve reflecting on the cultures in which they work, their social positioning, personal interpretations of life and learning, and sense of identity. Goodson (1981, p. 69) writes that 'in understanding something so intensely personal as teaching, it is critical we know about the person the teacher is'.

Teachers' learning and development can be brought together by using narrative and life histories as a catalyst for reflecting, critiquing, re-visioning and becoming (Ritchie & Wilson, 2000). Goodson & Sikes (2001, p. 71) echo this view:

Professional work cannot and should not be divorced from the lives of professionals. ... Life history studies have the capacity to transform the content of analyses of professional practices. Once professional practice is located within a whole-life perspective, it has the capacity to transform our accounts and our understanding.

Therefore, the construction of teachers' professional identity is inextricable from their sense of self; and when teachers are given the opportunity to narrate life stories of teaching and learning, they can and will re-construct and re-negotiate their sense of self.

### **Teachers' Identity and Narrative**

Recent work has highlighted the fact that within the complex societies that we inhabit, identity should not be seen as unitary and fixed but as shifting and constantly re-performed in the different contexts that make up our lives. For Hall (2000, p. 19), 'identities are ... points of temporary attachment to the subject positions that discursive practices construct for us all'; and for McGuigan (1999, p. 103), identity can be understood as 'a multi-accentual concept, mediating self and history in many complex ways, [where one is] constantly in process of becoming and increasingly hybrid'.

Identity and personal biography are inter-related. Bruner (1996) views narrative as a mode of thinking fundamental for articulating lived human experience, and Polkinghorne (1988, p. 150) argues that 'we achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative'. Teachers' personal narrative therefore becomes particularly relevant and important for establishing their pedagogical approach and professional identity. Narratives unfold not only a person's individual character but also their social character. Hence a teacher's narrative amounts to more than simply telling stories; it has significance for how they pursue a vision of education as professionals. Indeed, a recent strand of thinking and practice in teacher education places narrative in a core position both as an approach and as the object of teachers' personal inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

We are concerned with questions such as: How do teachers use stories to reflect on lives, personal values and educational beliefs? Can personal narratives help teachers to theorise practices, and to understand better the learning and growth by themselves and by their students? Although biographical research opens up new ways of understanding what it means to be a teacher, and allows exploration of the relationship between teachers' personal experiences and their professional practices, there is a danger that if teachers speak to each other only through researchers' representations it is merely about researchers' questions and

research agenda. Life histories and narrative inquiry as an intervention form a strategy that can empower individual teachers to make sense of their personal knowledge of life and work, and potentially transform their understanding of personal identity and educational practices (Josselson, 1996). It can be a journey of self-discovery and professional development through critical reflection and meaning-making. The risk of a focus on teachers' personal narrative and personal knowledge of practice is a detachment from its connection with theoretical, cultural, historical and contextual arenas of teaching and learning. The challenge is to link the personal and localised narratives with the 'bigger pictures' (Hargreaves, 1999).

In this context, we propose an approach where teachers can work as or like researchers and directly inquire into each other's stories of personal and professional experiences. From a theoretical point of view, narrative inquiry provides opportunities for teachers to explore and understand how different social, cultural, historical and personal factors influence their educational values and practices and their personal and professional identity. The objective is to help teachers co-construct meaning, socially and dialogically (Bruner, 1996). In this approach, in response to a text which prompts and provides theoretical resources for framing their stories, teachers share personal lived experience and attend to that of others at the same time. At the core of this process is the notion of the dialogic self which points to the significance of interaction and collaborative interpretation in human inquiry as a social process of shared meaning-making. This approach underpinned the case study we discuss below.

### **The Case Study**

The case study is of a three-day international conference on human-centred education (HCE) held in July 2005. It was attended by 50 teachers from 30 schools and educational projects from 20 countries in Europe, America, Asia and Africa. These teachers share similar values and educational ideals, characterised by a commitment to curricula and pedagogies that see education as more than a cognitive enterprise. HCE emphasises holistic aspects of learning and experience and the goal of education as enabling human flourishing and the development of each individual's full potential.

These educational projects developed in very different contexts, and their interpretation of HCE arises from diverse principles, resulting in very different approaches to teaching and learning. They have in common that they are seen as alternative to mainstream education, either because parents reject what is on offer from the state or, in some cases (e.g. schools for marginalised communities in DR Congo and Colombia), because there is no mainstream schooling on offer to their students.

The conference, designed and organised by the authors of this article, was sponsored by the Guerrand-Hermès Foundation. It was a response to teachers' expressed need to share their experiences and learn from each other. The goal was to construct a space that would enable teachers to be exposed to recent

research in HCE, engage with each other's practices and, above all, respond by sharing personal narratives of lived experience through interaction, dialogue and experiential learning. The framework for discussion included the following:

- *Pre-conference sharing.* Before the conference, participating teachers were invited to write a short piece describing their personal background, a profile of their school/project, why they were interested in participating in the conference and what they expected to bring home with them. These articles were published on the conference's website.
- *Research presentation and dialogue with speakers.* Each morning two speakers presented their research projects, exploring some aspects relevant to HCE. They would then be joined by a discussant to form a panel for questions, dialogue and discussions with participating teachers. All speakers were academic researchers and well-known scholars.
- *Experiential workshops.* The afternoons saw parallel experiential workshops run by participating teachers. Each one-hour workshop was interactive and experiential, exploring in-depth diverse approaches to HCE.
- *Small group discussions.* Small groups provided a vehicle for focused interaction and discussion in response to presentations and workshops. Each small group had 6-8 teachers and was led a facilitator. One and a half hours of small-group work in the morning was followed by two and a half hours in the afternoon. Teachers stayed in the same group throughout the day's discussions. The following day they re-formed into different groups. This was designed to encourage an ongoing element of 'story-telling' – that is, a short response from each teacher about their personal background, educational values, principles underpinning their practices and a profile of their school/project. Story-telling also triggered responsive narratives and free and open-ended conversations.
- *Open spaces.* The evenings were kept as an open space for participant-initiated discussions, forums and workshops. Those teachers who did not get a chance to run a workshop in the afternoon used the evenings to present their work.
- *Reflexivity.* On the last afternoon, teachers worked individually or in a team to reflect on key learning during the conference and what they planned to take back home with them. Participants presented their reflections on posters and shared perspectives and understanding. After the conference, all participating teachers were invited to write their reflection on the overall conference experience and what effect it had on their lives and work.

As organisers and researchers, our central focus was on understanding the nature of interaction amongst participating teachers. We explored the conference's effect on teachers' perceptions of self, teaching, educational visions, values and world views and how they had translated them into teaching practices. We participated in all conference activities, observed teachers' interaction, and interviewed and had extended conversations with 10 teachers as key informants. The interview transcripts, our own field notes, and various written

contributions from teachers before, during and after the conference, formed our data-set.

### **Initial Arguments**

According to participants' reflection, the conference facilitated the teachers' stories – the voice of the person who teaches, mixing with the voices of those in the teachers' stories, including parents, children and other social agents. Teachers talked about their own experiences, including their own schooling and education, their decision to become a teacher, their educational visions, values and practices. The myriad stories provided profound insights into what it means to be a teacher-as-person (Goodson, 2003).

The analysis of these data is ongoing, but in this article we offer some initial arguments for readers to engage with. We chose a number of key informants' comments and reflections to support these arguments. All names are anonymised.

### *Understanding the Whole Premises of Teaching*

The structure of the conference provided opportunities for teachers to explore the premises that underpin their practices. According to the participating teachers, attending to researchers' findings and going to theorisation and experiential workshops were useful because they had the chance to see that there may be better approaches to teaching and learning. This was illuminating for some teachers, although a majority pointed out that it was impossible to transfer the good practices in one research project or one school directly to another, particularly when they are working in very different situations. Raymond, a teacher and teacher trainer in Hawaii, reflected:

For me, application is always an organic activity from inside out, not the implementation of ideas and practices from the outside in. I find it paradoxical to question how we can appropriate the fruits of others' practices and somehow graft them onto ourselves. It is like asking: should a pear tree try to become a peach tree and vice versa. But it had helped me to know in a more active way what kind of tree we are and encouraged me to strive to bring forth good fruit according to our respective kind.

According to Raymond, what was truly illuminating was that through engaging with other teachers' experiences and practices, it confirmed and, to some extent changed, his own understanding of whole premises of teaching. Laura, a teacher from Portugal, explained:

I now have a new awareness of what I do, how I do it, and why. The conference helped me find words to describe it too. It has strengthened my understanding and reinforced the direction of my

approach in setting up and teaching my courses and in relating to my students.

Understanding of what underpins teaching also ensued from reflecting on the difference between mainstream and human-centred education. Luis from Brazil, working with women who were offenders, reflected:

Participants at the conference helped me understand how disempowering formal education system could be. For the women I work with, formal education often provides knowledge and information that are not necessarily relevant to their experience of abuses, poverty and despair. In this sense, education that is more human-centred can address these women's unique needs as well as help them develop attitudes and skills to move forward from their own situations.

In these cases, storytelling had enabled teachers to empathise with each other whilst at the same time underlining the ways in which they differed, thus bringing into relief their own premises as teachers.

#### *Attitudes Towards Experts' Input*

Researchers and academic scholars at the conference represented 'authoritative voices' and were regarded as 'experts' in education. Most teachers seemed to find the experts' presentation useful in confirming and articulating their own approaches and understanding.

However, some teachers also had conflicting attitudes towards these experts' input. Ute, a teacher working in an alternative school in Germany, valued research knowledge, and said that the experts 'provided a new set of vocabulary and new expressions, which add some dimension to our understanding of what we are doing'. Internalising authoritative voices was particularly challenging for Ute because she had to translate for her colleague Steffi, whose English was not so fluent. Ute explained that interpreting itself was a process of re-articulating and further understanding:

In order to interpret theories into something tangible, I must make sense of my understanding of the speakers. It can be quite frustrating because I have yet to find the words in German to articulate that understanding.

Yet Ute also reflected that she would perhaps prefer to spend even more time on small group discussions and sharing personal narratives and practices, saying: 'Practical examples of classroom experiences and teachers' stories must also be used to [inform] educational theories and research.'

This ambivalent attitude suggests that although the activities led by 'experts' provided useful ways of structuring small group work, it was the teachers' response to these activities that she valued rather than the experts'

texts themselves. Moreover, for her, there was a tension between the experts' authoritative voice and teachers' own voices.

### *A Shift of Focus*

Analyses of teachers' interaction and narrative at the conference point to a shift from seeing teachers' professional learning as acquiring knowledge and skills to exploring the question of what it means to be and to become a teacher. This came about because during the conference, teachers engaged with what others had done, explored why they had done it, and reflected on their own situations.

Uli is a teacher/founder of a well-established alternative school in Austria. She told us that attending to other teachers' narratives about lives and teaching was a profound experience for her. According to Uli, each story portrayed a unique journey of being and becoming a teacher. Each time she encountered others' journeys, she became more aware of her own, and of the different factors that had impacted on her own values, beliefs and what kind of teacher she is.

Sally, from England, identified her own transformed self-understanding through engaging in personal stories:

Strange enough, although I meant to give the same introduction about myself and our school, I can't decide if I was telling the same story differently or telling a different story each time. In each introduction, I found something different in understanding myself and my work.

Salamah, an Indonesian teacher, reflected that sharing stories with other teachers confirmed some pedagogical beliefs that she 'held fast'. She said:

As well as feeling close to many values they [the teachers] each hold dear, I felt some clashes. I was pushed and pulled by these diverse perspectives, but in a positive way ... It helped me to review the way I see myself and my work.

By engaging with others' thinking through what it means for them to be a teacher, Salamah went through a process of developing new personal perspectives about what it means to be a teacher herself. The pushing and pulling created tension between self and other, offering the teachers the opportunity to integrate that tension into the overall sense of who they are.

Of course, being a teacher is only one part of what are often conflicting identifications of oneself. It is more a question of being able to hold these tensions and conflicts within oneself – not just pushing them to one side. Reflecting on being a teacher may involve reflecting on what it means to be a woman or man, an artist or musician, a parent or sibling, a political or a social activist and so forth. For instance, as parents, many participating teachers shared a common concern about their own children's education, which was often one of their motivations to embark on a different path in their own professional development.

Elisabet came with her family from Europe to live in Paraguay. From being a teacher of modern languages, she changed her professional direction after the birth of her fourth child. She decided that she would not allow the kind of frustration her three other children had experienced to be repeated in the youngest one. She reflected:

From observing my three children losing their motivation and inspiration in the Paraguayan school system, which does not allow a child's participation in decision-making processes that affect his life, [I realised] that it was the clue to my own difficulties at school, and to my uneasiness and multiple frustrations in my role as a teacher.

A desperate mother and frustrated teacher, Elisabet decided to change her own practice and start training as a Montessori teacher, set up an alternative school and explore education innovation for her children's sake.

### *Insights into Social Issues in Education*

Experiential workshops and sharing narratives within small groups has presented complex social realities within which these teachers work and pioneer educational innovation. Teachers thus had the opportunity to explore and respond to their own questions about teaching and education in different socio-cultural, historical and political contexts. Luis, for example, commented that the socio-cultural distances between all the schools created opportunities for teachers to develop insights into social issues that impact on education.

Some participants pointed out that it opened their eyes to hear diverse voices in other teachers' stories, which spoke of those who had been silenced and oppressed, and told tales of the vulnerable and deprived.

Chitra told the stories of her childhood growing up in a slum in southern India. Her experience as a child labourer struggling for her rights for education touched many of her audience. Today, her project in India aims at providing opportunities for girls and women who are otherwise deprived of their rights for childhood and education. One teacher reflected:

I became aware that every [participating] school has its social and cultural roots and has importance in its own reality. Stories brought me into very different realities. ... This reminds me that our work is not simply to explore practices that best help our children learn, above all, our work is to deal with social issues and bring hope and future to our children.

Multiple voices at the workshop suggested that teachers' stories are not merely isolated personal tales. Instead, they are always mixed with those of others and are drawn from both past and present, private and professional, individual and collective, personal and socio-cultural. Alejandro grew up in an oppressed and deprived indigenous community. He realised that telling his own past enabled



him to see more clearly the role of education in social transformation. He suggested:

Human-centred education needs to have social transformation as one of its goals. Otherwise there is no human flourishing. Now there is a network of us and there is solidarity so that we can start building a more just world for our children.

### **Discussion – why might it work?**

It is easy to exaggerate the success of the conference since most of our data are derived from the collective enthusiasm of the conference itself, rather than on more dispassionate subsequent reflection by the participants. Thus, rather than focusing on the way that it affected practice, we are dealing with how teachers thought such an approach might change their work. More detailed exploration awaits a follow-up investigation. Nevertheless, the case study provides much material for critical consideration.

Central to this case study is the recognition of the importance in teachers serving as narrative inquirers to engage directly with each others' stories and experiences. In this process, teachers re-construct who they are and re-conceptualise the journey they are taking, question and re-articulate their assumptions, values and beliefs, their pedagogical underpinning and educational visions. We argue that teachers' narrative and identity are mutually constitutive of one another. This suggests that there is no narrative which does not extrapolate teachers' identity; conversely, no teacher's identity exists in isolation from personal narratives. Furthermore, the essence of being a teacher lies in the root of their personhood. Thus teachers' narrative identity is not only instrumental to their professional development; it *is* simultaneously the process of their professional development.

On reflection, several factors in teachers' interaction are worthy of some attention. These, in some ways, may have enabled teachers' narrative inquiry and hence their understanding.

First, group-based discussions and narrative sharing in the case study provided a socially constructed interactive process for teachers' narrative inquiry. It had made a difference to the teachers' understanding. Teachers co-created a common understanding and educational discourse that they could all relate to and were an integral part of, acknowledging that it helped enhance their educational repertoire – adding a further dimension and meaning to their personhood and their practice. Without the interplay of mutual telling of experiences, reflexivity and re-articulation, it may not have been easy to achieve the profundity in the teachers' inquiries.

Second, the conference brought together a peer network of teachers who normally have little opportunity to engage with each other and to re-conceptualise education and schooling. During and after the conference, teachers expressed their eagerness to continue the dialogue and interaction and maintain close connection to this community. Meaning, understanding and

learning were mediated by the differences in perspectives. Embedded in the community was the mutuality of learning; the teachers learned from experiencing each other's practices and engaging dialogically with each other; teachers learned from researchers and experts through engaging with new research findings and theoretical exploration; and finally, researchers and experts learned from engaging with the teachers and their practices and stories. The community provided a structure and a process for learning and growth and for re-negotiating and re-interpreting the teachers' chosen way of being (Fielding, 2001).

Third, teachers' learning and growth could be viewed as a social practice associated with sharing and negotiating meaning. At the centre of the community lies the potential of 'new professionalism' (Hargreaves, 1994), through which teachers, rather than striving to develop their personhood and practice in isolation, are able to be part of new networks of inter-connectedness, co-participation, mutual engagement, peer learning and collaboration. The nature of the community reflected these teachers' aspirations for what they wanted to become as persons – a personal identity that is yet to be actualised through a shared vision for being, living and educating. Narrative, that in this instance was collaboratively constructed, mediated between who and what the person is and who and what they ought/intend to become.

This leads to an assumption that teachers' narrative inquiry might be a helpful means not just of performing teachers' professional and personal identity, but also of re-constructing it. However, it begs the question of whether bringing teachers together and asking them to tell stories about professional practice is enough.

### **Conclusion**

The case study showed that teachers' direct engagement with each other encouraged their personal and professional development, in a way that was mutually constitutive and mutually enhanced. As Engeström (2000, p. 960) points out, 'expansive learning increasingly involves horizontal widening of collective expertise by means of debating, negotiating and hybridizing different perspectives and conceptualizations'.

We argue that bringing teachers together to reflect on life experiences and teaching practices can be a professional development endeavour. It may become significant and valuable in terms of the potential it holds to allow teachers to centre all the seminal activities and interactions on personal growth. A peer network may unify teachers through a common vision and purpose and help reinforce their identity as persons and as educators. However, we also highlight that researchers' input at the conference may also be important to allow interaction with educational research because theory provides a way of talking about practice across contexts.

It is reasonable to express several notes of caution. First, the data on which this is based are very limited. Second, the notion of community presented

here may be rather a romantic one, a criticism that is frequently levelled at the concept. Third, the newness of the community clustered around agreement over principles might be significant in the relative lack of conflict at this stage. This might also be a factor in the issue about the utility of narratives and might be where the joint object of the activity is so diffuse and conflict is less important. Fourth, the nature of the community/network – i.e. teachers within mainly small alternative schools that are more responsive to their concerns – might also be of consequence. The expression of the narrative self might be difficult for teachers in mainstream schools because it transgresses the boundaries of 'the bureaucratic self', the subject of controlled production.

As we mentioned above, there are as yet no data on the long-term utility of this approach – in the short term it was affirming and re-energising for the participants who are trying to sustain a counter discourse of schooling in their different contexts. Realistically, we do not think that a detailed evaluation could ever 'prove' the efficacy of this approach. Rather we are offering an account – another story or narrative – and inviting the reader as teacher or teacher trainer to respond.

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