

'I could go work in a factory, but this is something I want to achieve': narratives into social action

Wendy McMillan

Abstract

This paper is conceptually informed by a reading of Peter McLaren's work (1993). Drawing on the relationship that he signals between identity, narrative, and social action, it sets out to examine the ways in which identity shapes narratives of academic performance and consequent action. Specifically, I present the narratives of academic performance of a social grouping within a cohort of preprimary teacher education students. These students are all women, historically classified 'coloured' and of working class origin. Argument is presented that students interpret and reconstruct their personal histories and particular social locations through the material and discursive contexts to which they have access. The students are presented as active agents—producing themselves within existing, and often potentially contradictory, material and discursive contexts. Evidence is marshalled to frame an argument that students' narratives shape their social action as agents of history, and are implicated in the distribution of privilege within society.

Introduction

I could go work in a factory, but this is something I want to achieve. (Randy, research cohort member) Terry Eagleton (1981, p. 72) argues that 'we cannot think, act, or desire except in narrative'. Conceptually informed by a reading of Peter McLaren's work 'Border disputes: multicultural narratives, identity formation, and critical pedagogy in postmodern America' (1993), this paper explores the relationship between narrative and action. For McLaren, all theories of social reality presuppose a 'narrative intentionality' (1993, p. 207). They are not just about seeing the world in different ways, but rather, he (1993, p. 207) argues, about 'living in particular ways'. His argument is essentially that people 'live out' what they believe in ways that have material effects. Narratives are played out as social action, McLaren (1993, p. 206) argues, because of their 'authorial voice and legitimating functions'. Construing their narratives to represent the 'truth' about social reality and their place within it, people act on these beliefs. At the heart of this thesis is a political question, 'How are narratives implicated in the distribution of privilege within the larger capitalist society?' (McLaren, 1993, p. 206).

Based on a qualitative case study that was conducted at the Table Mountain teacher training college in South Africa in the late 1990s, this paper seeks to examine how narrative understandings shape people's social action as agents of history. Specifically it sets out to examine how the narratives of academic performance of a group of teacher education students were 'played out' in the choices that they made about study and employment. This paper explores the understandings of the 'Clan' students—a group of coloured¹ working class women who drew on a narrative perspective of 'coloureds is average'. I try to show how raced, classed, and gendered identity shaped the narrative understandings of the Clan women—how their explanations of social reality were the:

... product of an individual or a group of individuals' interpretation and reconstruction of her/their personal history and particular social location, as mediated through the cultural and discursive context to which she/they has/have access. (Raissiguier, 1994, p. 46)

I commence this paper with a short introduction to the research site and a brief exposition of the methodology of the research upon which the paper is based. Thereafter I present the Clan narrative, outlining the discursive and material parameters that framed it. I then examine how the Clan narrative shaped the choices that these students made about their studies and their employment. Finally, I make an argument for the ways in which narratives frame our social actions as agents of history.

Locating the study: context and methodology

The cohort was a final year class of pre-service teacher education students enrolled at Table Mountain College of Education. They were completing a three-year diploma preparing them to work with very young children between the ages of three and six. Historically Table Mountain College had serviced the teacher education requirements of white students and white schools in the greater Cape Town area of South Africa. Although two amalgamations with historically coloured training institutions had brought coloured students and lecturers to Table Mountain College, the dominant discourses remained those of white, middle class, male priorities. The prevalent discourses were neo-liberal and colour-blind.

The study upon which this paper draws set out to examine the relationship between narratives of academic performance and actual performance as recorded on year-end mark schedules. I therefore defined the cohort as the nineteen students who had registered for the Preprimary course in the first academic year as this allowed me to 'track' potential relationships between narrative understandings and actual performance. All nineteen students were interviewed in their final academic year using a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview was designed to elicit broad understandings of race, class, gender, and academic performance. Personal narratives of academic performance were constructed from these interviews.

Setting out to understand the narratives of academic performance of these students, I divided the cohort into three sub-groupings, or narrative clusters. In selecting students to constitute each of these clusters, I began with my observation that since their first year of registration these students had been organized into three social groupings. Assuming that students socialize with peers who share common values and interests, I argued that these groupings had the potential to reflect broad narrative commonalities. Theoretically this perspective was substantiated by the work of Lloyd and Duveen (1992) who, drawing on Habermas, argue that the social structure of educational institutions results in peers playing a significant role in the different representations that learners construct of the world, and particularly the way in which learners represent themselves.

Distinctive and distinguishing narrative explanations of academic performance emerged from each of the three social groupings. The discussion that follows highlights the narrative threads of one of these explanations—that of the Clan students. The exposition signals how these students

drew on discourses and material contexts (Raissiguier, 1994, p. 46) to which they had access in framing their accounts. Drawing on evidence from follow up interviews conducted three years after the initial data was collected; it is argued that narratives shape people's social action as agents of history (McLaren, 1993, p. 206).

'Coloureds is average': the Clan narrative of academic performance

There were seven Clan students—Nikita, Randy, Wendy, Marjorie, Denise, Tanya, and Sally. Nikita's narrative of academic performance, and the discursive and material contexts upon which she drew in framing it, will initially be foregrounded as a lens for understanding the Clan perspective.

On being coloured and working class

Nikita summed up her understanding of academic performance and her own academic potential when she explained that 'I just feel that I am coloured and coloureds is average'. Raced identity, she implied, was central to academic performance, to employment and to life chances. Understandings framed by her raced identity shaped the academic expectations that she had for herself and the consequent ways in which she behaved:

I know that I can do much much better but because I have accepted that I am an average student I don't bother with wanting to... improve myself... I think, when it comes to assignments, no man, but the whites are supposed to be above average, good, excellent work and then the coloureds is average.

Nikita linked her explanation of her academic potential with her expectations for employment. Therefore although 'it will be nice working in a white environment', Nikita decided 'it will be too much pressure I think'. Because she understood herself as 'average' and white peers as 'excellent', she felt that working in a white school where 'average is not good enough' would be too pressurized. She perceived that she would 'have to prove myself all the time'. Excellence, Nikita explained, came naturally for white students—'with your white student it just comes naturally, that kind of thing'. In contrast, she explained that for her it would either be impossible, stressful, or inappropriate:

And me being the average student I don't know if I will be able to handle to go and work in an environment where average is not good enough... It will be nice but I won't fit in.

What did Nikita mean by the term 'coloured', and how did she come to construct this meaning? Wildman (1995) signals that race structures the social reality of black² people in a way that makes non-engagement impossible. It was this material context that framed Nikita's understanding that racial categories delineate a reality. While she relied on the traditional apartheid labels, Nikita did not suggest that she understood racial differences as a biological reality—that heredity separates groups of people from other groups of people. Rather, drawing on her experiences as a coloured working class person, she implied that race signaled access to socio-economic resources. This she linked with academic potential:

... white students will do better because of what they have been exposed to early on and I don't have the knowledge or the background or even the mentality or thinking skills that they have because of what they have been exposed to from primary school or high school.

'Coloured', as an identity that signaled social location and access to socio-economic privilege, was at the heart of the Clan narrative of academic performance. It was central to Wendy's understanding of how marks were allocated at Table Mountain College:

(I)f you have an assignment, you have to laminate things, and buy things. The more you bought, the more you bring the higher your marks but I can't afford that... You get marked down and I personally feel it hurts. It is unfair. Why should you because you are coloured and you can't afford something, get marked down?

It was implied in the way in which Denise associated skin colour and life experiences:

I'll click with... my skin colour first. I would say that it would be a common experience that group people together.

Randy echoed this perspective.

Life experiences and common sense discourse prevailing in South Africa at the time led Clan students to conflate race and class. They associated this conflated social location with a lack of the necessary resources, skills, and deportments to perform well at Table Mountain College. Randy believed that the crowded living conditions at home made it difficult for her to perform successfully, 'I know that I am not doing brilliantly at college because of my circumstances'.

Other Clan students argued that their schooling had prepared them inadequately for the academic challenges of tertiary education. Tanya explained that she needed to work harder than white peers in order to be successful:

I need to concentrate on everything... (I)t is certainly not easy for me at College because at school we were not taught to do research and going into things... so I find it very difficult to write essays.

Denise echoed this feeling. Wendy suggested that her sense of being academically inadequate left her feeling inferior and insecure:

... sometimes you also think, 'Do I really belong here? How did I get in there?' It is a very high standard you have to work to.

She was critical of the way in which she was made to feel inadequate at Table Mountain College. In associating dominant expectations of high standards with racism, Wendy implied that she experienced this as discriminatory racist practice:

Definitely I think there is racism... It is like they expect the best... They expect you to set this very high standard and if you don't, no matter who you are or what you are, you have to stick there.

Her response is best understood in the way in which she described how dominant culture operated at Table Mountain College:

... definitely I think there is racism... I would say comfort zone—this is your comfort zone. Many times I pick up a—it is like, 'You do what we want, kind of thing or else don't bother. We are not willing to change.'

Wendy assumed that the privileging of particular values and departments at Table Mountain College served to discriminate against particular groups of students—implicitly those who were African, coloured or working class.

Other Clan students also associated the mismatch between their abilities and the demands at Table Mountain College with racism. Sally believed herself less articulate than white peers. She explained the consequences, associating an incident with the Rector of Table Mountain College with racism:

It is almost as if it is a racial issue also... when I told him that I had spoken about this thing to you and that—he just pushed it aside. But when this other girls came (he listened to them)... it was maybe because they were white and they have given him more. Maybe I couldn't talk as well as they could.

Denise, a Clan student who had performed well academically at a historically white Model C school, presents an illuminating example of the way in which interpretation and reconstruction of personal histories and particular social locations, and the discourses to which people have access, shape potentially contradictory narrative accounts. On the one hand, her experiences as a coloured person in South Africa led her to assume that racism was a reality. Thus she described an incident at Table Mountain College:

Even now with computers... then all the white girls got more marks than we got, and not just—but a bit more, and I thought everyone should have got the same range.

On the other hand, Denise labeled the perceptions of discrimination and inferiority of the other Clan students as 'racist':

They are still very racist in their thinking because they felt that the lecturers were giving the white students more marks.

Drawing on the meritocratic discourse that prevailed at her high school, she explained that she assumed that coloured working class students did not do as well as white students because they did not work as hard. She used herself as an illustrative example:

I really don't see why they need to complain 'cause if you look at what—if I look at Susan—Susan's assignments are always beautiful... so that when they do get their better mark it's because they took time with their work and then they went to research it. Whereas I that started a week before the time and they started two weeks before the time, it will be better because they'll have more things to put in there. So there's no point in complaining and moaning because they worked harder.

Might Denise be considered as an 'exception' to the 'coloureds is average' narrative framework? On the face of it, Denise's perspective does not draw on the discursive resources that led other Clan students to construct themselves as 'coloured' and consequently as potentially academically inferior. However, it is in the way in which gender intersects with race and class that Denise's account shares common threads with her Clan peers.

Gender as it intersects with race and class

Drawing on Harris (1990, p. 587), McLaren presents identity as multi-vocal. Each lens of identity and facet of experience, he suggests, cannot be described independently. Rather identity should be explored as 'inextricable webs' (Harris, 1990, p. 587). With identity as multi-vocal,

McLaren (1993, p. 211) argues against a construct of narrative as 'unitary'. Instead he (1993, p. 277) presents the postmodern subject living in many narrated worlds, rather than simply one. Drawing on Patton (1986, p. 143), McLaren (1993, p. 211) suggests that narratives are best understood as 'assemblages'—as multiple lines of force 'crisscrossing, cutting through, freezing, trapping, and repressing power'.

Willis (1983, p. 130) provides an insight into the culture of masculinity— particularly as it is played out in working class communities:

... masculinity... which fills an identity located in a social position often emptied of all other worth and value... (It) is also masculinity that helps to ... giv(e) ... some displaced meaning and dignity ... It can also oppress women and lead to the reproduction of conventional gender roles in the family.

His perspective serves as a springboard for understanding how race, social class, and gender are nested in ways that shape particular material realities for coloured working class women. The material and discursive contexts that framed this intersection specifically shaped the narratives of academic performance of Denise, Sally, and Tanya, the three single mothers of the cohort.

Gender shapes the parenting roles assumed for men and women. Fathers are in a biological and social position to choose whether they engage in the act of parenting or not. Short of abortion or offering a child for adoption, single mothers have few options. Phoenix (1991) highlights that social class, where it intersects with dominant gendered understandings, frames the choices that single women parents face. Thus where young middle class mothers might depend on supportive funding from *their* parents, including safe childcare while they continue their education, the full economic burden of childcare usually falls to the young working class mother. This responsibility shapes the life chances of single parent working class women. Although the emphasis of the analysis will be on the ways in which class and gender intersect with particular effect, it should be borne in mind that any examination of social class in the South African context implies a textured relationship with race.

While neither Tanya, Denise, nor Sally claimed that gender shaped their academic performance, it certainly framed a real material constraint for them. Raissiguier (1994, p. 25), although emphasizing that discourses always shape the way in which we apprehend reality, argues that it is important to locate these discourses in the lived, historical, and material situations in which they circulate. She draws on Smith (1988, pp. 38-39) to highlight that discourses 'must not be isolated from the practices in which they are embedded and which they organize'. This perspective is significant to an analysis of the narrative understandings presented by Tanya, Denise, and Sally. These women did not draw explicitly on gendered discourse to explain or to refute their 'lot' in life. It was, however, in the way that they accepted their material reality as 'natural' that their understandings were framed by dominant gender discourse.

Sally emphasized that her age—or rather her return to study as an older student— shaped her academic potential and performance. She also argued that her role as a wife and mother prevented her from giving her full attention to her studies in the way that was assumed as 'normal' at Table Mountain College. Sally had been sixteen at the time of her first pregnancy, and it might be argued that her delayed career plans were a direct consequence of having to take on the responsibilities of motherhood:

My life revolved around being a mother... and getting used to that kind of thing. So I had no inspiration of doing anything for myself.

Economic constraints as a member of the working class, combined with a common sense understanding framed within dominant gender discourse that women are primary care-givers and consequently responsible for parenting, excluded Sally from post-school training. Consequently she came to tertiary education, older, out of practice with studying, out of date with learning technologies, and bearing competing roles as student, wife, and mother—and later also wage earner.

The stories told by Denise and Tanya echoed themes from Sally's account. Both Denise and Tanya were forced as single parents to interrupt their tertiary studies in order to care for, and economically support, unplanned babies. Neither received substantial practical or financial support from their children's fathers. It was evident that both these women experienced practical difficulties balancing studies, part-time employment, and single parenting—as Denise expressed it, 'I don't know where I am getting on and getting off'.

Tanya and Denise believed that their academic performance was directly shaped by the responsibilities of single parenting—as Tanya explained, 'I can't perform like I want to because I am sometimes overtired'. Denise graphically described how childcare and the associated demands such as part-time employment used up the energies that other unencumbered students channeled into their academic studies:

... if I take time with it I can do so much better... sometimes—I just think, 'Ag, just give it in. Get it finished with 'cause that's going to give me more work if I take it back and do it better.' I am just so tired.

Implying that parenting shaped the achievement of academic potential, Sally, Denise, and Tanya presented a narrative thread that argues that gender shapes academic performance. Similarly, because of the ways in which social class frames the choices available to women (and single mothers especially), by arguing that parenting shapes academic performance, these students were also presenting a narrative thread that argued that class shapes academic performance. These women understood, although implicitly, that being working class—which is about being coloured—framed their potential academic performance.

Gender also framed the assumptions that the Clan students had about employment. Central to their account was that they were training to work with very young children—a career that has low social status and poor remuneration. Nikita's potentially contradictory narrative is characteristic. On the one hand, the dominant common sense understanding that young children are women's natural work formed a material and discursive backdrop against which she framed understandings of what it meant to be an educator of the very young:

In general it is the woman's figure who is nurturing—who is responsible for nurturing and for caring, and when it comes to children and that kind of thing.

This assumption was unanimous amongst the Clan students.

On the other hand, Clan students also drew on an alternative discourse around gendered roles that prevailed amongst the academic staff in the Preprimary Sector at Table Mountain College. These lecturers emphasized that the traditionally female occupation of educating young children was a work of profound long-term social significance rather than a natural activity associated with women. This discourse led Nikita to argue that women got to work with young children because men thought of it as a female occupation:

I am sure that men feel that it is a woman's job—looking after children, caring and that.

By locating her comments in the specific context of her own coloured working class community—'if I think of my own community'—Nikita highlighted the way in which she experienced gender to be nested with race and class:

If I should ask, 'Why don't you do preprimary?'... If I had to ask that question of a male person they would look at me as if—because it does not happen—it should not happen.

The ironic tone that she adopted when commenting that within her community, a male preschool teacher 'should not happen' indicates that she understood that gendered roles are a social construct not a biological reality. Other Clan students signaled a similar awareness.

Nikita highlighted how she experienced that in coloured working class communities women were expected to engage in the occupations that had low status, poor remuneration, and did not challenge the role of men as the significant breadwinners— 'they feel ... "We are supposed to be out there doing real work"'. Significantly Nikita did not challenge the fairness of this perspective.

'You are going to come and you are going to get R1000 if you are lucky': expectations for employment

It is the way in which the lenses of race, class, and gender are nested that shaped Nikita's assumption that preschool teaching was both a feasible and appropriate career aspiration. Nested identity, for the other Clan students, framed similar expectations for academic performance and employment.

Like Nikita, Wendy did not intend applying for employment at historically white schools because 'I think it is more stress and pressure, too much expectations from you'. Instead she voiced a desire to work in 'a community I feel comfortable. I know these people. It is fine'. Other Clan students, although not presenting themselves as inadequate for white schools, also expressed a desire for employment in working class communities. This commitment implicitly locks these students into under-resourced, poorly paid employment. While I am in no way supporting the discourse of individualism, it is important to signal the implications of particular choices. None of these students recognized or challenged the way in which economic resources are distributed in society. While unhappy with the inadequate working conditions that they anticipated for their futures—as Wendy described them, 'you are going to come and you are going to get R1 000³ if you are lucky'—the Clan members did not associate these with the unequal power structures in society. Similarly, Clan students assumed unemployment as a 'fact of life'. Significantly, Wendy blamed the college for not preparing students for unemployment rather than criticizing a society that distributes socio-economic resources unequally:

They don't prepare you completely for major things like what happens if I lose my job... You come into a job situation and they tell you, 'You are retrenched'. What happens if I get out there at the end of my third year and I don't get a post?

McLaren (1993, p. 206) signals that while narratives are the product of human agency, they also serve to shape what people take for granted as the 'Truth':

... (o)f particular interest is narrative's socializing function and the way in which it constructs a specific moral realm—that is, on the way in which narratives introduce individuals or groups into a particular way of life through their authorial voice and legitimating functions.

The authority implicit in discursive assumptions, particularly those relating to social location and meritocracy, prevented the Clan students from challenging dominant understandings of social reality.

This is not to argue that the Clan students were mere recipients of a false consciousness (Raissiguier, 1994, p. 11). They were not 'unproblematically reproduced' as classed, gendered, and raced subjects (Raissiguier, 1994, p. 161). Potential contradictions were evinced in the ways in which Clan students challenged acquiescence to the status quo. There was strong evidence that Clan students believed that they had the *potential* to be successful. Nikita's comment serves as an example:

Generally I am a very shy quiet person, who at times can excel depending on the environment and whether or not I am in a comfortable situation.

Randy linked determination with achievement, and implicitly with access to improved life chances:

And here I want to do this because I need to do this for future reference so that I know that I can make something out of my life... I can go work in a factory, but this is something that I want to do—to achieve.

McLaren (1993, p. 212) signals the source of potential narrative contradictions evinced in the Clan accounts:

... these contextual categories (that inscribe our identities) do not occur synchronically outside history, but are in fact the result of struggles over meaning by various groups in the larger society.

It is in drawing on a variety of discursive and material contexts that students produced potentially contradictory accounts. How they were played out for the Clan students will be discussed in the following section of the paper.

Narratives into social action: how the Clan experienced their short term 'future'

In this section, I examine how the Clan narrative shaped the choices that these students make about their studies and their employment.

Social action as academic performance

The 'coloureds is average' narrative testimony of the Clan students described a context in which one would not expect these students to perform well academically. Evidence supports the claim that being coloured, and implicitly working class, negatively shaped the academic performance of Denise, Tanya, Sally, and Marjorie, the four students who were no longer with the cohort at the end of the third academic year. The economic constraints of being working class meant that Sally could only study as a full-time student for a single year. Thereafter she continued her studies part-time in a dispensation that took her five years to complete a three-year diploma. Similarly, financial constraints brought on by the demands of single parenting in a working class community meant that Denise's re-entry into the diploma course was delayed, and that Tanya was forced to leave the college altogether. Being coloured also accounted for Marjorie's withdrawal from the course. She left during the second academic year, after failing a number of first year subjects. Marjorie explained:

Somehow I just wasn't happy anymore at College... no one cares, no one bothers whether you are there or not, whether you have done your assignment. In our coloured community, I think we were just so close knit, you know, you always had someone looking over your shoulder, being there for you and watching out for you, and you didn't have that at College.

She chose unskilled employment rather than engaging with an ethos at Table Mountain College that she perceived as culturally alienating. Commonsense understandings about her chances, as a coloured working class woman, of access to satisfactory conditions of service in preschool employment provided a further context in the framing of her decision to leave preschool teacher training.

However, it is more difficult to argue that the academic performance of Nikita, Randy, and Wendy was shaped by a 'coloured experience', or by their narrative of 'coloureds is average'. While it might be argued that Nikita's second class pass was a fulfillment of her assumption that 'coloureds is average', this is not so since eight of her ten white peers also graduated with second class passes. Randy and Wendy came jointly third in class with upper second passes. Considering that the interviews from which the narratives were constructed were held only three months before these results were published, it is important to examine why these young women persisted with their narrative of discrimination and poor performance.

Two explanatory threads contribute to an understanding. The first relates to the potential contradictions in their narrative perspective. While perceiving themselves as victims of a 'coloureds is average' social context, it has been highlighted that each women also had a sense of herself as potentially successful—as Wendy expressed it:

Most times, I like challenges, I put my mind to, 'Okay—'. Sometimes I would be a bit scared to do things, but if I put my mind to it, 'I can do this. I will do this.'

The potential contradiction between their subjective narrative accounts and their 'objective' performance needs to be understood as one of emphasis—their *narrative testimony* highlighted their perception of being 'other' and 'other-ed', while their *academic performance* reflected their determination to succeed.

How Nikita, Randy, and Wendy understood power to operate at Table Mountain College shaped both their narrative understandings and their social action as students at a tertiary institution. They perceived themselves in an alien environment where their answers were 'wrong', their perspectives were discounted, and their worldview did not 'match' with that which was privileged as dominant. They could not play the system because they did not have epistemological access to the rules. Instead these young women understood that they had to work as hard as they could in order to achieve. Thus, the way in which they 'selectively reject and resist the values and methods of the school, whilst at the same time accepting its instrumental value' (Davidson, 1996, p. 26) resulted in the potential contradictions that were evident between what they *said* and what they *did*. They argued that they did not bother to apply themselves because of the situation in which they found themselves. Yet, in fact, these three students applied themselves with determination in order to achieve their desired goals. At the level of actual academic performance it would seem that these three young women lived out only part of their narratives. The narrative thread that led them to construct themselves as potentially successful appeared to 'out-weigh' their narrative of 'coloureds is average'.

The second explanation centres on the way in which narrative understandings are *interpretations* of personal histories and nested social locations as mediated through the discursive contexts to which people have access (Raissiguier, 1994, p. 26). Clearly there is a nuanced relationship between the subjective narrative of academic performance of the Clan students and their actual 'objective' performance as recorded on year-end mark schedule—rather than a direct correspondence. It appears that while 'explaining' academic potential and performance, the Clan narrative may be signaling a more inclusive understanding of social reality and life chances. While the Clan students wished to believe the meritocratic promise that hard work ensures satisfactory employment, common sense insights shaped by their experiences as working class coloured people led them to question the principles upon which meritocracy is founded. They observed that working class and coloured people worked in employment that had lower prestige and remuneration than middle class or white people, and they questioned whether this was fair. The Clan students were not convinced that marks actually counted when it came to employment and access to socio-economic resources. Privilege, they believed, was accessed through who you were as a classed, raced, and gendered individual. Identity, not marks, these students effectively argued, signaled your life chances. Their narrative accounts thus described what they assumed about their future life chances rather than merely explaining what they believed about their academic potential.

In asking how narrative understandings shape our social action as agents of history, this paper raises a significant question, 'Is it possible that people's narratives shape inequalities in educational outcomes where outcomes are measured more in terms of access to life chances than in terms of marks?' This relates directly to McLaren's (1993, p. 206) concern regarding the distribution of privilege within society. In answer it is necessary to examine how the Clan

narrative was played out over time— how it shaped the choices that they made about employment.

Social action as employment

Three years after the initial study, at the time of the follow-up interviews, Denise, Tanya, and Sally had not completed their teacher training. Denise was still completing her studies, having returned to the course after the birth of her son. Her narrative understanding revealed an identity more hybrid than those presented by the other Clan students. On the one hand, her lived experiences as a single mother in a coloured (implicitly working class) community echoed themes from the 'coloureds is average' narrative. Thus she prioritized employment:

Well, hopefully, I'll be working. I'll have a stable job, I'll have income for my baby, more—I think. That's more important. I'm not so much worried about money for me. I can live without it, but I'll be a mommy.

Similarly, like the other Clan students, she assumed employment within her coloured working class community that would inevitably be less well remunerated than middle class preschool employment.

However, threads of entitlement, often implicit to white identity (Frankenberg, 1993) and presumably framed by her experiences at an historically white high school, informed Denise's assumptions about employment in potentially contradictory ways. She was concerned about job satisfaction rather than merely about being employed— 'I don't want to be stuck in a job that I don't want to do'. She intended pursuing preferences rather than merely accepting what came her way—'I would prefer the middle group or the older group'. It will be interesting to see how Denise's complex and hybrid narrative is 'lived out' in her future employment choices, and consequent life chances. Which narrative understanding will ultimately frame her future?

Tanya did not complete her studies because of the economic demands of single parenting. Her interview revealed that little in her life had been predictable:

My mother does not understand when I need her to really do something for me... in that she has let me down quite a few times.

I can't believe that someone that I actually trusted and someone that trusted me would do something like that.

Initial analysis suggested that Tanya did not have a narrative of academic performance at all—or rather, that she found academic performance impossible to predict:

Then I got to Standard Eight and I failed Standard Eight. It was so funny because I did not expect that to happen.

To Tanya, academic performance (like the rest of her life) was not governed by principles of cause and effect. With a personal narrative understanding that little in the world made sense or was predictable, Tanya floated along the surface neither surprised by, nor secure in, what happened to her. By the time of the second interview she had been away from Table Mountain College for three years. During that time she relief-taught in Preprimary, Grade Two, Six, and Seven classes in a number of schools. She had also married, and recently given birth to a second

child. She expressed neither triumph nor surprise that she was employed in her chosen career without the prerequisite qualification.

Although Tanya did not appear to have a predictive explanation regarding life chances, there were hints from her interview that she drew on her gendered identity in an attempt to secure a predictable future. She linked marriage and security—'I need to get myself sorted out. I also want to get married and live that sort of life'. This perspective was echoed in the follow-up phone call. Tanya signaled that having a man to 'look after' her was the best solution to her life chances. Someone who cared for her, Tanya implied, would be able to protect her from, or at least mediate, the social reality that she was unable to understand:

(Y)ou keep thinking there's nobody that cares about you. How could you do this by yourself? How could you ever think of coming through this?

Tanya's narrative understanding shaped her social action in a particular way. Responding to the narrative assumption that the world did not make sense, she sought a solution that seemed sensible to her—marriage to someone who could stand between her and what she did not understand. Although the 'coloureds is average' narrative did not expressly inform Tanya's understandings, it was implicit in the way in which her nested raced, classed, and gendered identity was filtered through her lens that the world did not make sense. The way in which these discursive and material contexts served as authorial voices introduced Tanya into a way of life that was characterized by dependence.

While Tanya was potentially disabled by her narrative, Sally constructed herself as successful and victorious. The way in which each woman *interpreted* the narrative 'coloureds is average' resulted in different strands of the narrative taking on authorial voice. For Sally, being 'coloured' and consequently 'average' described her past and not her future. She perceived coloured, implicitly working class, identity to describe rather than to define. She understood that it framed her early life especially in the way in which youthful single parenting had shaped her initial life chances. It explained her experiences as the target of racism—for example, in her account of the course negotiations with the Table Mountain College Rector. But, for Sally, neither race nor social class determined her future. While recognizing the material constraints of being coloured, working class, and female, Sally understood herself to be empowered— '(O)ne has so much potential that you can't just sit back'. It was, she argued, possible to 'get on' in life. She saw education as providing the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1973) necessary for success in dominant society:

... to enter certain places or to be able to talk or to be part of society at the time, it is necessary for one to have a good education.

'Sacrifice'—both financial, and in terms of time and family life—were central to Sally's understanding:

To be accepted (at Table Mountain College) you must have certain requirements and also financially the standards are good because you can't just come with sad stories that you don't have the finance... (I)t is a good thing to have that kind of standards.

Conceiving of education as a route to social mobility, she presented her upcoming graduation as a victory.

Sally's narrative informed her social action in two ways. Firstly, the way in which she perceived herself as potentially empowered led her to construct the creation of her own employment as a victory:

I trust, or I believed in myself that I can make a go ahead of preprimary and—yes—I have been successful in getting my premises and I am starting in the new year.

However, the second thread of her narrative was less empowering. In assuming that a 'coloured (implicitly working class) experience' carried with it certain material realities such as poverty and discrimination, Sally did not challenge the economic situation in which her preschool business was located. Although her take home 'profit' was meager, she believed that she was successful. It did not occur to her that she might apply for better remunerated employment, or lobby for improved conditions of services. In presenting particular distributions of privilege in society as legitimate, her narrative 'trapped' her into the assumption that particular (disadvantaged) economic locations were 'inevitable' for her as a coloured working class woman. This understanding was echoed by Wendy, and resulted in similarly limited access to socio-economic privilege. Her employment history suggests that the fears about employment that she had as a student were not unrealistic. At the time of the second interview, Wendy was employed in her third post-college job. Her tenure had seldom been secure, her salary had been inadequate, and at each school the conditions of service had provided her with little support. She explained that working in schools that offered inadequate remuneration and poor conditions of service was all that was available to her because she did not have a car to get to schools elsewhere. Drawing on the discourse of subordination at the heart of the 'coloureds is average' narrative, Wendy implicitly argued that she had to accept the poorly paid employment that was traditionally available to working class coloured women. For her, at least at that particular point in time, her narrative understanding took on an authority that introduced her into a particular way of life that denied her access to the socioeconomic privileges that white or middle class people take for granted (Wildman, 1995).

However, it is important to note how Wendy interpreted her choice. I asked in the follow-up interview why she didn't seek work elsewhere, suggesting that she might buy a car on hire purchase. Understandings framed by personal history and particular social locations of race, class, and gender shaped her response. Wendy was adamant that she would rather stay where she was than incur debt. She explained how she had seen her single mother struggle economically with mounting debt. She presented her desire to live within her means as a victory over the economic constraints that pressurize working class communities and people.

Nikita presented a different interpretation of the 'coloureds is average' narrative of life chances. It echoed Marjorie's perspective. The follow-up interview with Marjorie highlighted how she believed that her situation was improved since leaving teacher training. Without a formal qualification she had easily gained employment with a stationary distribution company where she had been trained on the job.

Nikita offered a similar account. In her initial interview she argued that Table Mountain College had prepared her inadequately for any teaching position— whether in middle class or working class communities. The sense of inadequacy generated by this understanding, and the lure of a familiar work environment led Nikita to seek preschool employment with her aunt. Her conditions of service were Spartan—no annual leave, long working hours, and poor remuneration.

After a year of preschool employment Nikita accepted the offer of an Administrator's post with a Christian charity. Whether this choice was shaped by her poor conditions at the preschool or her perceived lack of preparation for other preschool jobs was unclear. It was certainly framed by religious identity—a theme that was hinted at in Nikita's initial interview. Where her narrative of performance as a student was framed predominantly by her raced and classed identity, the discourse of faith took on the authorial voice that framed her later social action. In written communication that served as Nikita's follow up interview, she explained:

You may wonder as to why I decided to leave teaching to do mission work... all that I can say is that I knew that joining the Mission Team was part of what God wanted for my life.

This anecdote clearly illustrates the significant point made by McLaren (1993, p. 212) that identities are never completed but are always in the process of negotiation. While disabling discourses of race and class framed Nikita's initial narrative, new threads shaped by new personal histories, interpretations, and available discourses framed a 'reviewed' account.

This is not to argue that Nikita now had a 'whole new' narrative. Rather, she wove new threads with the old themes. She continued to assume that she was an inadequate candidate for teaching in middle class schools with satisfactory remuneration. This discursive context framed the way in which she interpreted personal experiences. It led her to conclude that the employment for which she was 'adequate' was either exploitative (as had been the position with her aunt), or emotionally stressful (as had been her college Practical Teaching experience). Responding pro-actively, and shaped by the discourse of religion that had newly gained ascendancy in her narrative understanding, Nikita elected to leave teaching and pursue employment where she felt adequate and valued.

It is worth reflecting on the potential contradiction between my observations of the access that Nikita, Wendy, Marjorie, Sally, and Tanya had to socio-economic privilege and their constructions of themselves as victorious. They experienced their life chances as improved in comparison with how they had grown up. Each of these women now had access to the relative privilege of 'semi-professional' or 'white collar' employment. However, while it is important to acknowledge and celebrate the empowerment of students like Sally, it is also important to focus on the underpinning social relations that make domination, exploitation, and oppression possible (Truman & Humphries, 1994, p. 4).

This paper has presented empirical support to McLaren's (1993, p. 206) theoretical assumption that narratives are implicated in the distribution of privilege in the wider society. There was an extent to which the Clan students, as members of subordinate groups, 'took on' and 'lived out' commonsense understandings of themselves, their academic potential, and their life chances as limited.

However, identity and the consequent construction of theories of social reality are 'unstable'. McLaren (1993, p. 212) describes this as:

... a malleability that is linked linguistically to the function of the signifier and the permutations of interpretative possibilities round which subjectivity pivots.

Like the identities that constitute them, narratives are 'open' to challenge, negotiation, or change—what Raissiguier (1994, p. 163) refers to as 'a relational and multifaceted process that is constantly in flux'. The plasticity of narrative was evident in the shift in Nikita's narrative perspective. The potential for empowerment is central to this malleability. McLaren (1993, p. 203) states in this regard that '(w)e can't escape narratives but I believe we can resist and transform them'. The account of Randy, the final student of the Clan, gives an idea of how this might be achieved. Illustrating a single example of what is possible, it highlights the role that academic staff play in the social action of their students.

Randy's story: of lecturers and empowerment

In the follow up interview with Randy, a contradiction was evident between her 'coloureds is average' narrative account of life chances and her actual employment at an affluent historically white private school. Her *narrative* suggested that she would have avoided teaching in a white school because 'I feel inferior towards white people'. How was it that her narrative of employment came to be lived out in particularly privileged socio-economic ways? The mentorship of Johan, a coloured working class lecturer at Table Mountain College, signals a lens for interpretation.

Johan's account, reported informally to me by him, provides a clue to what happened. While completing her diploma, Randy had approached him about a job that she had seen advertised and wished to apply for. Since it was at a privileged white school, she had a strong sense—informed by her narrative—that she didn't stand a chance because she was coloured and working class. She was also unsure whether she would fit in in an environment that she perceived to be culturally alienating.

Johan's response was to turn her understanding on its head. Firstly, he reminded her that she was an active agent who was in a position to make choices. He argued that if she didn't apply she would never know whether she had the *potential* to be accepted or not. Secondly, he argued that she, as a coloured working class teacher, had a *responsibility* to become employed in white middle class schools. That was, Johan believed, one way in which change could be brought about in South Africa. He suggested to her that this job opportunity was a chance for her to act as a role model. On his advice, Randy applied for the job, and was appointed.

This is a particularly moving anecdote. It illustrates two significant aspects of the constitution of narratives, and signals their relationship to social action. Firstly, this anecdote demonstrates the way in which narrative construction is constantly in flux. Earlier discussion highlighted how Randy spun a potentially contradictory narrative— weaving together the limitations implicit to 'coloureds is average' with a determination to succeed and a desire to prove herself. Johan's testimony suggests that he appealed to the 'success' aspect of her narrative understanding in their

discussion about employment. In providing alternative discourse for thinking about the issue of prospective employment, Johan 'fed into' Randy's narrative.

This anecdote illustrates how narrative understandings can be shifted in ways that become personally and politically enabling. In providing Randy with alternative discourses for thinking about life chances, Johan challenged the 'closed epistemological discourse' that contains and limits what is though possible for certain groups of people (McLaren, 1993, p. 203). He offered accounts of social reality that challenged the legitimacy of common sense understandings, and he presented alternative ways of life for her.

This anecdote also signals the importance of role models who share common identities with students from oppressed groups. It is apparent that Johan's voice held particular authority for Randy because he shared a common raced and classed identity with her. He spoke, for her, with an authority that came from shared lived experience. The predominantly white and middle class demographics of the academic staff at Table Mountain College provided few opportunities for this.

Conclusion

McLaren's (1993) thesis is significant in that it offers a theoretical explanation of how narrative influence is exerted. This paper has marshaled empirical evidence in support of three theoretical assumptions raised by McLaren (1993). Firstly, while acknowledging Raissiguier's (1994, p. 11) point that the Clan students were not merely passive recipients of a shaped, false consciousness since they *interpreted* and *remodeled* circulating definitions of what academic performance meant to women, coloured people, and working class people, it must be emphasized that analysis has clearly demonstrated a relationship between identity and the narratives that people construct of social reality—what McLaren (1993, p. 206) signals as 'a common narrative finality based on relations of race, gender, (and) class'.

Secondly, evidence suggests that the authorial voice and legitimating functions of narrative result in their being considered as 'true' accounts and predictions of social reality. Students, in consequence, lived out their narratives 'as though' they were 'The Truth'. Narratives come, in this way, to shape people's social action as agents of history—or, in the words of three students from my research cohort:

What you hear becomes part of you sometimes... and later on you believe it... Society affects what people do.

Thirdly, in shaping people's social action, narratives are implicated in the distribution of privilege in society. Narratives frame the choices that people make. These choices have real consequences in terms of access to socio-economic resources. Narrative analysis thus presents conceptual tools for explaining and understanding one of the mechanisms for unequal distribution of privilege in society.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Glenda Kruss and the anonymous referees for their constructive comments and suggestions. The substantial financial support of a SYLFF Fellowship for the research project upon which this paper is based is gratefully acknowledged. The financial assistance of National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily attributed to the National Research Foundation.

Notes

1. The terms white and coloured are part of the nomenclature of the apartheid system, and to some extent continue to shape post-apartheid understandings. I argue therefore for their use in sociological description of the South African reality of that era. However, along with Carrim and Soudien (1999, p. 170), I reject the racism and racial essentialism implicit in their use.
2. Following Erasmus and Pieterse (1997, p. 2), I use 'black' in a way that is specific to the South African political left—to mean 'all people who have suffered under white domination'.
3. At the time, the Department of Education salary for a preschool teacher with a three-year qualification was R4 100 per month. For a contextual comparison, Koch (2003) suggests that a full-time domestic worker earned R1 540 per month, and a General Practitioner with under seven-years experience R18 000 per month.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1973) Cultural reproduction and social reproduction, in: R. Brown (Ed.) *Knowledge, education, and cultural change: papers in the sociology of education* (London, Tavistock).
- Carrim, N. & Soudien, C. (1999) Critical anti-racism in South Africa, in: S. May (Ed.) *Critical multiculturalism: rethinking multicultural and antiracist education* (London, Falmer Press).
- Cortazzi, M. (1993) *Narrative analysis* (London, Falmer Press).
- Davidson, A. L. (1996) *Making and moulding identity in schools: student narratives on race, gender and academic engagement* (New York, SUNY). Eagleton, T. (1981) *Walter Benjamin* (London, Verso Press).
- Erasmus, Z. & Pieterse, E. (1997) Conceptualising coloured identities: preliminary thoughts, paper presented at the *National Identity and Democracy Conference*, Cape Town, South Africa, 1418 March.
- Fine, M. (1997) Witnessing whiteness, in: M. Fine, L. Weis, L. C. Powell & L. Mun Wong (Eds) *Off white: readings on race, power and society* (New York, Routledge).
- Flax, J. (1990) *Thinking fragments: psychoanalysis, feminism and postmodernism in the contemporary west* (Los Angeles, University of California).

Foucault, M. (1969) *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language* (New York, Harper Colophon).

Frankenberg, R. (1993) *White women, race matters* (London, Routledge). Goodson, I. F. (1992) *Studying teachers' lives* (London, Routledge).

Hall, S. (1986) Gramsci's relevance to the analysis of racism and ethnicity, *Journal of Communication Studies*, 10(2), 5-27.

Harris, A. (1990) Race and essentialism in feminist legal theory, *Stanford Law Review*, 42, 581-616.

Hodkinson, P. (2000) Standpoints, power and conflicts in contemporary debates about educational research: an interpretation of repeated rejections, *Auto\Biography*, 8(1/2), 3-11.

Kock, R. (2003) *The quantum yearbook* (Port Elizabeth, SA, Van Zyl, Rudd & Associates).

Lecompte, M. D. (1993) A framework for hearing silence: what does telling stories mean when we are supposed to be doing science? in: D. McLoughlin & W. G. Tierney (Eds) *Naming silenced lives: personal narratives and processes of educational change* (New York, Routledge).

Lloyd, B. & Duveen, G. (1992) *Gender identities and education: the impact of starting school* (Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf).

McLaren, P. (1993) Border disputes: multicultural narratives, identity formation, and critical pedagogy in postmodern America, in: D. McLoughlin & W. G. Tierney (Eds) *Naming silenced lives: personal narratives and processes of educational change* (New York, Routledge).

McMillan, W. (2001) Explaining differential performance of teacher college students, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bellville, University of the Western Cape.

Nias, J. (1989) *Primary teachers talking: a study of teaching as work*. (London, Routledge).

Patton, P. (1986) Ethics and post-modernity, in: E. A. Grosz, T. Threadgold, D. Kelly, A. Cholodenko & E. Colless (Eds) *Futur* fall: excursions into post-modernity* (Sydney, Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney). Phoenix, A. (1991) *Young mothers?* (Cambridge, Polity Press).

Proweller, A. (1998) *Constructing female identities: meaning making in an upper middle class youth culture* (Albany, SUNY). Raissiguier, C. (1994) *Becoming women/becoming workers: identity formation in a French vocational school* (Albany, SUNY).

Rizvi, F. (1993) Children and the grammar of popular racism, in: C. McCarthy & W. Crichlow (Eds) *Race, identity and representation in education* (London, Routledge).

Smith, D. (1988) Femininity as discourse, in: L. Roman, L. Christian Smith & E. Ellsworth (Eds) *Becoming feminine: the politics of popular culture* (London, The Falmer Press).

Soudien, C. (1996) *Apartheid's children: student narratives of the relationship between experiences in schools and perceptions of racial identity in South Africa*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Buffalo, State University of New York.

Soudien, C. (2001) Certainty and ambiguity in youth identities in South Africa: discourses in transition, *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 22(3), 311-326.

Truman, C. & Humphries, B. (1994) Re-thinking social research: research in an unequal world, in: B. Humphries & C. Truman (Eds) *Re-thinking social research: anti-discriminatory approaches in research methodology* (Aldershot, Avebury).

Wildman, S. M. (1995) Language and silence: making systems of privilege visible, in: R. Delgado (Ed.) *Critical race theory: the cutting edge* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press).

Willis, P. (1983) Cultural production and theories of reproduction, in: L. Barton & S. Walker (Eds) *Race, class and education* (Beckenham, Croom Helm).