

A NARRATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS' LIFE STORIES AND THEIR WORK IDENTITY

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Pamela Jane Heaton

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**Department of Psychology
Rhodes University, East London Campus**

Supervisor: Clifford van Ommen

ABSTRACT

Media coverage of the poor state of this country's education system has described public images of the teaching profession which provide a context for the research described in this paper. The research is concerned with how and to what extent work identity is reflected in the life stories of five female teachers from a rural village in the Eastern Cape. A social constructionist approach is taken to the meaning and construction of identity, and the paper describes the process of a narrative method of analyzing and interpreting the stories.

An initial analysis reveals that the participants had few career options and little choice of career. Further analysis is concerned with interpreting how the teachers create coherence in their stories around this lack of choice as well as within the larger social and historical context. Simultaneously there is an interpretation of the participants' work identity.

The teachers' create coherence in their narratives around their families and their socio-economic or cultural circumstances, but make no explicit reference to the political context of their work choices, which were made in the context of the restraints of the Apartheid era. From each teacher's story an understanding of their unique work identity emerges. These alternative understandings provide a contrast to the images constructed by the media.

CONTEXT

My interest in teachers and their life stories began during 1998 when, as psychology Masters students, my colleagues and I were working with teachers from a wide-spread rural area in the Eastern Cape. In working with these teachers we heard of, and later saw, the difficult conditions under which many of them were working in remote villages. A large number of the teachers who attended our workshops worked in poor, badly equipped buildings without electricity and water.

At around the same time the country's teachers were publicly being taken to task by the then Deputy President Thabo Mbeki at the fourth annual congress of the South African Democratic Teachers Union for their part in the breakdown of the education system (Sunday Times, 1998). The media had many stories about teachers and the local press ran articles with headlines such as, "Teachers urged to act more professionally" (Daily Dispatch, 1998), "Teachers get a caning" (Daily Dispatch, 1998), and "Late, drunk teachers a no-no" (Daily Dispatch, 1998).

These stories attributed a public image to teachers. Deputy President Thabo Mbeki's reported speech, for example, conjured up a public image which is "fast disappearing";

(Y)ou will agree that your profession is a calling.

Teachers used to be respected and were accorded a special place, particularly in African society. This was so both because of the importance which the masses of our people attached to education and because the conduct of our teachers, both at school and in the community, was exemplary.

(Sunday Times, 1998)

Later in the same speech Mbeki emphasized that those teachers whom he criticized are "a few among us whose behaviour tarnishes the image of the majority of dedicated teachers" (Sunday Times, 1998).

From these few sentences it would seem that there is some prescribed set of qualities for teachers which include being respected, dedicated, professional people who behave in an exemplary way, and who are teachers because they have a calling. Mbeki states that there is a problem when teachers' behaviours in the classroom do not fit this notion.

It was with these thoughts in mind that I became interested in gaining a richer understanding of some of the teachers I was to work with during 1999, for my own experience of them made me realize that the stories I was reading in the newspapers and hearing on television and radio gave only a superficial picture of teachers. I was particularly interested with their work identity as teachers and how this fitted with the image described by Deputy President Mbeki. In the light of the plethora of public opinion about teachers I was curious about how they saw themselves and to what extent their identity or feelings of selfhood were located around their work as teachers. To do this it seemed necessary to gain some idea of how this work identity is embedded within the context of their life stories in order to understand better the contexts of their 'calling'.

This paper describes the process of my attempt to gain a richer understanding of the work identity of five women who live and work as teachers at two different primary schools in a rural village in the Eastern Cape.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION, IDENTITY, STORIES AND NARRATIVE UNDERSTANDING

My description of the process needs to begin by locating these attempts within a social constructionist approach and my interpretations of the concepts of identity, life stories and narrative.

Social Construction

A social constructionist approach opposes the traditional idea of objective truths and rather sees knowledge as being sustained by social processes (Burr, 1995). A person therefore is not an object with a fixed inner essential self (Harré, 1989; Watson, 1996). This moves away from views such as Erik Erikson's (1950) that identity is achieved through a developmental process involving stages of development which must be resolved by an individual before (s)he can pass on to the next stage of identity development (Mishler, 1992). A social constructionist approach rather sees identity as being constructed within social relationships

and consequently not as being static and invariable but context-dependent and ever in the process of construction and reconstruction (Sarbin, 1997; Shotter & Gergen, 1989).

Identity

In defining identity from a social constructionist approach, Wetherell describes it as people's "sense of themselves" (1996, p. 33). Sarbin understands identity as being "comprised of voiced and unvoiced answers to the ever-present question: who am I?" (1997, p. 69). Though Sarbin (1997) makes a distinction between "self", summarized as being the answer to the question "what am I", and "identity", he states that many writers see them as synonymous. In *Texts of identity* (Shotter & Gergen, 1989), for example, the various contributors choose either one or the other term. This paper will treat "self" and "identity" as synonymous.

Language plays an important role in identity construction. Social constructionism views linguistic meanings in a poststructuralist way. Meanings are never fixed but temporary, and dependent on the context in which they are embedded, and as such are contestable and open to question (Burr, 1995). Shotter & Gergen (1989) state that "persons are largely ascribed identities according to the manner of their embedding within a discourse" and that this includes both their own and the discourses of others (p.ix). So, for example, returning to the above reference to Mbeki's speech, the meanings of such words used by Mbeki as "respected", "dedicated", "professional" and "calling", which he used to identify an image of teachers, can only be considered meaningful when embedded within the discourses of his speech, rather than attached as fixed signifiers of the quality of teachers.

Identity, stories and work

Burr (1995) sees identity as being "constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us and being "achieved by a subtle interweaving of many different "threads" " (1995, p. 51).

We use language to pull together these threads of different social interactions which are interpreted and shaped into stories about our lives through which our identity is constructed.

As Watson points out,

Part of what each of us is, as a unique individual with a distinctive self-identity, is the outcome of the stories

which we construct to make sense to ourselves and others of who we are and where we have come from. These stories emerge out of culturally constructed meanings but they also help us to reconstruct and change these meanings.

(1996, p. 261)

It is inevitable that work, or lack of work, usually plays a large role in the stories we construct around our identity. Watson (1996) sees identity and self esteem as being closely linked to work and paid employment. Mishler (1992) points out that individuals lead culturally complex lives and simultaneously live in different spheres, for example work, family and social lives. Thus Mishler (1992) sees the necessity for recognizing that, due to the different interactions involved in these different spheres, the notion of a unified "master" identity must be questioned and rather the understanding of individuals constructing part identities be considered. Thus work could form in itself a part identity (Mishler, 1992). Bruner (1990) cites Gergen's (N.D.) view that the individual's identity changes according to the public role (s)he is playing as well as the status or power of the others with whom (s)he interacts and this idea would support the idea that people construct an identity or identities around their work. Watson (1996, p. 247) sees work as socially locating individuals "so that it possible for other people to categorize and define us".

Narrative understanding

Bruner (1990 p. 109) speaks of "reflexivity" or a "capacity to turn around the past and alter the present in its light, or to alter the past in the light of the present". This notion leads us from storytelling to narrative understanding. In telling a story the narrator stands aside from his or herself as the protagonist of the story and the chronological sequence of events and constructs a coherent narrative that fits with and makes sense of the narrator's identity. The narrator, in shaping the protagonist's actions in this way, is the link between the protagonist and the hearer of the story and consequently the narrative provides an "interpretation of events rather than an explanation" (Bruner, 1995, p. 23). Thus, as Bruner (1996, p. 95) points out, the narrative is played out on the "dual landscapes" of both the "subjective" consciousness of the protagonist and the "objective" consciousness of the narrator. The telling and shaping of the story can therefore lead to another understanding by the narrator of

his/her life. Widdershoven (1993) cites Ricoeur's (1983) emphasis on the hermeneutic relationship between life and story. According to Ricoeur "the relation between life and story is a hermeneutic circle: The story is based on the pre-understanding of life, and changes it into a more fully developed understanding" (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 5).

Reissmann (1993) and Linde (1993) refer to the way in which individuals make meaning or make sense of life stories as "creating coherence". This points to the fundamental notion of narrative psychology which is that narratives provide a framework for understanding how individuals render their existence as human beings meaningful (Polkinghorne, 1998). A narration of a story in which oneself is the protagonist thus gives a coherent account of one's identity according to the context in which the story is embedded as well as the narrator/hearer context. The narrative psychologist and researcher therefore move beyond an interest in the content of the story to an interest in why the story was told in the way it was (Reissman, 1993).

Teachers and narrative understanding

Analyzing how teachers create narrative coherence in their stories is useful in gaining an understanding of teachers' work identity. Cortazzi (1993) sees the study of teachers' narratives of their own thinking, culture and behaviour as arguably being crucial to the effective improvement and reform of educational systems. Clandinin & Connelly (1987) see narrative as a useful way of framing "our understanding of how classroom participants know, and come to know, their situations" (p. 131).

It is upon these understandings of identity and narrative that this investigation of the work identity of five women is based.

METHODOLOGY : HEARING, ANALYZING AND RECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVES OF TEACHERS' LIVES

A narrative methodology acknowledges that I as interviewer/analyst play an active part in the

construction and reconstruction of the interviewees' stories at the interview, analysis and reporting stages, and that my interpretations are only some of the many possible interpretations (Mishler, 1992; Reissman, 1993). For this reason the processes involved in these interpretations have been made as visible as space in this paper will allow. Full transcripts are available on request.

Collecting, hearing and recording the stories

The process of meaning making takes place as the narrator tells her story or stories. Rosenthal (1993) points out that 'each interview is the product of the mutual interaction between speaker and listener' (p. 64). Furthermore, the focus of the interviewee's stories evolve around the topic presented by the interviewer which is interpreted by the interviewee in the light of the prevailing circumstances. The interviewee selects stories relevant to the topic and the interviewer is curious about some aspects of the stories and asks more questions.

The participants of this research are Grade 1, 2 and 3 teachers from two lower primary schools taking part in an existing project being conducted by the Psychology Department of Rhodes University's East London Campus. One of the teachers declined to take part in the research and so only five teachers were interviewed. In order to maintain the anonymity of the teachers concerned I will not name the village in a rural area of the Eastern Cape, some 120 kilometres or so inland from East London, in which they teach. All teachers at the schools were female. The teachers are referred to by initials only.

The data for the research consists of texts of single conversations conducted with each of the five teachers who had agreed to be interviewed after receiving an initial letter explaining the research.

I attempted to use the style adopted by Mishler (1992) as a guide for the interview. After an initial introduction in which I stated the aims of my research and that I wanted the interview to

be open ended and unstructured, the conversations were begun by myself in the following way:

I want to talk with teachers about how they came to be doing the work they do. More or less the whole story of how you came to be a teacher and perhaps how you came to be a teacher in this village. What was involved in how you came to be leading the life you lead her as a teacher?

In most cases this elicited talk from the participants which I did not interrupt. It was only when the participant stopped talking that I would then ask a question to deepen my understanding of a particular topic mentioned by the interviewee. One participant, G from school 1, said very little and consequently the conversation mostly consisted of my questions to build on the previous answers. As D's interview from school 1 occurred several weeks after the other two participants from her school she seemed to have heard of the format from the two other teachers and came prepared with a written story. She did not, however, refer to this script throughout the interview. The interviews were not structured and questions mostly arose out of my interest to hear more about topics introduced by the interviewee. However, in some instances as the interviews progressed, my experience of interviews with earlier participants sometimes influenced my questions.

Transcribing the interviews

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim in full by myself. Reissman (1993) points out that transcribing is in itself an interpretative practice. No code or form was adopted to indicate length of pauses, changes of tone, etc. and this may detract from the fullness of the transcription. However, as the interviews were conducted in English, the interviewees' second language, their first language being Xhosa, I did not attempt a detailed transcription.

Analyzing the interviews and stories

The listener/analyst continues the narrative process during the analysis. In effect a new story is told as themes of the original interview are developed, and restructuring takes place when stories from other interviewees are linked together to create new coherence (Kvale, 1996).

There is no one method of analyzing narratives (Reissman, 1993). I therefore chose to craft a methodology which is based on work by Bell (1988), Linde (1993), Mishler (1986a; 1986b; 1992) and Reissman (1993). My analysis was conducted in four phases.

First phase

I initially isolate the narratives within the text of the interviews as a whole. Following the lead of numerous writers, I understand the narrative as conforming to certain structural devices (Bell, 1988; Bruner, 1996; Labov, 1977; Linde, 1993; Mishler, 1986a, 1986b; Reissman, 1993).

Firstly a narrative begins with an abstract which alerts the listener that narrative clauses will follow. An orientation sets the scene of the action of the narrative clauses which follow. The action takes place in the narrative clauses which have a temporal sequence and may contain some form of complicating action. A component of evaluation is an important aspect of narrative which runs through the structure in that it gives meaning for the telling of the story as well as conveying the stance of the narrator. The narrative ends with a coda which finishes the narrative and returns the teller and the listener to the present situation.

Using this structure I reduce each interview to a series of core narratives (Bell, 1988; Mishler, 1986a, 1986b). Bell (1988) argues that during interviews the interviewee tells sequences of stories which when linked together provide insight into how the person's experiences and interpretations have changed over time. Ricoeur (1976, p. 85) describes this as "linking together action kernels" and sees it as necessary for the structural continuity of the narrative. In this research I analyze each individual interview into a series of stories which form episodes of a core narrative which relates to the theme of how the participant came to work as a teacher. Each story is interpreted as an individual unit but thematic connections are made between each story in the series which makes up the core narrative. I name each story and each core narrative with a quotation from the text which is appropriate to its local theme (Bell, 1988; Mishler, 1986a, 1986b). In this way I create a narrative according to a sequence which I interpret as giving a coherent account. The sequence does not necessarily follow the sequence in which the story was told (Mishler, 1992). Thus the purpose of this

phase of the analysis is to separate the narratives from the non-narrative parts of the interviews. Whilst the interviews have been parsed into narratives around the theme of work identity, there is sometimes information in the non-narrative clauses of the interview, for example explanation, which is relevant to the narratives and should be included in the analysis (Bell, 1988; Mishler, 1986b). In this paper, where there is not the space to discuss the non-narrative material, it was nevertheless taken into account and assisted my understanding and selection of the narrative clauses.

Second phase

In this phase of the analysis I trace the choices and or decisions made by the teachers which led them to their present occupations. I use Mishler's (1992) idea of "work identity realms" as a starting point to take the analysis a step further. In making a narrative analysis of work identity narratives, Mishler (1992) borrows Young's (1984, 1987) term "realms" to describe a hierarchical structure of realms of choices within the sphere of work which lead to the formation of a work identity. Mishler (1992) sees the achievement of a work identity, though constantly changing, occurring through a hierarchical sequence of positive choices connected with work, which he sees as a part identity. Other part identities are achieved through other spheres of life such as family and social life through similar hierarchical realms of choices. As Mishler (1992) points out, this provides a useful model for comparative and multiple case studies. However, in this South African context the notion of hierarchical sequences of positive choices is not so useful because social, economic and historical influences often preclude the opportunities for positive choice or even choice. Consequently the model is used as a point of departure only for pulling together the stories and comparing them around work choice/lack of choice and the spheres in which the choice or lack of choice occurred. This forms a basis for the following stage of analysis.

Third phase

In this stage of the analysis I interpret how the individual teachers have made sense of the choices or lack of choice which emerged from the previous phase, and attempt to gain an

understanding of how they, as narrators, create coherent stories around becoming teachers. This involves examining how the text is constructed, the information the respondents use, the way in which they choose to put it together in order to convey a coherent story, and linguistic forms and strategies employed (Linde, 1993).

Fourth phase

Finally, the coherence of the stories is considered in the context of the interviewees' social histories. A social constructionist approach views individuals both creating and being created by the institutions that surround them. Similarly a person's current identity is dependent on their social histories and their past and present social positions (Wetherell, 1996). Whilst the interviewees mostly create coherent stories around the social context of their families, this final analysis will examine how the teachers make sense in their stories of the social context and social histories beyond the family.

Coherence

Mishler (1992) believes that personal narratives perform the function of creating coherence in a person's life. In analyzing the ways in which the text is constructed to form a coherent story different levels of coherence are examined, as well as strategies such as positioning and narrative smoothing which are employed by the narrator to help create coherence.

Levels of coherence

The stages of analysis outlined above reflect a search for different levels of coherence. Reissman (1993) cites Agar & Hobbs' (1982) three kinds of coherence, namely global, local and themal. Global coherence is concerned with what is to be achieved by the story as a whole; in this instance for example, global coherence revolves around the account of being a teacher. Local coherence refers to coherence achieved within the narrative itself, by, for example, linguistic devices. Thematic coherence is concerned with how the narrative is developed around particular themes (Reissman (1993).

In addition to these levels of coherence Linde (1993) also sees the global coherence of life

stories as functioning at a social level to establish an adequate causal sequence of events. Linde (1993) sees this as being particularly important in accounts of choice of profession. In situations of insufficient causality she sees the accounts being either structured in terms of "accident" or "containing a socially recognized discontinuity" (Linde, 1993, p. 221).

Reissman (1993) sees it as important to take into account the "multilayered" larger social context. Included in this larger social context is the influence of social history and past and present social positions (Wetherell, 1996).

Whilst attention has been paid to local coherence, generally a description of only themal, global and social/historical levels of coherence will be discussed in the analysis.

Positioning

At any level of coherence the story teller can change her position in relation to, for example, the notion of herself as a teacher. According to Harré (1983, cited in Wetherell, 1996), during a social act or conversation a subject is seen as a number of possible locations or positions which are subject to constant change, rather than an object with a fixed position. In making sense of their lives or creating coherent life stories individuals adopt different positions in different parts of their story. Burr (1995) points out that such positioning is not necessarily intentional.

Narrative smoothing

Creating coherence may involve what Spence (1986) refers to as "narrative smoothing". This would involve the narrator leaving out, or perhaps minimizing, parts of their life story to create coherence around a position or identity they wish to assume. Again, it is not necessarily an intentional act.

ANALYSIS

Core narratives

The core narratives which were isolated for the teachers' interviews in the first phase of the

analysis are tabulated in Table 1.

(INSERT TABLE 1 HERE)

These core narratives are summarized below.

C's story: "The easy way"

C is 44 years old, is unmarried and has been a teacher for nineteen years. C lives in the village of her birth some 70 kilometres away from her workplace and stays near the school during the week, traveling home at weekends. Her four stories tell of her struggle to overcome poverty and support her siblings, and finally result in her being proud of her position as a teacher which she tries to uphold. The first story gives a brief overview of her life. It tells of being born of very poor parents and her struggle to get an education and be qualified as a teacher as the "easy way" of earning money to support her siblings. She describes the tough struggle to earn enough money to put herself through training college but out of this story emerges not only the need to support her siblings but also her own need of "becoming something". In the third story C tells of how she chose teaching because it was only a two year course, but that a teaching post had not materialized at the end of training and she had had to resort to selling vegetables. She defended herself against the taunting from others which ensued by valuing the long term benefits of education. In the fourth story C takes a stand against teachers who are "spoiling" the profession.

G's story: "My parents had no money to take to me to the university so I decided to take the shortest path"

G is 53 years of age and is married with six children. She has been teaching for thirty years. Her home is in the village in which the school is situated. Like C, G saw teaching as the shortest route to earning an income to provide for her siblings. Her story differs though in that she does not as fully embrace the identity of teacher. Over the course of four stories she tells of her route to attaining a profession which was not her first choice but has, nevertheless, given her the freedom to care for her own children in a way she values.

TABLE 1: INTERVIEWEES' CORE NARRATIVES AND THE STORIES WHICH COMPRISE EACH CORE NARRATIVE

TEACHER C	TEACHER G	TEACHER M	TEACHER S	TEACHER D
<p>□The easy way□</p> <p>I do struggle</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Becoming something Nothing without education 2. I am proud of being a teacher 	<p>□My parents had no money to take me to the university so I decided to take the shortest path□</p> <p>The shortest route to</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. (My mother) ask me to <p>I am happy to be a re for your own children</p> <p>□I'm not their mam</p>	<p>□Forced to be a teacher□</p> <p>I was never interested in</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. I am not going to be a 5. I was having high aims 	<p>□My last parent passed away□so I had to come back □</p> <p>I was not much interested in</p> <p>Nurses then looked as if they</p> <p>I was an ordinary PTC</p> <p>I was the firstborn</p> <p>Qualification is better than</p>	<p>□Not a bed of roses□</p> <p>Not a bed of roses</p> <p>We (Red Families) thought</p>

The first story tells of how G's parents couldn't afford to send her to university to study to be a nurse and so she had to settle for being a teacher. The second story tells of how G's mother wanted her to have a professional job so that she could help to keep her siblings. A complication was that, as with C, G could not get a permanent post immediately and had to take temporary jobs in the interim. In the third story G reveals that she sees nothing special in being a teacher but that she is happy with the job because it gives her the opportunity to have time to care for her own children. Finally, in the fourth story, G states that her public, out of school, identity of a teacher is a negative thing for her.

M's story: "Forced to be a teacher"

M is 40 years old and single without children. She lives in town, 34 kilometres away. Over the course of two episodes M tells the story of how she finally became reconciled to being forced by her parents to be a teacher, though she still has hopes of getting out of the teaching profession. In the first story M tells of how she had dreams of becoming an actress or working in an office but was forced by her parents, who were both teachers, to become a teacher herself. She finishes this episode on an ambivalent note in that though she has adjusted herself to teaching she is determined not to "pension as a teacher". In the second story she recounts a period of rebellion against teaching in which she stayed at home for three years and did nothing. She goes on to tell of her return to teaching and finishes with her resolve to leave the profession having weakened in the face of her uncertainty about her ability to study again at her age. The final episode sees M standing aside from her younger self to make a mature evaluation of her own and her parents' past actions.

S's story: "my last parent passed away" so I had to come back"

S is 55 years old and single with two children. S differs from the others in that she begins her story when she is already a teacher. It recounts an attempt to get away from a profession in which she was not interested; an attempt which is thwarted by her parents' death. The episodes trace her change of perception of the teaching profession and her pragmatic acceptance that her ambitions would not be met. S's first story very briefly overviews her

detour into nursing and deals mainly with how she came to be teaching in her present school with which she identifies. The second story tells of her motivations towards nursing. In the third episode S begins to tell of her ambitions to travel after she had qualified as a nurse but soon changes to tell of her ambitions as a teacher. In the fourth story S explains her role as firstborn in the family. This contrasts with the descriptions of the possibilities for her when her parents were alive described in the final episode. In this fifth episode S puts her idea of going into nursing and her other ambitions into the context in which they occurred and positions herself in the present as a teacher looking back on that time.

D's story: "Not a bed of roses"

D is 56 years old and married with one child. D's story is told in two episodes. D describes her whole life as a teacher as not being "a bed of roses". The first episode takes the listener in a seamless way from D's hard life as a child to the difficulties of adulthood. She relates the complications caused by sickness, conditions for teachers not including maternity leave and her present-day worry of the impact forced removals in 1986 may have on her pension rights. It is only in the second story that D reflects back on her choice of career as being "the only profession" available to her. In this reflection she positions herself to see it as a culturally informed choice.

Becoming a teacher: choices and options

The second phase of the analysis is concerned with the choices and/or decisions made by the teachers in arriving in their present occupations. Using a framework based on Mishler's (1992) model to compare their paths to becoming a teacher, each interviewee is seen to achieve their positions through a hierarchy of "choices". Mishler (1992) demonstrates his model in a Western context where there are multiple choices in the sphere of work. However, because of the socioeconomic context of interviewees in this research, the term "choice" is used very loosely to also embrace the concepts of "available options" and "lack of choice". Thus, to arrive at being a teacher each of the interviewees passed through the following sequence of choices:

1. work/no work
- professional/non professional
- type of profession

The following table illustrates how the interviewees frame these various choices. In some interviews no mention is made of a particular choice.

(INSERT TABLE 2 HERE)

At the level of work/no work choice only M made a choice not to work for several years, but this was a choice she made after she had already been forced by her parents to qualify as a teacher. C and G mention the importance of their working to support the family because they were the firstborn children. At the level of choice of profession, for C, G and M, choosing a professional career meant getting work more quickly. M's parents, like S's, also saw it as very important to be a professional or have a qualification. D saw that there was only one choice for "Red" people and framed her choice in terms of her cultural background.

None of the teachers thus mention that they had chosen or wanted to become a teacher first and foremost. On the contrary they all say that there was no alternative and/or they were not interested in teaching. As their stories reveal that there seemed to be few choices available to them, it is interesting to take the analysis a step further to gain an understanding of how the interviewees make sense of this lack of choice and how they have shaped coherent stories about their work.

Creating coherent stories about work

At this point of the analysis the core narratives and stories of which they are composed are analyzed individually to gain an understanding of the sense and themes around which coherence is created. The ways in which the various participants create coherence in their stories is summarized at the end of the section.

C's Core Narrative: "The easy way"

Over the course of the series of stories, C makes sense of her choice of teaching in a variety

TABLE 2 : WORK CHOICES

CHOICE	C	G	M	S	D
WORK	I am the first-born so I am to look after the other children because we are fatherless	The firstborn couldn't go far. He just fell of in standard 3. My parents wanted me to be a teacher so that I can help others (siblings).	I stayed (in teaching post) for six months only. I just told them that I will not be available next month. I'm fed up. I am not coming back. So I went to stay with (my sister) in 1982, 83, 84 doing nothing.		
PROFESSION	I thought it was the easy way because I'll take only two years and then I'll work after two years	I thought of taking the shortest route to become a professional. You get work more quickly than just a housewife or so.	(My parents) said it was very much important to be professional, to have something conc (sic) because by that time it was very much easy to get a job by having a teachers' certificate.	(My parents) felt that qualification is better than anything	
TYPE OF PROFESSION	There is nothing that drives me to be a teacher except that I think there's no other alternative. (Repeats statement of work in two years)	I became a teacher because my parents had no money to take me to the university. I wanted to become a nurse.	I was never interested in teaching. My parents are both teachers. I was forced by them to do teaching.	I was not much interested in teaching so I applied for nursing (my mother) passed away so I had to come back. I was the first-born so I had to look after my younger sisters and a brother.	Red families we thought teaching was the only profession

of ways. There is a shift in her position towards teaching, from regarding it as being a profession in which she can qualify quickly, to taking up the voice of teaching in the final story.

Story 1: "I do struggle"

In this story C evaluates her life as a struggle and it is around a theme of struggle that she creates coherence of her choice to become a teacher. The struggle centres around C's identity as "the firstborn" and the responsibilities this identity entails. At the end of the story the siblings are qualified and this justifies the cause for the struggle.

C prefaces the telling of her failure to get a teaching post with the explanation that the only reason she decided to take up teaching is because she thought it would be the quickest way to get work which in turn would help her to take care of her siblings. This explanation fits well with the struggle theme. However, there also seems to be some ambivalence in this explanation. She seems confused when she says:

020 to be trained as a teacher was not something I didn't love or I do love it. Only
 021 because I thought teaching would take me two years it would be
 022 an advantage to me to go and work because at home I am the firstborn so
 023 I am to look after the other children because we are
 024 fatherless.

and she glosses over the fact that the "two years" the teaching qualification would take does not take into account the additional two years working in Cape Town to earn money for this training. These are perhaps hints of contradiction to the struggle theme and precursors to changes in how she makes sense of her career choice in the future stories.

Story 2: "Becoming something"

The struggle continues in this second story as C tells of the job she took in a dairy shop in Cape Town, which involved a long journey to work and an early morning start

259 I didn't have some money to go to St. Matthews and then I worked for two years to
 260 go the following year.
 262 I bought all the necessary
 266 things that were listed in (the) application form; things like white bedspread,
 267 white sheets and so on.

However, in this story there is a shift in focus and these efforts, instead of their being for the benefit of her siblings, seem to be directed towards C's own sense of self when she says it was "that feeling of becoming something" which kept her going for the two years she worked in Cape Town.

Story 3: "Nothing without education"

054 There is nothing that drives me to be a teacher except that I think there's no
055 other alternative. I thought that teaching is the easy way because I'll take
056 only two years and then I'll work after two years.

C begins this story with this comment but her original reason for teaching becomes less potent and a new sense of coherence comes into play when she gives more details about the miserable time when she had to sell vegetables because she could not find employment as a teacher. She positions herself as an educated person when her uneducated friends from the location who have jobs in factories laugh at her:

087 they said that I had wasted my time and they are working in factories and
088 they are getting some fat cheques and I just said to them, "Earning big cheque or fat
089 cheque is nothing without education because tomorrow you will be driven
090 away from that work where I won't be driven in teaching".

Education is important for C because it brings with it the identity of being "something"; "earning big cheque" is nothing without education.

Story 4: "I am proud of being a teacher"

In this story C takes up the voice of the teaching profession as she tells of her attempts to protect the image of the teaching profession:

STORY 4 : "I am proud of being a teacher"

Abstract

217 People have a negative to teachers because of the things that are
218 happening outside done by the bad teachers. For instance some teachers didn't
219 come to work, they drink and don't go to work.

Orientation

226 I am proud of being a teacher and we are trying to talk to these
227 people who are spoiling our jobs entirely.

Narrative clause

231 like for instance, I have a friend of mine who is drinking and then I called her
232 one day and telled (sic) him, "My friend, don't do it like this, people outside are looking at

233 us. We must be example. And then she said to me, "OK my friend, I'll try". And I
 234 told him that, well my friend you can drink your liquor during the weekend
 235 not during working hours.

Resolution/coda

And then she is trying to cope with me, she is trying to do
 236 that.

Over the course of her narrative C, as narrator, has shaped her stories as a protagonist with three different but interwoven identities. From the firstborn and street seller identities emerge a strong teacher identity. In the first story she adopts the position of firstborn and relates the hardships that forced her into the identity of street seller. The second story forms a bridge between the identities of firstborn and teacher; it shifts from the hard, manual work of the struggle as family provider to her "white sheets" vision of a person in training to be a professional. C's ideas about the "nothingness" of her identity as street seller and the "somethingness" of her educated, teacher identity are conveyed in the third story. In the fourth story, in positioning herself to take up the voice of teaching as she talks of "our¹ jobs", **C confirms her teacher identity as she struggles to ensure that the teaching profession is one of which she can continue to be proud.**

G's Core Narrative: "My parents had no money to take me to the university so I decided to take the shortest path"

Coherence is created for G around what is pragmatic in the world and consequently teaching is seen by her only as something necessary to earn a living for her family.

Story 1: "The shortest route to become a professional"

G starts her narrative by saying "I became a teacher because my parents had no money to take me to the university", and in so doing she makes sense of her inability to go to university and become a nurse around her family's poverty which causes her to take "the shortest route to become a professional". She contrasts the identity of a professional with that of a housewife in the pragmatic terms of getting work more quickly.

¹ **Where bold text is used the emphasis is mine.**

Story 2: '(My mother) ask me to keep the others'

Similarly G frames her parent's wish for her to become a teacher, 'something professional', as a means to 'more quickly' helping to keep the family. However, as with C, these plans were complicated by G's failure to get a teaching post immediately after leaving college. Despite the fact that she had temporary 'jobbing' teaching posts after qualifying she only regards 'starting teaching' as being when she starts to work 'under the government' three years later. Thus it seems that her identity is associated with the permanent, professional, position rather than the job or activity of teaching.

Story 3: 'I am happy to be a teacher ' you get time to care for your own children'

It is clear in this story that G shapes her identity as a teacher around that of being a mother. Teachers are 'just people' and the act of teaching itself is 'nothing special', but it is the freedom to be with her own children, that the profession allows her, that makes her happy:

109 I am happy now to be a teacher because if you are here you stay at home

110 you see your children. You care for your children. You get time to care for your

111 own children.

Story 4: 'I'm not their mam'

Leading out of the previous story where her identity as a mother is foremost, in this story G speaks of her desire to confine her teacher identity to the school. She complains that in the village people refer to her, as they do in school, as 'Mam':

250 If they give you something they call you, 'Come here, Mam'. I am not

251 their mam.

Clearly her teacher identity is not something she enjoys outside school.

Thus whilst being a teacher was not G's chosen career, she creates coherence by telling a story in which she figures as a person whose key role in both her family of origin and own family is closely linked to the benefits that a teaching post can offer. In Story 3 she evaluates this situation from her present position when she says, 'I am happy **now** to be a teacher because if you are here you stay at home you see your children'.

M's Core Narrative: *Forced to be a teacher*

As narrator M shapes her identity as someone who is really very different from the teacher she has been forced to be. A theme runs through the episodes of the narrative of the forces which keep M in a profession that she does not enjoy and prevent her from becoming the person she *likes* to be.

Story 1: *I was never interested in teaching*

In this story there is a movement from being forced, as a young person, by her parents to become a teacher, to the present time where she is forced by the restrictions of home ownership to remain in teaching despite her desire *to do something with a computer*. At the beginning of the story M distances herself from teaching and her parents' choice of career for her and makes sense of it by telling a story of how she was forced by them into teaching. She describes the very rich identity she had imagined for herself as potential actress or office worker but was forced to abandon:

007 I was forced by them to do teaching. I was interested in music and even acting.
 008 Yes, I was very interested in acting. As a child I liked imitating the plays. If you
 009 have seen the Bona, there are stories in the Bona with ladies with long hair and being
 010 gorgeous. As a child I like that. I used to take my mother's purse and wear big earrings

M has *adjusted* herself to teaching but she is determined not to remain a teacher. However, along with this determination there is her ambivalence about overcoming the force of her home ownership:

024 my problem now is just that
 025 I've got a house in town and I'm planning selling it by June this year. After that
 026 I think I'll be going to Cape Town to do something with a computer.
 027 Otherwise I won't pension here as a teacher. I don't like it, really. But I am
 030 just doing it because I am forced and so I thought by that fact that my house is in town.

Story 2: *I am not going to be a teacher*

In this story M tells of how she overcame the forces of her parents by leaving teaching and staying at home with her sister for three years:

126 I just told them that I

127 will not be available next month. I am not coming back.

Eventually though she is forced by boredom to return to teaching:

133 And then in 1986 I was so bored to be in the location doing absolutely nothing

M is still not happy as a teacher but at the end of the story it seems as though M might feel she is forced by her age to remain a teacher as she thinks she might not be able to make it at computer school. As narrator her protagonist self has the power to fight both her parents and boredom but as she returns to the present she seems to become overwhelmed once more:

167 I am just thinking of my age, if I can make it at

168 school. Can I?

Story 3: I was having high aims but I was still a child

M positions herself in this final story as a mature adult explaining her actions as a young protagonist. She believes that though her parents were forcing her to be a teacher when she was young, there were possibly other forces that she might not have been able to withstand:

231 I was

232 having high aims but I was still a child. At that age I am sure I

233 would have been doing a lot, I would have been a drunkard or an alcoholic by that time. I

234 was very young. Really I was very young.

M's narrative creates coherence around her lack of career choice by telling of her powerlessness in the face of various forces that drove her to be a teacher and kept her in teaching; her parents, the boredom she experienced without a job when she refused to be a teacher, the house in town that she cannot sell and her now advancing age. However she does move on to position herself as mature person, commenting that her early high aims were just part of being a child. In this way M assumes control over power that she relinquished in the past. However, her present voice at the end of Story 3, as she speaks of her concerns about the force of age, is less sure.

S's Core Narrative: *My last parent passed away so I had to come back*

S makes sense of being a teacher around seeing herself as having some choice in her early

life when her parents were capable of "letting us do whatever we feel like"; but this choice was stymied when her mother died and, as firstborn, she had to look after her younger siblings.

Story 1: "I was not much interested in teaching"

In this story S first positions herself as already a teacher but "not much interested in teaching"; an autonomous, mobile self who "applied for nursing" and "went to Baragwanath". However, this nursing training is complicated by her mother's death and there is a shift in her identity. We now hear how she was "approached" to come and start (her present) school and S takes on the identity of a teacher in a "one-teacher school". She shapes her story around the difficulties in maintaining this identity; forced removals, the collapse of the school buildings and obtaining the present temporary structures. S reasserts her autonomy in the coda when she tells of how, when she first returned to teaching, she was motivated by the appearance and behaviour of teachers and "**decided**" to join "this profession".

Story 2: "Nurses then looked as if they were more professional"

As S explains why she wanted to go away from teaching she keeps up her position as teacher. A change of reason mid-sentence suggests she is smoothing her story to fit her present teacher identity:

037 P. What made you go away from teaching in the first place?

039 S. There was just nothing. It is only the conditions and er no, it's only that nurses

040 then looked as if they were more professional than others

045 That's what motivated me **then**.

Story 3: "I was an ordinary PTC teacher"

S begins speaking of how she would have continued with nursing if her mother had not died and her ambitions to travel but quickly switches back to the way in which she upgraded her teaching qualifications. She positions herself in relation to her qualification as a teacher; her elevation from an "ordinary PTC teacher" to a "qualified" person with a "Junior Primary Teachers Diploma".

Story 4: "I was the firstborn"

In this short story S positions herself as firstborn responsible for her family. When asked if she was disappointed that she had to leave her nursing "halfway", S replies:

148 No, I was not disappointed. It is only that at my home I was the firstborn. We
149 were seven. I was the firstborn and I felt that I just cannot stay in Johannesburg far
150 from my home. So I had to look after my younger sisters and a brother.

Story 5: "Qualification is better than anything"

As with M in this final story S is looking back and taking control of her story by putting things into their historical context. She puts her career choices and decisions to travel into the context of past circumstances rather than thwarted desires and ambitions. All the children, with the exception of her brother who died after matric, "started by having (a teaching) qualification". "There was nothing much" that made her want to travel:

279 It's only that my parents when I
280 started school and they were still alive they were capable of doing anything for
281 themselves and letting us do whatever we feel like.

S shapes her story around the contrast between the past when she was "not much interested in teaching" and the later situation where she is "principal, assistant and everything". Her position as firstborn is crucial to this contrast. Earlier ambitions are relegated to their place in time in the light of this position. For S identity also seems to be linked to appearances; the school buildings, how teachers dressed and behaved and the "more professional" appearance of the nurses with their epaulets and stripes on their caps. It is from her present position as a principal who has "developed" her school that she shapes her story around as someone who "decided to join this profession" rather than someone forced by the death of her parent to give up on the preferred profession of nursing. Hence, she portrays herself as a person with power rather than someone who has failed to reach her goals.

D's Core Narrative: "Not a bed of roses"

D creates coherence around herself being at the centre of a life that was "not a bed of roses" and evaluates the chronicle of her life events in terms of the hardships she had to face.

Story 1: "Not a bed of roses"

D establishes her identity as being from a wealthy family in the beginning of this story. Telling of how she had to take off her uniform after school and look after the sheep creates an image of education being cherished alongside basic manual work. However, this situation was complicated by sickness which led to life being "not a bed of roses". Life events are related to sickness or specific difficulties over which she had no control. Her "doctor transferred" her to a school closer to home. She identifies with being "a single woman" and the difficulties in having a baby in "those times" when there was no maternity leave in such cases. Even when things improved for D it was because she was "asked to take a transfer" to her present post by her mother-in-law. She was happy because it was her "first time to be away from home". This time the situation was complicated by the transfer of the village to the Republic of South Africa during the time of forced removals, and this has resulted in her present concerns about her pension for her full period of service. Her concern of identity seems to focus around her prospects of being a pensioner:

051 My pension, that is my main worry now

052 because I am losing those years of my service yes.

In this story D does not specifically identify with being a teacher; she does not use the word "teacher" in connection with herself but refers only to "teaching", "years of my service" or her "teaching post".

Story 2: "We (Red Families) thought teaching was the only profession"

In this story D positions herself in the present and in relation to her culture as she reflects on her choice of teaching:

063 As we grew from those old Red families, I'll put it that way,

066 we thought teaching was the only profession.

In D's narrative it seems as though there is little distance between herself as narrator and protagonist who is still positioned in a situation which is "not a bed of roses". However, distance is created when, as her present self, she reflects on herself in past situations: as a child from a wealthy family, a single parent or a happy person away from home for the first

time. In this way it seems as if teaching is just part of the difficult context with which D had to contend, rather than contributing to her identity. She is already preparing to take on the identity of pensioner.

Summary of coherent stories about work

An earlier level of analysis revealed that none of the interviewees had wanted to become a teacher first and foremost. In the light of this lack of career choice they create coherence around their work stories in a variety of ways.

C has accepted her teacher identity and initially shapes her story around this as being necessary to sustain her family, creating coherence around the struggle that this involves. However, over the course of her narrative there also emerges her struggle to become 'something' and to get an education for herself. In the social sphere this indicates a move beyond the family to her need to have an identity in the wider community. In contrast G makes sense of her work identity only in relation to her family. Her job is important in that it serves her need both to support and be with her children. She shuns her position as teacher in the wider community.

M's perception of her power in the face of the forces of society in the shape of her parents, alcohol, home ownership and advancing age fluctuates depending on how she positions herself in relation to them. As narrator she has power but as protagonist she has little power and in such a position she reverts to 'trying' as a teacher 'just for the sake of the kids'. Being a teacher is not an identity that sits comfortably with her and she is keen to show something of the actress or office worker trapped inside her.

S has shaped her story around choice rather than force. She does not make room for any position that would see her life as a loss of desired goals or ambitions but rather positions herself as deciding to 'join this profession'. She identifies with the school she has 'developed' and her achievements as a teacher seem important for her identity. This is confirmed when, outside the narrative, S expresses her pride in having seen some of her ex-

pupils go on to become professional people.

D positions herself in relation to a life of difficulty which is still ongoing. Whilst some of her difficulties were from her family context others were from her wider social context; her years of service in teaching which are in jeopardy, her difficulty as a single parent and her present pension problems. Consequently, in making sense of her life as not being a "bed of roses", teaching is just part of this situation rather than something from which she gains identity or sense of self.

Coherence in these narratives is framed mostly around familial contexts though societal forces beyond the family are touched on or alluded to. A final level of analysis examines how the respondents dealt with some of the social contexts and social histories as they made sense of their work lives.

Broader social contexts and social histories

At this level I limit the analysis to three themes which emerge from the narratives of the teachers, namely education and professionalism, family position and forced removals. Not all the interviewees refers to all these themes, but what is common to the emergence of these themes is that the teachers all employ narrative smoothing to their stories around these issues.

When considering the prevalent broader social context and social history pertaining to their stories, Apartheid was an ever-present social institution in this country for the majority of these women's lives. Education was a prime site for discrimination during the Apartheid era, and yet none of the teachers refer explicitly to the inequalities of this time in the course of their narratives, and it is on this aspect that I would like to focus. I link this focus to the three themes mentioned above.

Education and professionalism

Each of the interviewees refer in some way to the advantages of having a profession or an education which leads to a profession (See Table 3).

(INSERT TABLE 3 HERE)

These and other simple statements from the narratives can be analyzed and interpreted in terms of their social and historical contexts.

Collectively, for example, the interviews cannot be viewed from a Western perspective where education is a taken for granted basic norm. The respondents from poorer families, C and G, narrate their struggle to get schooling for themselves and their younger siblings. Consequently, education and professional training was prized as "very much important" and seemed to give some social standing; the "feeling of becoming something" and, as M says, something "concrete". In contrast, as Mayer (1971) points out, "Red" parents like D's tended to strictly limit their children's education in order not to contaminate their rural traditional way of life with white colonial education. Mostly only one child in the family was educated sufficiently to enable them to read for the family's benefit. Thus, for D, teaching was "the only profession" possibly because Red families were reluctant to consider education that "changes the African's way of thinking and makes him think like a White man" (Mayer, 1971, p. 28). Whilst relating her career choice in a cultural context D also puts it clearly into the past when she refers to it as happening "during those years".

However, whilst some social factors are alluded to in the narratives it is necessary to scratch further beneath the surface of some of the explanations to get a clearer picture of the social contexts in which these stories are set.

C, G and M talk of the teaching as being the shortest, easiest route to becoming a professional whilst S speaks of being "an ordinary PTC teacher" before she "upgraded". It was a short and easy route because in order to become a primary teacher it was only necessary to complete Form 3 before going on to study PTC 1 and PTC2. In order to become a nurse Forms 4 and 5 had to be completed before nursing training commenced. What none of interviewees mention however is that the Primary Teachers Certificate was a

TABLE 3: ADVANTAGES OF BEING PROFESSIONAL OR EDUCATED

C	G	M	S	D
<p>feeling of becoming something</p> <p>Earning a big fat cheque is nothing without education</p>	<p>You get work more quickly when you are a professional.</p>	<p>they said it was very much important to be professional, to have something conc (sic)</p>	<p>(my parents) felt that qualification is better than anything</p>	<p>teaching was the only profession</p>

device of the Apartheid era Bantu Education Act of 1953 introduced to boost the number of black teachers available for primary schools in order to replace the white teachers who were being phased out of black schools as part of the Verwoerdian state policy (Christie & Collins, 1984; Govender, 1996). With the exception of M who is 40 years old, the interviewees are all over fifty years old and consequently would have received their schooling and teacher training during the 1960s and 1970s under the Apartheid education system. This system, unlike education for whites, was specifically geared to mass education at lower levels and only a small proportion went on to higher grades (Christie & Collins, 1984). Similarly, C and G speak of their struggle in a position of poverty to provide education. However, they do not speak of the inequality of the compulsory contributions they would have had to make to their schools and or having to pay for their own textbooks and stationery, expenses not payable by white children (Christie & Collins, 1984). Christie & Collins (1984) speak of the teachers' certificate being a three year certificate but all the interviewees undertook a two year certificate.

It would seem that the interviewees have smoothed their narratives to exclude such matters as colonialism and apartheid. Some of the teachers refer to the times without being explicit about the issues. They speak of "then" and "those times" in ways that suggest there might be some implicit understanding of how things were in the past. M, for example, in her second story says, "then it was 1979 so it was none. It was only teaching which was recognized as a profession". S, in her fifth story tells of why her sister decided to take up nursing; "married women were not allowed to teach then". Of herself in her first and second stories S speaks of what motivated her "then". D refers to "those times" when it was difficult for a "single woman" to get time off work to have a baby. Thus it seems that these interviewees use these linguistic devices not only to position themselves as narrators looking back on the past but also to allude to much wider social constraints and histories.

Family position

Whilst the responsibilities of being the firstborn in the family clearly occur with the family

situation, an understanding of what constitutes those responsibilities is created in a wider social context. C and S are the firstborn in their families whilst G has to adopt that role and in their narratives there is a taken-for-granted assumption that the communal needs of the family will take priority over their own individual needs. They make sense of their life stories around this assumption. C only refers to her struggle to 'become something' once she has positioned herself as being the firstborn who has 'to look after the children because we are fatherless'. As the first one in her family to reach Standard 8, G has to take over from the firstborn who 'couldn't go far' and help to 'keep the others'. S reshapes her story around being a teacher when she has to abandon her plans to become a nurse and to travel after her mother's death. As well as being shaped around the culturally based assumption that the firstborn helps the other members of their families, these stories are similar in that there is again an omission of any reference to the inequality of what was available in black education and its comparative cost. So the stories are framed in terms of the firstborn's responsibilities in relation to the poverty of the families, the '(falling) off of the firstborn in Standard three or Standard four', or the loss of income after the parent's death, rather than in terms of the relatively high cost of education to black people or the fact that the black education system was designed to cater mainly to educate children to Standard 4 only (Christie & Collins, 1984).

Forced removals

S and D refer to the forced removals of residents from their village to the Ciskei homeland which took place because it was a 'black spot' in the 'white corridor' of the Eastern Cape (Platzky & Walker, 1985). Both S and D managed to avoid moving from the village when it was transferred from the Ciskei to the Republic of South Africa in 1986. In S's story it forms an important part of how she was able to develop her school in the face of difficulties, which is crucial to her present identity as a teacher. In telling of this event she makes a distinction between herself and myself as listener by saying 'my people had to leave', but otherwise makes no reference to it being a discriminatory act of Apartheid.

D only brings it up in her story as being responsible for her concern for her pension:

- 043 (this village) at the time was under Ciskei and in the
 044 course of 1986 it was transferred to the Republic of South Africa.
 046 since I started teaching in 1964 I didn't break. I am only worried
 047 that the Department is regarding me as if I started in January 1986.

This account does not include that these boundaries of Ciskei and South Africa were artificially created structures of Apartheid bantustans.

Thus, when locating their stories in the wider social context of their times the teachers smooth their narratives to omit the Apartheid institutions, such as Bantu Education, job reservation, "influx control" and separate "homelands" or "bantustans", which were part of their historical context and which restricted their career possibilities. M, for example speaks of her desire to work in an office but there were few jobs available for black women in offices during the 1980s. Geographically, all the women lived in rural areas where there was very little work of any sort available, but before the 1980s it was difficult to work outside one's own area of residence due to pass laws. Consequently teaching was one of the few jobs available in the rural areas.

DISCUSSION

In this paper I have analyzed the life stories of five women from a rural area in the Eastern Cape using a narrative form of analysis. Such an analysis leads, for each of these interviews, to what Kvale refers to as:

a condensation or a reconstruction of the many tales told by the different subjects into a richer, more condensed and coherent story than the scattered stories of the separate interviewees.

(1996, p. 199)

The analysis has shown how the women have shaped their stories and identities in different ways to deal with the lack of work choice. They find coherence in their stories around their families and/or their personal struggle for survival. They all had contextual difficulties with which they had to cope; poverty, familial or parental obligation or illness and their stories tell of how they dealt with those difficulties. For all but M, there is a sense that they have adjusted to their roles in life and identify with being a teacher or the profession of teaching.

M and D are concerned with their future selves and this perhaps preoccupies their present sense of self and feelings of identity attached to teaching.

The narrative method of analysis is clear about its subjectivity and I have been an active participant at all stages of the process of in finding and molding the different events related in the interviews into coherent stories (Kvale, 1991; Mishler, 1986a, 1986b). A part of this participation is my interpretation and questioning, at the analysis stage, of whether or not the teachers have smoothed their stories to omit issues related to Apartheid which may have influenced their life and their choices. My hypothesis is just one of the many instances where the interviews have posed further questions, and one needs to take the interviewees' stories back to them for further discussion. This illustrates the notion of the 'hermeneutic circle' to which I referred earlier. In the absence of further stories I can only speculate about reasons for this narrative smoothing. For example, it is possible the interviewees were feeling the need to be politically correct with me, as a white interviewer. M does make the distinction in her story of 'my people' which acknowledges a difference between us. Similarly D seems to struggle to explain her choice of teaching in a way I will understand:

062 So as one from,
 063 how can I put it, as we grew from those old
 064 Red families, I'll put it that way,
 066 We thought teaching was the only profession

Alternatively, perhaps such memories from the past are too painful to include in such a context. According to Reissman:

Political conditions constrain particular events from being narrated. The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from awareness.

(1993, p.3)

Both my hearing, and the teachers' telling, of the stories take place in a present-day context layered with other stories and histories which influence their telling and my interpretation.

The teachers' narratives show how they make sense of their life stories, not only by chronicling past events, but also by shaping them in the light of their current context in such a way that the interviewees present a version of themselves, an identity, which is 'true' for that particular moment in time. Thus the teachers position themselves in relation to teaching

in a way that presents the identity they wish to portray. In this way we learn of their understanding of, for example, such concepts as becoming a "professional" and what it meant to them as young people trying to support their families. These meanings we can compare with the present, public notions of teacher professionalism.

At the beginning of this paper I referred to Thabo Mbeki's comments about teachers and their profession. More recently the present Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, stated that, "the level of professionalism among teachers is at its lowest" (Daily Dispatch, 1999). The teachers' stories in this paper provide a contrast to such media stories. They help us to construct richer and alternative meanings to those put forward by Mbeki and Asmal when, for example, they speak of concepts such as "the professionalism of teaching" and "teaching as a calling".

Furthermore, as a result of this research, our understanding of these women has gained depth, as through their life stories we witness the forging of their work identities.

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