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'Nobody says how people died of heartache!': Constructing a primary narrative in a pedagogical setting

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Abstract

National and international literature on history education and regime change emphasises the importance of primary narratives in (re)establishing a democratic society. By telling and listening to primary narratives we not only include 'lost' or 'silent voices' in the historical record, but we (might) prevent atrocities from happening again. The primary witness, however, is mostly presented and treated as 'the Other', someone who has to be brought into the learning and teaching process. Moreover, an understanding of how a primary narrative is constructed and used in a pedagogical setting has not yet been established in existing literature. The article presents and analyses a case study in which a primary witness, working at a former HOR school in a supportive (not pedagogical) role, is brought in to guide Grade Nine learners in the area from which she had been forcibly removed during apartheid. The analysis suggests that we have to look further than the mere *presence* of primary narratives in history education, and study the pedagogical practice and approach to history that the teacher/facilitator (in this case a primary witness) employs. The latter includes primary narratives but also 'less organised' forms of positioning self and others in history.

It is a clear autumn day in Cape Town, April 2005. Eileen Meyer [a pseudonym], a woman in her early sixties, is walking with a group of Grade 9 learners through the area from which she had been forcibly removed during apartheid.

She counts the number of cottages in each street or road we passed already. Learners are taking note. 'Have you got it? ... everybody still writing?' She always gives them enough time to write. It seems to determine our pace. She spells the names of shops that were there. A boy tells her that the grandpa of a girl in Grade 11 lived in the area. EM points out a house where there was a shop; the man who owned the shop still has his business now in Retreat. 'Here is history now again', she says, pointing at the church where she was confirmed, married; where her children were confirmed, married, and where her

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husband was buried out from last year. ‘Ok?’ I watch her saying this, she remains seemingly motionless while she waits till the learners have written this down. What does this make her feel? A boy asks her if she still attends here. She says her children sometimes do, cause they have a car. You need a car to get here, she explains, the church is empty Sunday mornings because people have to come from so far, from Mitchell’s Plain etc. ‘On the pavement. Careful there’s people that side.’ – ‘white’ people are passing us. [Researcher’s observation notes on first group]

Pointing out landmarks in the landscape and instructing the learners to take note, Eileen Meyer re-inscribes the area with shops and homes where (mostly) ‘coloured’ families live with ‘13 children in a two-bedroom house’. She draws playing children and ‘friendly’ gangsters onto the streets that presently bustle with ‘white’ inhabitants and business owners and ‘black’ workers and maids who pass by or – from a distance – stare at the flock of ‘coloured’ and ‘black’ children. A few greet the learners.

This article problematises the role and use of primary narratives and their bearers in meeting the demands of the history curriculum for the inclusion of oral testimony in the recovery of silent or lost voices. By focusing on how Eileen Meyer, a victim of the apartheid policy of forced removals, is engaged as a primary witness with young post-apartheid learners, the article provides a taste of a multi-layered analysis of this emerging pedagogy.

The ‘never again imperative’ and the construction of primary narratives

In South Africa, where the majority were treated as ‘foreigners’ under the apartheid regime, this kind of pedagogical interaction is important. The Department of Education (DOE) curriculum statement of 2002 urges educators to include ‘lost voices’ or ‘silent voices’ in history, by engaging the younger generation in oral history projects and in visits to heritage sites (DOE 2002: 4-6, 92-3).

The pedagogical importance of primary narratives, however, lies not only in ‘revising’ the historical record. Literature on oral history and history education in South Africa presents the sharing of primary narratives as something that needs to happen, in order *to prevent the atrocity from happening again* (Dryden 1999; Coombes 2003; Jeppie 2004; Naidu et al. 2007). Teachers too speak about this so-called ‘never again’ imperative. Lesley Adonis [a pseudonym], the Grade 9 teacher who asked Eileen Meyer to guide the learners, said the following:

Living memory is so short! You know, I, I don’t know, I find the memory of people are so short! But so short! (long pause) Ten years on people don’t remember (laughs). It’s scary, it’s so frightening, you know. That for me was also one of the issues why I thought the walk, because the question is, how do you make people remember? But not only remember (pause), that you don’t repeat the mistakes of the past. (long pause) I think there’re very few answers. But I think the one thing is through education. That is why I felt that the story must be told. And (long pause) that must be an oral history that is ongoing. So it’s passed down the generations. And in that way (pause) I don’t think you

can say 'never'. But it's more. When that history is not told, when the memory dims, it becomes easier to repeat the mistakes of the past. But when that is a LIVING history, when it is stories that are told down the generational line, then I think (pause) there is a greater possibility [that it won't happen again].

As is clear from Lesley Adonis's reflection, the 'never again' imperative remains an imperative; it does not guarantee a peaceful future. Internationally, researchers and primary witnesses of traumatic historical events similarly question the imperative (Simon 2005; Wiesel 2006). This awareness moves our attention beyond the mere *presence* of primary narratives in history education, to the question *how one constructs and uses* a primary narrative. In the context of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel asks a daring question:

[I]s it perhaps our fault that the world remains unchanged? If two or three generations have ignored or rejected our message, could it be that it was poorly and inadequately handed down? Should we have chosen other words, another language to speak the unspeakable? (Wiesel 2006: 1)

Simon (2005) and Wiesel (2006) also argue that primary narratives are not innocent of context or motive. They point out an underlying danger: primary narratives can be used in order to remove or annihilate competing narratives and their bearers.

What lies beneath: The construction of primary narratives in post-apartheid South African history education

The case-study on Eileen Meyer guiding three groups of Grade 9 learners is part of doctoral research that focused on how South African history Grade 9 teachers and museum facilitators of two Cape Town museums construct and use primary narratives when teaching the younger generation about apartheid and the Holocaust (Geschier 2008). The study made use of oral interviews, and classroom and museum observations. One of the conclusions drawn was that the challenge is situated beyond what kind of language or words the primary witnesses use. It does not suffice to study the presence of primary narratives in history education and their construction and use; one also needs to study the pedagogical practice of the person taking on the role of teacher/facilitator and his/her approach to history. Moreover, the analysis of the primary narratives needs to entail an investigation of 'less organised' forms of positioning self and others in history: teachers/facilitators often did not construct easily identifiable narratives, but they did position themselves and others, for example the learners and the learners' parents, in relation to history. These positionings of self and others in relation to history or, as Bruner (1996) would argue, 'the Past, Present and Possible' happened in a variety of ways, including regulative comments.

In contrast to the majority of the study's informants, Eileen Meyer was 'the odd one out'. There were two major differences from a 'normal' pedagogical interaction. Firstly, Eileen Meyer is not a trained teacher, but a custodian in a school that was administered by the House of Representatives (HOR) in apartheid times, restricted to admit-

ting 'coloured' learners. Secondly, the interaction took place outside a conventional pedagogical setting.

Another reason why Eileen Meyer was 'the odd one out' lies in the way in which she positioned herself and how she was positioned by others. The 26 Grade 9 teachers interviewed, seven of whom were observed in the classroom, spoke and acted primarily from their 'teacher' identity. They seemed to 'forget' their primary witness identity with regard to the apartheid regime. In contrast, Eileen Meyer, similarly to primary witnesses working at the District Six Museum and the Cape Town Holocaust Centre, foregrounded her primary witness identity and did not (or with difficulty) respond to questions focussing on the pedagogical interaction itself. Eileen Meyer, the teachers and the principal of the school treated this interaction as being 'different', with the primary witness being 'the other' who has to be brought into the educational process.

Why is this question around the construction of primary narratives and less organised positionings of self and others in history important? It has been 15 years since the first democratic elections in South Africa took place, and history is actively rewritten and negotiated while most of the primary witnesses are still alive.

The psychologist Bar-On (1999: 4) would argue that South Africa is a 'quasi-democratic' nation, a society that moved very quickly out of an oppressive regime. He argues that people do not merely change their identities and values as political or social changes occur (See also Halbwachs 1992: 21-22). The process of reconstructing identities and discourses of what is 'normal', 'describable' and 'discussable' in quasi-democratic societies is something not to be taken for granted because it is a process which unfolds in complex ways (Bar-On 1999: 253-291).

One can witness the complexity of this process of change and reconstruction in the treatment of primary witnesses and primary narratives in the official documents of the South African Department of Education. The national curriculum suggests both Nazi Germany and apartheid as topics in Grade 9. The focus is on learning outcomes around historical consciousness, citizenship and democracy (DOE 2002: 4-6 and 92-3).

From the perspective of an oral historian, the inclusion of these two topics is potentially rewarding for the process of popularising oral history. Both present real opportunities for providing substance to those interested in recovering oral testimony and using it in pedagogical interactions on the recent history of one's country. The revised curriculum for Grades R-9 indeed encourages the 'inclusion of lost voices' in history and encourages teachers to undertake oral history projects and visits to heritage sites. The Department, however, does not make explicit who these 'lost voices' (or 'silent voices') are, nor does it make a distinction between primary witnesses and primary narratives. It provides little insight into the theoretical debates and practical changes that have occurred in the literature on oral history and testimony (DOE 2002: 4-6 and 92-3; 2003: 29 and 36).

Witness identity and fostering change

For the present study, it is important to point out that, as in the case of Eileen Meyer, the primary witness is often treated as ‘the Other’ in education, someone ‘from outside’ who has to be brought into the teaching and learning process. One easily forgets that the majority of the South African teachers have experienced apartheid first-hand in various ways, as teenagers, as adults/parents and even as people who may have taught during the tumultuous times of 1976 and the 1980s. Many teachers, moreover, have experience of being trained and socialised into history and history teaching in particular ways during that era. The curriculum seems to collude with this ‘forgetting’: It assumes that educators know how to achieve the prescribed outcomes through the inclusion of primary narratives, how to facilitate the learning process and, implicitly, how to bring about change. References to the role and influence of personal positions and experiences of the teacher on the learning process are rare (see also Harley et al. 2000; Goodson 1996; Harley and Wedekind 2003; Taylor 1999).

This is problematic for socio-historical and pedagogical reasons. Philosophers, narrative researchers and socio-cultural theorists point out the importance of paying attention to the construction of narratives by individuals and groups within a society. Identity – knowing who one is – is in the words of Taylor ‘to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary’ (Taylor 1989: 28). We inescapably understand this moral orientation in the form of narratives (Taylor 1989: 50-52; Wertsch 2004: 49-50). In addition, LaCapra (2001: 91) states that ‘critically tested’ testimonies of events such as the Holocaust have a social role in the sense that they contribute to ‘a cognitively and ethically responsible public sphere’. While this argument seems to confirm the assumption of an uncomplicated intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values, it points to the importance of paying attention to the subjectivity of teachers/facilitators if we want to understand how people change, reflect on change and mediate this to younger generations.

In the field of education, Ellsworth (1997 and 2005), Jagodzinski (2002), Bruner (1996) and others (Kozulin et al. 2003; Britzman, 2000) also challenge an idealistic, unproblematic interpretation of change. Ellsworth (1997: 8) points out that pedagogy is ‘a much messier and more inconclusive affair than the vast majority of our educational theories and practices make it out to be’. Educators, and human beings in general, have the desire to forget that ‘the fancy of understanding’ is a prestigious but seductive illusion (Ellsworth 1997: 81-82; see also Britzman 2000; Chang 1996; Hooks 1994). Ellsworth explains:

Teaching is not psychoanalysis. But consciously or unconsciously teachers deal nevertheless in repression, denial, ignorance, resistance, fear and desire whenever we teach. And in any classroom, the presence of the discourse of the Other can often become painfully and disturbingly evident and ‘disruptive’ to goals such as understanding, empathy, communicative dialogue. This is especially so in classrooms that deal explicitly with histories (Ellsworth 1997: 70).

Internationally and locally, stakeholders within national and provincial departments of education, teachers and academics increasingly perceive museums as crucial educational sites that document and symbolise the transition, and facilitate the building of the future – or, in Bruner’s words, ‘the Possible’ (1996). Research on and acknowledgment of history classrooms as a site where this transition and the construction of collective memory also takes place, or *might* take place, is, however, minimal and, if present, mostly situated in First World countries (Stearns et al. 2000: 1-2; see also Bage 1999; Kuhn and McLellan 2006; Barton and Levstik 2004). Most research on history classrooms in South Africa focuses on learners’ perceptions, performance, the curriculum and learning outcomes (Bam 2001; Dryden 1999; Kros s.d. and 2000; Chisholm 2004 and 2005; Bundy 2007; Siebörger 2000; Legassick 2007; Taylor et al. 2003; Taylor and Vinjevd 1999). Research on transition and the classroom practice of history teachers as ‘an epistemological and cultural act’ (Stearns et al. 2000: 3) is limited (Dryden 1999; Coombes 2003; Jeppie 2004; Naidu et al. 2007).

Many history teachers, however, do instruct their learners to interview their parents, grandparents or neighbours about their experiences during apartheid. In addition, museums like the Cape Town Holocaust Centre and the District Six Museum actively involve primary witnesses in the development of the exhibitions and in the daily programmes offered to schools. This way of using primary witnesses, and the underlying assumption of a transmission of knowledge and values from one generation to another and learning from and transforming of the past, is, as explained above, well known, defended *and simultaneously* questioned by many.

So let us return to Eileen Meyer: She is brought into the pedagogical setting in the role of primary witness. What kind of narrative does she construct, and, underlying this, with what kind of pedagogical practice and approach to history does she engage? The latter will be addressed first.

An implicit pedagogy: The witness as educator and historian

Even though she did not have formal training in teaching or in historical studies, Eileen Meyer established a specific and patterned pedagogical mode of interaction. It is likely that her experiences as a learner informed this. As is clear from the extract quoted, she focused mainly on, and regulated the pace according to, the learners’ note-taking of what she told them and of spatial markers, such as street names. One could typify this kind of pedagogical practice as being ‘repetition-led’ and the approach to history as being ‘factual’. Meyer’s practice focused mainly on routinely reproducing ‘the truth’ and positioned teacher and learners in specific roles in the pedagogical interaction, namely the teacher teaches the ‘best’ story ‘as the way it happened’, learners absorb and reproduce it. She foregrounded evaluation and control of bodies, movement and noise (Jacklin 2004: 150-156 and 178-200; Seixas 2000: 21-23). In addition, a factual approach to history, according to Seixas (2000: 21-23), ‘enhanc[es] collective memory’ and assists in providing identity, cohesion and social purpose.

While Lesley Adonis's reflection on the 'never again' imperative seems to resonate with the latter interpretation, the analysis below of Meyer's positioning of self and others in history seems to question an unproblematised, inclusive, 'we' group identity.

The pedagogical texts were encapsulated in Eileen Meyer's speech as well as her body language. She linguistically and bodily pointed out and marked the landscape of the area with shops and people that used to be there. She repeatedly checked if the learners had written down the 'facts' she had shared with them. Throughout her interaction, she told the learners to look up in books ('when you are at UCT') and to ask other people about this area and the forced removals. This instruction seemed to function as a truth-claim rather than a discipline-specific instruction to further the learners' knowledge and skills. In the same vein, she told the learners that they could now tell other people that they have seen and walked through the area. The learners asked mainly 'factual' questions, and often checked if their notes were 'correct'. One of the accompanying teachers moved beyond the factual, asking questions relating to the experience of living in that era ('how was it like to live during that era?'), and some of the learners expressed empathy and surprise when Eileen Meyer spoke about her emotions. However, it is not clear if learners wrote down the latter. She often made regulative comments like 'move on, don't be inquisitive' (at a house where a piece of paper on the door read '... no jobs! No money!') and 'Don't look, just walk. Don't look into windows'. These comments demarcate what she perceived as acceptable behaviour, but also the pedagogical text, i.e. not the inside of people's houses.

Some of the activities were more 'convention-led', being orientated towards the procedures of the discipline of history (Jacklin 2004: 144-150 and 168-177): Eileen Meyer asked the learners if they knew people who lived in the area and she asked them to define the Group Areas Act and forced removals, something that the learners had learnt about in class. Discipline-specific activities such as asking the guide critical questions, looking around/investigating, thinking about/linking back to what had been done in class were, however, rare and activities such as comparing different sources/voices were absent. The main role allocated to the learners was to listen and to take notes.

Eileen Meyer constructed her narrative mainly while standing at two buildings crucial to her story: her birth house and the church she attended. Standing at these buildings, her positioning of self *in history* was strong, most notably revealed by markers such as 'So now you have my history now' and 'Here is history again'. In her primary narrative, Eileen Meyer used iterative and generalised positionings using the constructions 'people would' and 'you would'. However, at certain points she seemed to bring in her own person and feelings more explicitly by talking about 'hurt', and '[being like] an uprooted tree'. She clearly struggled to express her emotions. During the second tour, she commented 'The saddest thing is: I show you around, and it brings out memories ... sad, hurt, I can't even tell.' At the end of that tour, Eileen Meyer asked the learners what they had learnt from her.

Teacher: 'I hoped you learnt something.'

'Thanks, Mrs Meyer,' the learners say.

EM asks, 'What did you learn? I want to know ... what can you tell me about what I told you?'

A female learner says that she learnt it was different compared to her own life, how they grew up.

A male learner says it changed a lot.

EM: 'Nobody says how people died of heartache!' She says she is disappointed that though everybody cooperated, a few were 'stupid' ([some boys had] pressed the bell [of a house in the area]). [Researcher's observation notes on second group]

The learners respond here from their position as secondary witnesses, having learnt that life in that time was different from life today. Eileen Meyer expresses disappointment and seems to expect the learners to talk about the pain, which, as she had said previously, she struggled to express herself.

Throughout the three observed tours, Eileen Meyer constantly compared past and present, and constructed an idealised, mythical past: there existed no gangs like they do today – gangsters were 'gentlemen' – and there were no internal tensions within the community. This construction seems to confirm the uniting characteristic Seixas allocates to a factual approach to history. There are, however, many 'others' in her constructed past and present. 'Others' situated in the past were the rats in the run-down houses and the drunkards on the street, but also the government who took the people away. Present 'others' were the researcher, 'black' learners and the 'stupid' learners who rang bells and looked into people's houses. Eileen Meyer apologised to the researcher when she talked negatively about 'the whites' in the area and while the 'black' learners were mostly 'invisible' in the interaction, she implicitly apologised to them when she talked about 'kaffir keppies'. She used this term to refer to headwear of a church in the area that mostly 'blacks' attended. She might have directed this careful positioning of her use of this derogatory, racist term not only towards the 'black' learners, but also towards the 'coloured' learners and the 'white', 'foreign' researcher – a 'present' generation that knows this discourse is not 'politically correct' in post-apartheid South Africa. The different assumptions and expectations of primary witness Eileen Meyer and the secondary witness learners, teacher and researcher come across clearly in the interaction below.

... She tells the learners that at that time there were no burglar bars, etc.; you would sleep with everything open. There were no gangs (as they know gangs today). A learner asks if there were 'white' people living there. EM says all people lived there, 'black', 'coloured', 'white', Christian, Muslim, Jew ... She tells them when people came from work, and were drunk, and would lie in the street, nobody would rob their wages. People would help them get home. 'There wasn't crime, man. ... the gangs would fight amongst each other, not with people.' She says there is hurt inside, because they were uprooted, 'you know, an uprooted tree'. If they would be given back the houses and area, it wouldn't be the same, she says. A male learner comments: 'so you're saying they took a big part of your life away?' EM confirms this. (Moving from metaphor to metonym!) She lists the names of her neighbours. She says people would have 13 children in a two-bedroom

house. The learners seem to be shocked (though two 'black' girls just stare. I find it difficult to read their facial expressions. They're far more shy and reserved than the other learners. They didn't ask a question.) A (male, 'coloured') learner asks, 'What race had most children?' A (male, 'black') learner reformulates: 'Which race dominated?' The teacher and EM almost simultaneously comment, 'You're not listening'. (Is there a conflation of past-present going on here? Learners bringing in THEIR everyday life concepts!). The answer EM gives seems unclear (to me): she seems to want to say 'all of them', but then comments – with a softer voice – that in this street it was all Christians. She also tells them they didn't have a bathroom. (again, I see the two 'black' girls just stare. Do they have a bathroom?). A boy in front asks further and EM tells it was two bedrooms, one small kitchen and a dining room. Toilet outside. EM asks a girl to stand close to her, 'I don't want funny things to happen'. She continues: when they wanted to bath, they had to fill the enamel bath, with cold water. The children were bathed in front of the stove. ... (Researcher's observation notes on first group).

Interestingly, she did not address the many 'white' and 'black' people we met on the street, but to the group she often commented that the 'white' people did not pay good prices for the houses in the past and that now the houses are businesses and are worth much more. In contrast, she said, when she wants to come to church, she cannot, because she does not have transport, she does not have a car. When 'white' people living in the area addressed her, Eileen Meyer did not, could not, express this injustice. Instead, she positioned the learners as unknowing secondary witnesses.

At the corner of a road, an old 'white' woman entering her house asks, 'What's going on?' EM explains to her that she tells the children there used to be a shop on the site of her house. [...] EM also says (as if to downplay the 'political' character of the walk), 'Learners don't know [this area].' [Researcher's observation notes on first group]

Eileen Meyer's regulative discourse was closely linked with her positioning of self and others in history in a space that, for her, is filled with painful memories. This is especially clear in the interaction that took place when the groups arrived back at the school. Her regulative discourse was so dominant at this point of the interaction that, to the researcher, it sounded like giving a sermon.

EM addresses the whole class, saying she is disappointed in them. She says she hoped this talk (walk) would have drawn them together. (Community/identity building!)

She refers to me again, saying, 'A visitor from varsity'.

(This is the first time she explains to the learners who I am. Early on during the walk I heard a boy asking the teacher what my name was, but he didn't get a response).

EM: [...] 'Grow up!' 'Stop acting like little babies!'

(She is starting a sermon here!)

'Don't say things to hurt the next person'. 'Don't hurt the person's feelings! We're all human beings!' 'I hope you're gonna pull yourselves together ... don't be hard on teachers ... it's plain rudeness ... stand up to those who're rude ... Stand up to them! ... Why? Why? I want to know why? Do you come from homes where things like this are tolerated? ... you come to school to LEARN ... why to suffer because of a few? ...'

She refers to the other groups who still have to do the walk: 'Do you think I want to do it?' She says she doesn't do this as part of her job, it's not part of her job description, she doesn't get money for this. She does it because of her love for children. 'You have to pull yourselves together ...' She refers to township schools (she refers to 'coloured' areas only)

'Maybe there they allow [you to do this]'

'Here we want doctors, lawyers from you guys!' 'I wanna be proud of you people!' She says what she says goes one ear in and one ear out.

(The learners look blank).

'Let your teacher also be proud of you.' (so they don't talk about 'Grade 9X' this and that).
'She's not your mother, she's here to teach you.' [Researcher's observation notes on first group]

She addresses the whole group, saying she's disappointed, she thought they were better than [name of another Grade 9 class].

'You didn't even bother [your teacher]', 'Why not appreciate what we adults do for you?'

The teacher comments it was not all of them, only a few.

EM says she thinks they have to go to [name 'coloured' township] high school.

'They corner you in the toilets and slit your throat!'

She asks them what they have learnt.

A girl thanks her in name of the class, saying, 'even though some of us didn't behave'. She says they learnt about the area.

EM echoes: 'of the area, the area.' [Researcher's observation notes on third group]

In these 'sermons', Eileen Meyer's positioning of self and others in history seemed to run strongly along generational lines. At the end of the first observed tour, she insulted and shamed the learners by positioning them as 'little babies' (see Antaki and Widdicombe 1998) and by referring derogatively to the areas a majority of the learners came from as well as to 'coloured' township schools. She repeated the latter insult at the end of the third tour. This positioning is complex. On the surface, it seems she was talking only about the present generation's 'discipline'. She positions the 'ill discipline' (or chaos?) within the learners, but, more importantly, in 'their' areas. Eileen Meyer distances herself from the Cape Flats where she lives, and constructs it as solely 'theirs'. Instead of allocating responsibility or agency within the apartheid government who had created these areas – and had dumped 'non-white' people in them – she talks in a demeaning way about the learners, 'their' townships and township schools.

Because of this shift in agency, the researcher had the impression that Eileen Meyer had displaced her anger and the hurt caused by the apartheid forced removals. In other words, she seemed to split off her own, intolerable feelings of anger and bitterness onto the 'misbehaving' children. It is easier, and possibly more acceptable, to be angry with the children than to show anger and hurt towards for example the old 'white' woman we met on our way, or the even more distant apartheid government. This interpretation, however, might be the researcher's *expectation* of what 'a primary witness would or should feel'. In spite of the fact that one can interpret it as an empowerment, the act of going through the area, and re-inscribing it with history and with people who lived there in the past, seemed to be painful and possibly disempowering for Meyer.

Miemie Taljaard, an Afrikaans-speaking English teacher and one of the proofreaders of this study, said the following about Eileen Meyer's 'sermons': 'I would consider [it] normal [for] a certain generation and group. I have always associated it with the extended family and it might be a way of including the learners, a way of showing concern. The learners from another social standing and generation would not understand or accept it as such, but it could have been meant to be an 'inclusive' sermon' (Taljaard 2007).

Primary narratives and working towards democratic change

The analysis above might come across as 'bleak': what does it tell us about the potential of primary narratives in democratic change? Eileen Meyer's reflections during the interview seem to suggest that she perceives herself as powerless in past and present relationships alike:

'... the hurt that we have inside [...] is like a sore that will never heal. It gets the [scab]. [The scab] falls off, but you still have that oozing of that sore [...] It's still sore. But um, what can we do? That was the government; we couldn't fight against them. Who were we? We were nothing! And we're still nothing! People, uh, uh, think that we have a say in the country, but we don't. (long pause.) They think that we have a say but we don't have a say! You can't just say what you want to! They said freedom of speech but I can't just tell my boss 'I don't like the way you treat me' because he, he's gonna tell me, 'Who the heck do you think you are?' Am I right so? Where's this freedom of speech coming? So we also gotta be careful what we say. You must be very careful what we (sic) say, it's not easy ...'

Her interaction with the learners, similarly, seemed to suggest there is no Possible, in the sense that she did not seem to be hopeful that the country and its people can *change*. Instead, she idealised and stereotyped *the* past with the underlying assumption that there is only *one* past and that Past and thus the Present and the Possible are *closed*. Her underlying feelings of anger, resentment and bitterness, however, fragment this constructed closure. These underlying, often unnamed, feelings might potentially impede empathic understanding on the side of the learners if they are not assisted in analysing the complexities within these interactions, enveloping both pedagogical subject-positions and positions of self and others in history.

The relevant literature indicates that the above typified pedagogical practice and approach to history do not contribute to changing teachers' and learners' perceptions, and, in a wider context, the democratisation of society. The 'ideal' dialogue would be 'analytic' and 'constructive': inviting the participants to *analyse* and consciously reflect on the interrelatedness of self and the world, and our desire for *both* closure – historical certainty, emblemisation and identification – and openness – fragmentation, otherness. (Simon 2005: 33, 77; LaCapra 2001: 218-219). In this kind of dialogue, 'the Other' is acknowledged as being located on several different levels: as much as 'the Other' is part of the world outside the self, the self, within its own being, also has unknowable or unconscious characteristics, which one does not always want to, or

is able to, address (see Bar-On 1999: 256, 265; LaCapra 2001: 168-169, 218-219; Wertsch 1998: 116-117). At the same time, this kind of dialogue is *constructive* in its recognition of and commitment to ‘the ethical relationship between self and others in the narratives we tell [and listen to]’ (Simon 2005: 23).

One cannot, however, be conclusive with regard to the potential of Eileen Meyer’s involvement in the observed pedagogical interaction. The potential of the primary witness’s involvement in a pedagogical interaction depends on the other interactions the learners are involved in. Learners did interact with each other during the tour. One interaction overheard by the researcher indicated that some learners did temporarily identify with Meyer’s plight and the plight of their ancestors; they showed empathy, an appreciation for the specific position, the personal experiences of the speaker (on defining empathy see LaCapra 2001: 27, 211-213 and Field 2006: 37-39):

A male learner to another boy: ‘I wanna come back’ (to this area?).

The other boy says, ‘You can’t.’

When EM tells about her husband being buried at the church, these boys say, ‘Oh shame.’ (They seem to be genuine). [Researcher’s observation notes on third group]

The researcher did not observe a reaction from Eileen Meyer on these learners’ positioning. When one learner, in the first group, asked a rather critical question, ‘Did you fight?’, she did not respond either. During the tour, learners themselves often remarked on the fact that they do not know the area or when they knew people who did live there, they could not give details. One boy said the grandfather of a girl in Grade 11 used to live in the area (see first extract above). However, Eileen Meyer told the researcher some days later that some learners walked up to her, often after the actual tour or a day later at school and told her that their parents and/or grandparents had experienced the forced removals from the same area.

These ‘other’ interactions, both during the tour and afterwards, seem to ‘ripple’ from Meyer’s testimony. This is a hopeful sign but also needs to be subjected to research in the future. A key question is how do learners take this kind of testimony home? How do they reformulate it, as secondary witnesses, and how do their parents, and/or other family members and acquaintances respond as primary and/or secondary witnesses? Is the testimony taken further in the history classroom? If so, how?

Gaining access to these other spaces is a challenge, however. During the time of the research, two history teachers at the school were also interviewed, one of them being the Lesley Adonis quoted above. Despite an initial agreement with Lesley Adonis to observe her Grade 9 history classes and notwithstanding several attempts, the researcher had no contact with her after the tours. It is possible, however, that her pedagogical practice and approach to history were similar to the majority of the teachers interviewed and observed in the doctoral research, namely speaking and routinely acting from within a factual approach to history with its particular underlying epistemological roles: there is one, best, story about the past that teachers must tell and the learners must accept and reproduce. This contrasts with what the

Department of Education envisions as a pedagogy that focuses on not only disciplined historical skills but also learning outcomes around historical consciousness, citizenship and democracy (DOE 2002: 4-6, 92-3; 2003: 29, 36).

The challenge, however, might lie deeper, or elsewhere, because teachers who spoke and acted within pedagogical practices and approaches to history that theoretically were more conducive to an analytic and constructive dialogue invested in similarly deep yet differing ways in relation to not only the ideal of nation-building (which Seixas (2000) alone typifies as being characteristic of a factual approach to history) but also the epistemological roles mentioned above.

In the case of Eileen Meyer, moreover, we learn that not only is the interaction with the learners accompanied by unspoken assumptions and expectations, but so is the interaction with the people that were met on the street. These passers-by were in age either contemporaries of Eileen Meyer or of the generation of her children, the learners' parents. They were from all kinds of life, representing the full spectrum of the agents of the apartheid drama. Only the present 'white' people were included in her exposé but, as mentioned above, in a seemingly contradictory way: While she portrayed the 'white' people as the ones benefiting from the forced removals in her interaction with the learners, teacher and researcher, she could not directly address or confront them with this injustice.

The complexity and pain that come with these kinds of interactions, and non-existent interactions, might be one of the reasons a majority of teachers do not engage with primary narratives in the first place, whether these are their own or those of others. However, the emotional, personal experiences of teachers and, in this case, the primary witness 'spill over', beg to be witnessed. Similarly, the observations discussed in the doctoral study seem to suggest that teachers' primary experiences are 'an excess' that nonetheless seeps through, even when teachers try to avoid them, for example by *not* sharing their own primary narratives. This seeping through happens in uncanny ways in forms of regulative comments, or when learners specifically *ask* the teachers about their own experiences. We cannot avoid this or act as if it is not there. Not only teachers but also society at large, including researchers and teacher trainers working at universities, do not fully realise that they teach through who they *are*, that they are implicated not merely in their role as teachers, but as historical agents in forming, conserving and changing values in education and the wider community (see also Modiba 1996).

Conclusion: Providing a safe space

Faced with this complexity and the imperatives of the curriculum, what is possible in such pedagogical contexts? Researchers and teacher trainers are often cast in the role of 'the one to fix it', 'the one who knows'. Two teachers involved in the research asked to be 'workshopped'. Teachers and facilitators such as Eileen Meyer need support. But

what kind of support? Perhaps not, or not only, in the form of ‘theory’ and ‘the best practice’ because that kind of ‘workshop’ similarly adheres to the underlying assumed epistemological roles mentioned above, where one party ‘knows’, the other party ‘accepts’ and ‘reproduces’. Moreover, as suggested above, the theoretical ideals do not automatically seem to guarantee the desired outcome of democratic change. In the doctoral research on which this article is based, the creation of a ‘safe’ space was suggested where teachers, and other educators, including primary witnesses, can engage with the primary narratives of self and others and other ‘forgotten’ aspects within the teaching and learning process discussed above. This kind of ‘safe’ space could be conducive to a growing understanding and an ability for educators in turn to create a ‘safe’ space for the current South African youth to engage with, listen to and witness a primary narrative.

As Simon and Eppert (1997: 178-182) explain, this space might enable a learning that entails two forms of attentiveness: not only a ‘learning about’ but also a ‘learning from’, not only discipline-specific *judgement* but also *apprenticeship* in witnessing the performance of another person’s experience. The listener/learner, in other words, learns to approach the primary narrative not only as historical knowledge, but also as a summoning. The words ‘safe’ and ‘safe place’ are important; this is what the clinical child psychologist Winnicott calls ‘a good-enough holding environment’. While Winnicott developed the latter notion in the context of parenting, Ellsworth, amongst others, has applied it to pedagogy. ‘A good-enough holding environment’, she explains, provides ‘some measure’ of continuity, reliability and hospitality so that we dare to take risks to ‘break continuity’, question and move beyond the known, beyond tradition (Ellsworth 2005: 70). This kind of space might be crucial in that the ‘absence’ of free speech and of a belief in an ever-other future, and, as some would put it, a ‘lack’ of educational quality, involves not merely a material concern, in the form of material resources and one’s professional training, but also, and maybe more importantly (Taylor et al. 2003), the teachers’/facilitators’/witnesses’ self-image and their moral status in society.

Interviews

Lesley Adonis, Interview on 14 April 2005 at a former HOR school, Cape Town.

Eileen Meyer, Interview on 18 April 2005 at a former HOR school, Cape Town.

Observations

Eileen Meyer, Observations April 2005 at a former HOR school, Cape Town.

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