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‘But sir, I lied’ – the value of autobiographical discourse in the classroom

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Abstract

This article aims to examine the benefits of teachers using their own autobiographical writing in the classroom. It explores the blurring of truth and fiction in autobiographical writing and argues that teachers can help students if they provide students with the cloak of fiction when writing about their own lives. Furthermore, it puts forward the case that when teachers share pertinent autobiographical episodes then pupils are more willing to respond in an engaged and passionate fashion. In developing my argument, I suggest that autobiographical writing can be therapeutic in certain classroom contexts. The data sources for this article are the author’s own life and two case studies: an 11-year-old boy, George, and a 15-year-old girl, Eloise, both of whom were pupils of the author and wrote autobiographically for him. The methodological approach is that of bricolage: chiefly, the article combines ethnographical observation with interviews and discourse analysis. I also examine quantitative studies which look at the therapeutic dimensions of autobiographical writing. Theoretically I draw on Friere’s concept of ‘conscientization’ (Friere 1985: 49) in order to critique the ‘banking’ concept of education, which would close down opportunities for pupils to write freely about their own lives.

Key Words

Autobiography, educational research, classroom context, Action Research, autobiographical fiction

Introduction: research questions and rationale

For the past 20 years, I’ve been an English teacher in various all-ability state schools I’ve also been an autobiographical writer. During that time, I’ve regularly asked myself some key questions which I explore in my research. What value does autobiographical discourse have in the classroom? Can autobiography and fiction be successfully merged so that pupils feel freer to

speculate about their lives? What is the therapeutic value of using autobiographical discourse within the context of an oppressive curriculum? Can autobiographical discourse improve relationships between pupils and teachers? Furthermore, can it give pupils a chance to explore their own identities in a meaningful fashion?

Autobiography in my life

Born in 1968, I was educated for the most part in suburban London schools: a state primary school and a private secondary school. I read English at Sussex University, gained a Postgraduate Certificate in Education in English at Cambridge, and a Masters degree in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia in 1990, where I was taught by two famous novelists. I had had dreams of becoming a writer but realised after doing the MA that I was unlikely to make a living out of it. During the 1990s, I taught, for the most part, 11-18 year olds in various all-ability, mixed-sexed state secondary schools in London.

When I came to teach, pressured by the constraints of time and an unenlightened curriculum, I held fast onto a 'banking concept' of education: that I had a certain amount of knowledge which I had to funnel into my pupils' heads. Paulo Friere writes in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

The banking concept (with its tendency to dichotomize everything) distinguishes two stages in the action of the educator. During the first, he cognizes a cognizable object while he prepares his lessons in his study or his laboratory. (Friere p. 61)

This is exactly what I was trained to do and still, some years later, am currently instructed to do: to identify specific 'blobs' of information to impart to the pupils I teach. My business was to carry out the prescriptions of the National Curriculum; a central belief of Friere's was that pedagogy becomes oppressed when it is prescribed. He writes:

Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness. (Friere p. 29)

Thus in the classroom context, the teacher plays the role of 'oppressor' and the pupils, 'the oppressed'. However, by reflecting upon my own experiences as a teacher, I was able to craft articles and books which creatively transformed my past. Whether what I was doing was authentic is a moot point. My books were written to communicate what it *felt* like to be a teacher: to avoid embarrassing people I had to fictionalise those I had encountered, changing genders and attributes. To make the book entertaining and meaningful, I chose to dramatise key turning points. Although my writing in no way has the literary quality of the classic 'aesthetic autobiographers' that Suzanne Nalbantian

(1994) critiques her observations could apply to my autobiographical books about school:

The autobiographical novelists drew first from their personal everyday life, cultivating perceptions selectively which could then be transposed into their fiction. A primary facet of their art can be said therefore to be an activity of perception. Then comes the leap to what is literary. In the passage from self-observation to self-recreation, life facts were transferred to structures dictated by concepts of aesthetics. (Nalbantian p. 49)

This was certainly true of my teaching memoirs. After writing very dry, factual first drafts, I found that the material just didn't live on the page and that I needed to highlight Wordsworthian 'spots of time' (Wordsworth, Book XI, lines 258-278), key moments of realisation, in order to make the reader feel what it was like to be in the classroom where I taught both George and Eloise, to capture its excitement and terror, its joys and disappointments.

I embarked upon a PhD in Creative Writing at an inner-city university in September 2009 in order to write a memoir, entitled *Who Do You Love?*, about a former girlfriend of mine who had died quite recently. As I began to write it I realised that I was twisting all sorts of factual details – names, places, events – in order to dramatise the narrative, to tell a 'truth' deeper than the facts. As a result, I decided to term the work an autobiographical 'novel' rather than a memoir. Furthermore, I have toyed with labelling my work 'life fiction': fiction which is very consciously shaped from the experiences of my life.

The importance of writing a good story

In the last twenty years, psychologists, medical practitioners, teachers and therapists have amassed a growing body of evidence that writing about one's life can have beneficial effects. In *The Writing Cure* (2002) Lepore and Smyth write of the 'tremendous success' of writing interventions within medical settings:

In Pennebaker's 'expressive writing' manipulation, people write several times for about 20-30 minutes on their deepest thoughts and feelings related to a stressful event. This brief intervention often produces highly revealing, and sometimes poignant, personal accounts of stressful life events...Findings from numerous experiments suggest that the writing exercises also confer a wide array of benefits, including improved lung functioning in asthma patients and reduced symptoms in rheumatoid arthritis patients, reductions in emotion and physical health complaints, and enhanced social relationships and role functioning. (Lepore 2002: 5)

The leading figure behind much of this research is the psychologist James Pennebaker (2002), who has overseen and conducted a number of experiments investigating the beneficial effects of expressive writing. His approach has been overwhelmingly 'quantitative'; using control groups, he has sought to prove that writing can confer health benefits within certain contexts. However, as he himself notes, for all his amassed evidence, Pennebaker remains deeply problematized by the methodological approaches adopted:

Across dozens of studies, researchers have used physician visits, immune markers, absentee rates, school grades, and other objective markers as dependent variables...An all-too-often unspoken secret about these measures is that they are terribly, terribly messy. (Pennebaker 2002: 285)

In other words, Pennebaker has to resort to personal testimony rather than quantitative data to suggest that writing is therapeutic. My approach is qualitative and lends itself more readily to examining and analysing the ways in which this type of writing can be beneficial. However, even though our methodological approaches are very different, we do arrive at similar conclusions. Pennebaker writes:

Across multiple studies, it is beginning to appear that individuals who develop good stories and who are able to change their perspectives from one writing session to another are the ones most likely to show health improvements. The linguistic analyses, then, suggest that people need to change or grow over the course of writing. (Pennebaker p. 289)

Pennebaker's idea that 'people need to change or grow' during the writing process is important to consider on a number of levels. We will see how the case of Eloise is particularly illustrative of this; my interview with her showed that she had 'grown' as a result of writing her fictionalised autobiography and that she had written a 'good story' too. One of the reasons why the story was 'good' was because she had the freedom not only to reflect upon her own life, but also to change it radically. That combination of investigating certain elements of her own life while also consciously changing certain parts of her history, enabled her to feel 'grateful' about her own life. This suggests that adopting fictional tropes in autobiographical writing may be a key factor in writing a 'good story' about one's life and thus has important implications not only in the world of education, but also in medical settings too.

My methodological approach: what I did in the classroom and why

The heart of the project was seeing if my own autobiographical writing would inspire my pupils to write autobiographically. I decided to read aloud the sections of *Who Do You Love?* which were about my childhood: being bullied at school; my parents' divorce and the time when my mother forced me to take a

lady's handbag to school. My field notes show that this piece of autobiographical writing and my oral rendition of it grabbed my pupils' attention. They laughed at the spectacle of me carrying around a lady's handbag and being called 'Pilk' – the nickname I was given by my fellow pupils at school. They also enjoyed hearing about me punching another pupil in the face and breaking my thumb. I travelled outside my 'comfort zone' as a teacher with this story because I showed that I was capable of subversive behaviour and that I could tell stories that didn't have an explicit moral. Having 'scaffolded' (provided a clear plan) a number of smaller writing tasks (Daniels 2005: 132), the pupils embarked upon writing a longer piece with a surprising degree of enthusiasm. Ironically, it was the prescriptive rubric of the English National Curriculum (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2007), which insisted that pupils should be writing fiction for the 'Writing to imagine, entertain and explore' (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority p.96) component, that initially forced me to get pupils to fictionalise their lives. Because they had to use their imaginations, I insisted that my pupils, who included George and Eloise, invent new details and fictionalise their narratives in an explicit fashion. This linked with my own methodological researches at the time which were making me question the boundary between fiction and non-fiction; even the most so-called truthful text is a form of fabrication, a filtering into prose of events that predominantly occur outside the form of prose. George and Eloise, like all my pupils, were quite aware that they should consciously drop fictional elements into the narrative, blending real-life events and fictional ones.

Crucially, I told my pupils that they could invent and fictionalise details about their lives if they wanted to – as long as it was realistic. I did this for a number of reasons. Firstly, I felt it gave my pupils parity with my own writing; I had fictionalised a great deal in my own memoir, so why couldn't they? Secondly, it linked in my methodological approach. My research had made me realise that the whole notion of non-fiction and memoir was highly problematic: it is a representation of experience and a new experience in itself. As I delved deeper into the philosophical ramifications of this approach, I realised I was taking a social constructivist approach (Daniels, p. 279) to autobiography: we actively construct new identities for ourselves when we write about our lives.

Using an Action Research model (Cohen 2007), whereby I was an active part of the research itself in the delivery of my lesson, and then subsequently refining my pedagogical research after reflecting upon it, I gathered data from two main year groups at the comprehensive where I was teaching: Year 7 (11-12 year olds) and Year 11 (15-16 year olds). I choose these two different year groups because of the different contexts involved. The Year 7 group were just at the beginning of their secondary school career and following part of a curriculum which was a little less prescribed than that of the Year 11 group I was taking, who had to follow the strict rubric of the GCSE course. These two groups, I felt, would give me a good cross-section of data: I would be able to

explore my research questions in the light of different ages and different pedagogical contexts, but still within the same setting.

My methodological approach when dealing with my data and analysing it was within the symbolic interactionist framework. Norman Denzin's detailed exploration of this approach includes these observations, which encapsulate the central concepts of symbolic interactionism:

Everyday and problematic interaction exhibit a situated, constraining structuredness based on ritual, routine, and taken-for-granted meanings...As interactional structures, ensembles are reified, patterned regularities of thought, action and interpretation...They include relationships of love, hate, and competition... A person's location in the world of experience is organized into a body of localized, interactional practices...Such practices are connected to the projects that persons pursue. Practices and projects personalise social structure. (Denzin 1992: 20)

People who write autobiographies are often forced to reflect upon the 'structuredness based on ritual, routine and taken-for-granted meanings', to examine 'relationships of love, hate, and competition' and to start to examine the relationship between the self and the wider society. A symbolic interactionist framework enables the researcher to look at the relationships between the structures of society and the self. Furthermore, as Denzin points out, the framework necessarily leads the researcher to examine people who are marginalized. Denzin writes:

Constantly preoccupied with the daily, ritual and enforced performances of stigmatised identities (race and gender), the interactionists speak always to those persons who occupy powerless positions in contemporary society. (Denzin, p. 29)

Bearing this in mind, I selected six 'outsiders' to look at in detail. These were pupils who did not 'buy in' to the autobiographical project and had stigmatised identities within the context of where I teach: George, Connor and Toral who were all Year 7 pupils, and Eloise, James and Chris (brother of George) who were Year 11 pupils. For the purposes of this article, I will focus upon George and Eloise, due to the contrasts and comparisons my investigation brought to light about them; their work and my interviews with them produced some of my richest data and, as a result, I was able to draw some of my most original conclusions.

Exploring multiple identities: George's fractured selves

The son of divorced parents, George was 11 years old at the time of my case study. He was a difficult pupil, frequently in trouble with his teachers and rarely 'on task' during lessons. His school days were punctuated by constant

low-level disruption: chatting when he shouldn't have been, refusing to do the work, and, on some occasions, engaging in fights. Even though he was the most reluctant writer amongst my case studies, George examined a number of different selves in his writing. All my students wrote at much greater length than they had done in other work; they appeared to be highly motivated by my autobiographical stories. As a teacher, I had presented a number of different identities to them in my writing: a bullied student, a child of divorced, warring parents, an inappropriately violent pupil who communicated with his fists, not verbally. Reciprocity (Oakley 1986) played an important role here: I had given something of myself, and now the pupils were willing to give something back. My autobiographical writing opened the doors to visiting different selves.

Because he was a reluctant learner in the classroom context, I sat down with George and worked for some of the time as his amanuensis as well as a co-creator of his story, questioning him about his environment, which he recalled in vivid detail. Steedman's comments in *The Tidy House* (1982) are relevant here. Steedman was anxious to see beyond children's technical errors in their writing:

The obvious and superficial differences between the child and adult writing – the spelling errors, the handwriting – are distracting to the reader, partly because they promote the indulgent smile, and partly because they deflect attention from interpreting the text. (Steedman, 1982, p. 27)

Eradicating the distractions that Steedman talks about, I was able to reveal the true depth of George's autobiographical imagination. He wrote about a taking a trip to the Michael Sobell Sports Centre with his brother, Chris, and their mother. The trip was poignant because his parents were divorced and he lived with his father, seeing his mother at weekends.

I was struck by the simple, descriptive beauty of some of his sentences. For example, he wrote about getting a drink in between trampolining: 'If I was thirsty I had a ribena or a hot chocolate I liked it how the machine put the cup down then poured the chocolate into the cup then the boiling water.' This sentence seemed to defamiliarise the whole process of getting a drink from a vending machine, turning it into a thing of transformative wonder, seen fresh through a child's eyes. There is embedded in the passage a Hardy-esque nostalgia, an idealisation of the past, perhaps best represented by the sentence: 'This was back in the time when my brother was nice to me.' My reading of the poetry Thomas Hardy wrote following the death of his wife informs my reading of this sentence, because it seems as if Hardy tapped into a fundamental structure in the human mind – that there is a tendency to colour the past with deeply-felt meaning and a sense of loss. Implicit in George's sentence is a belief that things were fundamentally better when his mother was around

more. Furthermore, there is a sense of him feeling that he had a clear identity as a child with a parent watching over him and that they were all enjoying themselves; there was play, sustenance, calm and a safe but fun setting.

In the next lesson, I asked the pupils to write a more conventional autobiography because I felt that many students were struggling with dramatising the scenes in sufficient detail. So I decided to back-track a bit and ask George to write his life-story using a prompt sheet that I gave them. During this lesson, George was back to his normal behaviour: he mucked around and wrote that he hated me on the document that follows – which he then deleted. George wrote in his second paragraph: ‘My parents are called brain badomda and agustos qumbie. George works as a truck driver. Mary is a priest in the Church of England.’

There is an inversion of sorts going on here: George’s father used to be an official in the Church of England, while his mother was, at that time, without a job. It’s interesting that he invests his mother with more religious job, and gives his father, the religious official, the job of ‘truck driver’, which connoted clearly for George low status and intelligence.

When I sat down beside George as his amanuensis, he wrote this:

My first accident was when there was a big child called Michael who lived two doors away from me. On the first day of nursery, Michael beat me up. He got his dummy and stuck it up my nose.

My first day at school was a problem because I farted in the lesson. I like to fart.

There’s a kid who lives in my house and we adopted him he’s names chriis.the worst teacher ever is By some kid [sic]

George laughed when he wrote this, but embedded within this apparently deviant response are some important concepts. Firstly, there is the theme of George being a victimised child, with his father calling him a ‘poopy boy’ and Michael beating him up. Secondly, there is a real sense of confusion about identity; the first person narrator becomes ‘some kid’, and there’s a lack of clarity about who else George is engaging with, whether it’s his father, Michael, or ‘chriis’ [sic], or the teacher; there’s no clear narrative thread.

His ambivalent relationship with his brother is revealed in the last paragraph, where he claims ‘chriis’ [sic] has been adopted. Interestingly, he is using the pronoun ‘we’ in connection with the adoption, suggesting his parents and he have acted as a family unit to adopt ‘Chris’. The line ‘the worst teacher ever is...’ was where he wrote my name and then deleted it after being told off I can see now that this reprimand could be construed as an oppressive act but it perhaps reveals that the project was difficult to manage at times and presented

many challenges to me as a teacher. George's jokey low self-esteem is crystallised by his signing off: 'By some kid'.

In many ways, George reveals that what Jerome Bruner says in *Acts Of Meaning* is valid:

The first is human reflexivity, our capacity to turn around on the past and alter the present in its light, or to alter the past in the light of the present. Neither the past nor the present stays fixed in the face of this reflexivity. The 'immense repository' of our past encounters may be rendered salient in different ways as we review them reflexively, or may be changed by re-conceptualisation. The second universal is our 'dazzling' intellectual capacity to envision alternatives – to conceive of other ways of being, of acting, of striving. (Bruner 1990: 109)

George's reflexivity is a testament to Bruner's fundamental point: his unique psychology means that he is frequently re-evaluating his past and present, constantly changing the identities of himself, his brother, and his parents in his mind. The psychological ruptures in George's family perhaps necessitated this. For him, his family may have had no fixed, stable identity. Furthermore, his destabilised view of his family possibly led him to envision alternatives in much the way that Bruner suggests. Steedman in *The Tidy House* talks about the links between imaginative play and writing, seeing that writing facilitates the kind of re-conceptualisation that Bruner talks about because it enables the writer to see an event from different perspectives. She writes:

The act of writing in childhood bears an obvious relation to the imaginative play of children – which we do know a great deal about – and its role in enabling them to see a situation from differing perspectives. But writing, unlike play, lets children watch and act from two perspectives simultaneously. (Steedman 1982: 28)

With her project, she asked the children to think of putting themselves in the shoes of a variety of characters. Reading *The Tidy House* made me think that George would have definitely benefited at this juncture with writing things from his parents' or his brother's point of view. This may have helped him unlock his thoughts more. The piece he wrote was locked into his own perspective, laden with value judgements about his brother in particular.

The alternative self: Eloise's constructed alter-ego

The most notable aspects of Eloise, 15, were that she was caked in orange make-up and spoke with a strong local accent; she had trouble concentrating in class and, until this project, rarely produced much work. She was generally friendly, except when upbraided for not doing work, when she would

remonstrate forcefully with teachers, muttering curses at them under her breath. Unlike George, who presented a number of different selves on the page with little or no thought about shaping a coherent piece of writing – which possibly mirrors his confusion about his identity – Eloise presented a carefully wrought autobiography which was aimed at duping the reader into believing it was true. Let's look at the first extract in her autobiography where she significantly deviates from the real-life facts. Her account reads:

One day, when I came home my older sister was there, there was a big family row and now I only see my mum, brother and my sister's baby at the moment. My sister aged 17 had a baby, she called it Latisba and she was a beautiful little girl. However my sister didn't want her so my mum looked after her for a few years and I liked to help. Eventually the baby was put into care my sister moved away to Ilford with her new boyfriend and I haven't seen her since. My mum couldn't work so she got a job in Dagenham, although she found it hard to cope with our small and cramped flat. My mum met a man who she thought she loved although that never worked out, it never did.

I found the concision of this first sentence utterly convincing when I first read it because it was similar in tone to the prose style of the rest of the autobiography. Particularly powerful was this opening complex sentence. Her adverbial phrase 'one day' was in tune with some of the generalities about time in the rest of the piece and made the ensuing incidents plausible precisely because there was a vagueness about exactly when they happened. It was Eloise's ability to mix vagueness about time with quite specific time-frames that added to the plausibility of the narrative; even her mistakes, such as saying that her mum couldn't work and then saying that she'd got a job gave the piece a confused authenticity. But perhaps this continuity error and the fairy-tale quality of the phrase 'one day' should have alerted me to its questionable grounding in 'facts'. I am still struck by Eloise's beautifully simple yet utterly surprising use of the connective 'and' in this first sentence; having used two embedded clauses, Eloise deploys a compound clause which uses anaphora to create a powerful effect: having referred to her 'older sister' in the embedded phrase, Eloise implicitly refers again to the 'sister' again because she is absent from the list: 'my mum, brother and my sister's baby'. This in itself tells a powerful story and forces the reader to realize that the big sister is the chief victim or casualty of the family row. Furthermore, the reference to 'my sister's baby' makes the reader realize that the big sister has given birth and is now separated from her child. The deadpan style has a child-like quality but there is a real sophistication of thought there. The sentences that follow are packed with action – again, all recounted in the same simple prose style. Yet there is real emotion, particularly when the sister's child is mentioned. She is a 'beautiful little girl' and Eloise 'liked' to look after her. The reference to her being put into care appears on the surface to be

emotionless, but in the context of what happened before it is tinged with feeling.

In my interview with her, Eloise explained that her story wasn't true, saying, 'But sir, I lied!' She went on to explain: 'Maybe you know, at the time probably, because there are TV programmes where people's lives are actually like that...Cos I couldn't really think of anything to write.'

In other words, Eloise reached for narratives in the media and in popular literature in order to dramatise her own story, with Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It* (2000) being a particular model. But her translation of these popular narratives into a prose life-fiction narrative is sophisticated, providing her with a sense of a parallel or possible life she could have led if her circumstances were different. This hints at the power of such an exercise; it enables the writer to access both his own life and other possible lives, both real and imagined. There are real complexities in Eloise's attitude towards what she has written. I asked her these questions:

Me: Do you feel like your life is a disappointment because you haven't had all this drama?

Eloise laughs: No, I wouldn't have wanted any of that drama. No.

Me: How did you feel when you were writing it?

Eloise: I would have felt, I dunno, you think you'd feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma like that in their lives at such a young age.

Me: Yeah, so it sort of helped you...

Eloise: To feel grateful about your own life I suppose.

My questions are leading here but provide some valid answers. When I suggested to Eloise that the exercise 'sorted of helped you...' I was clearly thinking about the original intention of my thesis – which was to uncover the therapeutic value of autobiography. Eloise duly obliges when she says that the exercise helped her 'feel grateful about your own life I suppose'. The phrase 'I suppose' is important because it qualifies this point. Perhaps more interesting than the point I was unintentionally directing her to say was what she said previously. She said: 'I would have felt, I dunno, you think you'd feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma like that in their lives at such a young age.' Notice her use of the conditional tense here; she is quite hesitant about what she was feeling while she was writing. Her tentative elaboration of her feelings at that time embraces the complexity of knowing one's feelings during the

process of writing autobiography. She speculates that 'you think you'd feel sorry for someone who had so much trauma...'. There is a sense that she is aware that she has felt empathy for her fictional alter ego, but this awareness of feeling empathy is tempered with a sense that she might not have felt this way. This suggests that writing life fiction of this sort enables students to reflect upon not only the different paths their lives might have taken if their backgrounds had been different, but also to explore the complex feelings that occur when one is writing autobiography.

Conclusions

My project illustrated that when a teacher is willing to share his or her own autobiographical writing with pupils, then pupils are much more willing to work harder on their own stories. This was, firstly, borne out in the interviews conducted with the two case studies discussed here. George told me: 'I liked it when you told us about your life coz it was funny about the handbag.' Meanwhile Eloise said: 'The whole thing was different in a way, I mean when you told us about your life, it was like the whole thing was different. Teachers never normally speak like that.' Five out of my six case studies reported a strong interest in my autobiographical stories and spoke of them giving them ideas or making them think that they could write about their lives in a more 'open' way, as one of my case studies, Toral, described it. Furthermore, analysis of written feedback from one randomized sample reveals that 14 out of 15 pupils, 93% of them, reported enjoying my writing and with 40% of them saying explicitly that it helped them with their own writing, particularly with regards to giving them a structure for writing.

Eloise's fictionalised autobiography was the first piece of independent work that she had completed for me; until then she'd been reluctant to complete any work. This was the first piece of homework she'd worked on and handed in on time. Likewise, George's autobiographical work was far longer and more detailed than anything he'd done before.

As we saw with George's writing, the project enabled him to explore a number of different selves in a somewhat chaotic fashion. When supervised closely by me: he arrived at a consistent sense of self in his writing; a child nurtured by a caring parent. Eloise's autobiographical writing presented a much more carefully constructed self; one which turned out not to be literally true. Nevertheless, this consciously fictional representation of herself and her family enabled her to feel grateful about her own life. Furthermore, in both cases, my relationship with them as a teacher improved as a result of helping them with their life-fiction; their behaviour in the classroom context was easier to manage. This suggests that autobiographical writing in the classroom context has a number of therapeutic benefits, thus corroborating the exhaustive research carried out by Pennebaker (et al.), which is documented in *The Writing Cure* (Lepore 2002) where quantitative studies showed the effectiveness of patients writing about, as opposed to talking about, their illnesses and the measurable health

benefits which ensued. While my research does not investigate issues connected with illness, it does show that on a number of levels, there are some visible benefits when students write autobiographically – such as improved relationships between teachers and pupils, as well as pupils feeling more 'grateful' about their lives.

Castells writes: 'Identity is people's source of meaning and experience' (Castells 2010: 6). Life-fiction enabled Eloise to explore a parallel life for herself and perceive the ways in which she is both different from and similar to her autobiographical alter-ego; this gave her a valuable vantage point from which she could view herself. With George it provided a window upon what he valued in his life: the time spent in the presence of his mother.

My research has shown that autobiographical writing gives students a unique chance to explore an important 'source of meaning' within an educational context; in particular, it reveals that when pupils are free to fictionalise their lives, they appear to gain a better lever on who they are.

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