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# Learning in Single Parent Families: A narrative investigation of single parents' engagement with their children's learning.

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**Abstract** This paper presents a narrative analysis of the largely neglected interface between single parents and children's learning. One in four children live in single parent families, 92% of which are headed by mothers (ONS, 2012) and 'school failure' (The Centre for Social Justice, 2011: 1) is frequently, though spuriously, (Strohschein, 2007) ascribed to children of single parents. Despite three million children living in single parent families (ONS, 2012) the connections between family experience and learning in the context of single parent families remains largely unexamined. This may reflect an implicit notion that the experiences of adults and children in one parent families differ little from those of two parent families. Indeed much of the literature conflates two-parent and single-parent families, fails to draw distinctions or tacitly assumes that children have access to two parents who reside in one home (Standing, 1999: 58). Narrative enquiry methods were applied to explore day-to-day experiences of single parents' engagement in their children's learning. The resulting, collaboratively constructed narratives tell of struggle, poverty, mental ill health, high aspirations for their children and the emotional 'work' (Featherstone, 2010: 212) associated with managing parental relationships post-divorce or separation.

**Keywords** Narrative Analysis, Single, Parent, Learning, Children.

## 1. Introduction

This paper considers the methodological processes by which a narrative analysis of single parent's experiences of engagement with their children's learning, was

constructed. The paper reflects on my own developing appreciation of the complexities and diversity of narrative inquiry and provides the evolving analytical framework and provides initial insights from this ongoing narrative analysis.

The study generates theory which will contribute to improved professional practice in relation to parental involvement in children's learning. Additionally understanding of lived experience within single parent families holds potential benefits for single parents by foregrounding the importance of their role as educators.

The overarching aim of the study was to develop an understanding of engagement in children's learning from the perspective of single parents within the context of their life story narratives.

Specific objectives of the study were;

- to construct and analyse life story narratives of single parents
- to collaboratively examine the everyday experiences of engagement in learning in research participants' families.
- to develop a theoretical understanding of facilitators and inhibitors of effective parental engagement in children's learning within the context of single parent families.

Specific research questions were;

- How do single parents' life experiences impact on their relationship to learning and engagement in their children's learning?
- What are single parents' perceptions and experiences of parental engagement?

- How do single parents engage in their children's learning?
- Does single parenthood have an effect on mothers' and fathers' engagement in their children's learning?

Labov's structural narrative analysis method and the computer software package, NVivo, were utilised to explore collaboratively constructed life story narratives and data from diary keeping and conversational interviews. Labov's (1972) analytical model comprises of six elements common to narratives: abstract (summary); orientation (time, place, protagonists); complicating action (events); evaluation (meaning of action); result or resolution (what finally happened) and coda (returning to the present). A criticism is that the model is too rigid. In my analysis I identify that narrators do not always follow the model in strict order. A reordering can be used by the narrator to create emphasis. One participant, for example, presents repeated complicating actions followed by resolutions or results with interim evaluations interspersed, building tension before arriving at a consolidating evaluation which leaves the reader in no doubt over her experience of coming to terms with on-going mental health issues,

*Although, kind of, I think... I don't know whether it's that I am just more conscious that, kind of, there is a thing called mental health and sometimes you have like the flu equivalent of whatever mental health it. Or whether there's, sort of, on-going issues. But I'm certainly more... More conscious of having to look after that aspect of myself,*

## 2. Narrative

*"There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories."*

Ursula K. Le Guin

Perhaps the most straightforward definition of narrative is provided by Aristotle in Poetics, narrative is a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. There is an increasing volume of literature which attempts to define narrative (Elliot, 2005). Though Polkinghorne describes stories as 'ubiquitous' (2007: 471) he considers 'the term *narrative* is used equivocally' (1995: 5) both in everyday life and in research contexts and makes distinctions between everyday prose and the particular configuration of prose employed to produce a story.

### 2.1. The Nature of Narrative Inquiry

Bruner (1985) asserts there are two forms of cognition, paradigmatic and narrative. We gain understanding by either creating categories or stories to explain our experiences. Paradigmatic thinking sorts and orders the world, yet our lives are formed and expressed through story. This is not a straightforward process however as *storying* is a complex human phenomenon, acknowledged by Bruner in the context of life stories 'When somebody tells you his life ... it is always a cognitive achievement rather than a through-the-clear-crystal recital of something unequivocally given' (2004: 692). Bruner points to the complex relationship between life, and life as experienced, in a way similar to Oscar Wilde's deliberations on life imitating art more than art imitating life. This is the noema, the object, the 'what', and noesis, or the 'how', the way in which we experience life as a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) leading individuals to '*interpret an experience in a unique way*' (Ehrlich, 2003: 47).

Narrative is quotidian, omni present in our everyday and intimate experiences of life (Fraser, 2004). Narrative inquiry is described as 'ubiquitous' (Clandinin and Huber, 2010: 2) and it is unsurprising that as a research methodology, it can both cross over and fall unnoticed between disciplinary boundaries. Terms used under the banner of '*narrative*' reflect the diversity within the field; '*narrative studies*' implies 'a focus on narrative as a particular kind of data' (Stanley and Temple, 2008: 275) while '*narrative inquiry*' suggests a methodological and analytical approach (Stanley and Temple, 2008: 276). Riessman emphasises that the study of narrative 'does not fit neatly within the boundaries of any single scholarly field' (Riessman, 1993: 1). This is echoed by Gergen's contention that 'Narrative study is highly varied and cuts across disciplines' (2009: 66) as well as Stanley and Temple's assertion that, 'Narrative analysis does not fit within disciplinary boundaries' and that it perhaps it does not 'readily sit within interdisciplinary ones either' (2008: 275) and Polkinghorne's assertion that the study of stories in academic disciplines is undertaken within 'literary criticism, history, philosophy, organisational theory and social science' (2007: 471).

It is exactly because narrative is so ubiquitous that it is effective in uncovering familiar, everyday, habitual practices which are unquantifiable and inaccessible thorough other means. Narrative inquiry also performs an important function in professional practice development in that it can form a bridge between theory and practice (Carson, 2009: 5). Though there have been many attempts to codify or systematise narrative both in terms of standardised parameters and guidance for process and analytic strategies, diversity is acknowledged as a key strength of narrative-based inquiry.

### 2.2. A Narrative Journey

It follows that narrative methodologies do not come with a ready-made blueprint and the process of arriving at a methodology and research design within this study has been a protracted journey. In keeping with the ideology of narrative inquiry, it is pertinent to provide an illustrative narrative.

In 2009 I undertook a phenomenological study of participation in informal learning as part of a Master's in Lifelong Learning (Davison, 2009). To the satisfaction of my supervisors I systematically and assiduously, coded data and conducted a thorough analysis which identified emergent themes. I carefully dissected the interview data and represented it in a series of thematic categories. Although the data neatly fitted into a model which explained and predicted motivation for participation in informal learning and could be transferred to other lifelong learning contexts, I was left with a sense that I hadn't adequately captured the experiences of participants; I'd not grasped what the experience of participation in informal learning meant to them. The study was successful in arriving at a germane and applicable theoretical model which went some way to explaining motivation for engagement in informal learning, however, I was left with a sense that I had only touched the tip of the iceberg. I hazarded that if I had delved further into the life stories of the participants I would have gained greater insight and arrived at more meaningful outcomes. I concluded,

'... this study could be extended by exploration of the place of Iyengar Yoga within women's lives and consideration of the contribution of yoga practice to the development of self-concept using life-history and narrative analysis.'

Davison, 2009

Nearing the completion of the study I was introduced by chance to Polkinghorne's (1995) elaboration on the distinction between analysis of narrative and narrative analysis. Polkinghorne differentiates between studies whose data are in the form of narratives in which analysis produces 'paradigmatic typologies or categories' and studies with data in the form of 'actions, events and happening' (1995: 6) which are analysed to produce stories. Polkinghorne places particular emphasis on the latter, narrative analysis, and draws attention to emplotment as a 'primary analytic tool' (1995: 6). As a relatively inexperienced academic and new researcher, the suggestion that stories can be presented *as analysis* was a revelation. Integral to this contention is the notion that stories are important and that the construction of meaning is a joint enterprise, not only between researcher and researched but between

researcher and reader.

As the current study commenced I was again drawn to narrative. My initial attachment to phenomenology as a meaning-seeking research approach was replaced with a belief that the most powerful and appropriate way to address the research question would entail eliciting and analysing life stories and the narratives of everyday life and engagement with children's learning. This was accompanied by a growing belief and commitment to keeping the narratives whole. I found this tension evident in other narrative inquiries. Thomas (2008) for example, describes an apparent emptiness or futility she associated with thematic, content analysis. Thomas conducted a study which thematically analysed a large body of interview data from people with cancer. She revisited the data with the belief that secondary analysis within a narrative approach would produce further insights not accessible through thematic content analysis. New to narrative, Thomas spent months studying the intricacies and debates of narrative methodology. She rejected the well-trodden path of thematic analysis and grounded theory believing that though her previous analysis had produced findings which contributed to the evidence base the benefits to patients in her study were tenuous. She reflects,

*'Stories were gathered, not for the therapeutic benefit of the tellers, though we were hopeful that it might be therapeutic to talk about cancer experiences, nor to mirror these stories back to the community of people living with cancer; ... Rather, they were turned into findings to feed into the evidence base consulted by health care practitioners.'*

Thomas, 2008: 427

I share Thomas's sentiments and do not want to turn the single parents' stories into findings for inclusion in an educational evidence base. I want the stories to be heard, to give voice to single parents and to communicate their lived experiences to other single parents and those involved with supporting their engagement in their children's learning, possibly even to leave the stories as a legacy for their children to know about the elations and challenges their parents experienced in supporting their learning. I am currently developing my own '*narrative analysis lens*' (Thomas, 2008: 431) that will enable me to examine form and content and to locate the narrators' stories within a wider social context. Additional analytic tools I am developing include; pen portraits of participants (Appendix 1); reflective descriptions of interviews and of the interview venues (Appendix 2); life story opening lines (Appendix 3); participants' approaches to diary keeping (Appendix 4); an overview of narratives derived using Labov's narrative analysis framework (Appendix 6).

### 3. The Research Methodology

### 3.1. Recruiting Participants

There are inherent difficulties in identifying and engaging suitable research participants particularly in respect of groups such as single parents which may be perceived as 'hard-to-reach'. A two-strand snowballing or 'chain referral' method (Cohen *et al.*, 2011: 158) was utilised to contact 'known-to-me' single parents and practitioner networks involved with single parents. Potential participants were invited to self-identify as being or having been single parents. Clearly, there is potential for quite different results to arise from the examination of experiences of parents of very young children for example, as opposed to the experiences of parents of adolescents, and parents who have previously taken part in parenting or family learning programmes may differ in their perceptions of what comprises parental engagement in learning. Age, gender, sexual orientation, socio economic status and other personal and family characteristics were not selection criteria within the study. This is reflective of the diversity of single parent experiences as evident within the literature and national demographic statistics (Davison, 2012; ONS, 2012; ONS 2011).

A parallel letter and copies of the individual invitation, information leaflet and reply slip were provided for intermediaries including personal contacts, colleagues and associates of mine who indicated that they knew single parents who might be interested in taking part in the study. I also contacted a parenting practitioner network with in excess of 80 members. This necessitated seeking additional ethical approval through the Local Authority's own research ethics protocols (Appendix 9). Practitioner networks, schools and other organisations can be seen as "*'closed' or 'private' settings...where gatekeepers' control access*" (Silverman, 2010: 203). I gave due consideration to relationships with the 'gatekeepers' to develop trust and to address issues including coercion and confidentiality. I asked intermediaries to circulate the invitation letter, information leaflet and enclosed reply slip to single parents who in their judgement would be interested in taking part in the study. Single parents were asked to return the reply slip to me or to contact me directly. In order to pre-empt any suggestion of coercion or obligation the intermediary was not party to the individual's decision to take part or not.

To reinforce the invitation circulated through the parenting practitioner network I visited a regular meeting of the practitioner network (November 2011) and delivered a presentation setting out the aims of the study. This came at a point when public service cuts were hitting hard and some practitioners were experiencing job insecurity. One in particular, a specialist working with fathers, did not know if he would still have a position but still accommodatingly circulated my invitation to take part in the study to fathers he worked with.

Initially a cohort of 10 from within a reasonable travelling distance was considered feasible in terms of researcher time and sufficiency of data. To date six participants have undertaken each of the three phases of the data collection, three known directly to me, one known via a relative of the participant, one parenting practitioner, one member of a parenting group. Three participants took part in response to personal, individual invitations directly from me, one received the invitation through an intermediary and two responded as a result of contact with the practitioners' network. Five of the participants are single mothers and one, a single father. A further three invited single parents chose not to take part; their reasons included lack of time and unwillingness to talk about issues related to their experiences of single parenthood.

Efforts were made to ensure that the invitation was accessible in terms of language and clarity and the authenticity of the invitation was supported by being put forward by practitioners who I would anticipate had a level of rapport and trust in relation to the parents they work with. It transpired that there was a low uptake from single parents who the practitioners worked with. There may have been a number of explanations for this reluctance to take part, including lack of time, confidence or interest in the focus of the study. Three positive responses were received, two from practitioners who were themselves single parents (one subsequently decided not to take part) and one from a single parent service user. I had an initial reluctance to follow up the interest from the practitioners as I had anticipated they would be the conduits through which I would gain access to single parents currently receiving support through the practitioners' network. I had not anticipated that some of the practitioners would be single parents and would be interested in taking part in the study. In retrospect it is apparent that I deterred one of the practitioner respondents from taking part by emphasising that the invitation was primarily aimed at parents the practitioner worked with. I am left with some regret that I did not immediately take up the practitioner's interest in taking part as I by not including her I inadvertently transmitted messages about the 'type' of single parents I wished to include in the study. This is contrary to my articulated methodology which recognises the diversity of experiences and backgrounds of single parents and may have inadvertently invalidated the respondent's experience of single parenthood. It certainly raised methodological questions in relation to my target group and highlighted possible inconsistencies in my assertion that single parenthood is experienced by a broad spectrum of society.

Although only 8% of single parents are fathers their role in relation to children's learning is significant. In order to 'boost' (Gilby *et al.*, 2008: 8) the potential participation of single fathers I contacted a regional organisation which promotes work with fathers. The invitation circulated through the organisation however

generated no responses. A second request to the organisation six months into the data collection phase of the study was also unsuccessful in attracting male participants. As this relatively small cohort does not support generalisation there was never an intention to make claims in respect of gender and this element of the research design is not considered problematic.

### 3.2. Ethical Considerations

Each potential participant was given a letter of invitation, information leaflet and reply slip. The information leaflet set out the aims, purpose and process of the study, explained confidentiality measures and provided my contact details. Consideration was given to accessibility of all correspondence and information provided to potential participants and participants. Written communication was graded between 57.9 and 79.8 against the Flesch Reading Ease scale and between 5.6 and 8.0 against the Flesch-Kincaid scale.

In response to acceptance of the invitation to participate, I made arrangements for an initial meeting in a suitable location. On first meeting I gave an informed consent covering letter and consent form to the potential participant. Informed consent was obtained prior to initiating work with any individual. The covering letter and the informed consent form were read with the potential participant. On agreement two copies of the informed consent form were signed and dated by the participant and myself. Signed and dated consent forms are securely stored with other documentation relating to the study.

An index list was compiled (REAG handbook 2011/12: 20). The index list contains names of participants, a participant-selected pseudonym and the unique reference number I assigned to each participant. The index list is the only document which holds both the name and unique reference number and is accessible only to me. The index list and data are stored separately. All data subsequently collected is recorded against the corresponding participants' unique reference number. I requested the following limited personal details from participants: age; gender; number of children; ages and gender of children. These details are recorded against the unique reference number on the separate working list. All data collected is stored on Northumbria University's U-drive, rather than a PC hard drive, in an encrypted and password protected database that is accessible only to me. Hard copy records, hand written notes, Dictaphone tapes and back up memory sticks are stored in a locked filing cabinet.

### 3.3. Data Collection

The data collection process comprised of three episodes; a life story interview, followed by a week-long diary keeping phase and a second conversational interview

the focus of which was the diary (Appendix 10). Wengraph's Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (2001, 2004) was considered early in the study and rejected as overly structured and formulaic, though following Wengraph a period of researcher '*free-associative self-debriefing*' followed each interview (Wengraf, 2001: 142).

I appreciated that the single parents taking part in the study were likely to experience constraints on their time. I met two of the participants in their own work places. Flexible working permitted this and was an aspect of the single parent experience which was subsequently discussed by some of the participants. Both the life story and the conversational interview took place at times most suitable for the participant and in participants' preferred locations. Participants were informed that they did not need to do anything to prepare for the initial meetings. The meetings took between 30 minutes to one hour and were relaxed and informal (Appendix 2). Interviews fitted in around work, childcare, school drop off and pick up times. Two of the interviews are characterised by interruption from children, a young adult in one case and a toddler in another.

### 3.4. Phase One: Life story interview

The initial data collection episode was conducted as a semi structured interview with the aim of eliciting a life story narrative. The interviewing technique I adopted was an adaptation of Rosenthal's (2004: 50) approach and entailed a main biographical narration instigated by a carefully constructed question followed by '*internal*' and '*external*' narrative questions. Internal narrative questions were based on the biographic narrative and comprised of clarification and elaboration. Basically, I asked interviewees to tell their life story (Rosenthal, 2004; Horsdal, 2012) and listened attentively. External narrative questions were pre-drafted and thematically informed by the literature and, with the exception of the first, by preceding interviews.

Most participants required very little prompting and entered into fluent accounts of their life from early childhood, encompassing recollections and reflections on their family of origin, their relationship with the other parent and accounts of their children. One participant, a single mother, focussed her response to my request to tell me about her life, on her childhood and young adulthood. There were events which were distressing and the interview ended without any reference to her relationship with the father of her children. One participant, the only single father in the study, responded by talking about his daughter and appeared reluctant to focus on himself. This interview required sensitive and persistent coaxing to encourage the participant to talk about aspects of his life story other than fatherhood.

The initial strategy I considered was to hand

transcribe the life story narrative and make a subsidiary digital recording to enable pertinent sections to be captured verbatim and transcribed in the analysis phase. Horsdal (2012) cites a number of advantages of hand transcribing asserting this method enables narrators to pace their account according to the speed of the writer and present a considered narrative (Horsdal, 2012). As data collection and on-going analysis proceeded I came to the realisation that a full transcription would enable me to conduct more detailed analysis of the rich data produced in the life story narration. I subsequently enlisted the assistance of a professional transcriber. A balance was achieved between sanitisation of data and full paralinguistic annotation by noting pauses and emphasis in transcription.

### **3.5. Phase Two: Participant diary**

Following on from the life story interview participants were invited to keep a 'diary' of learning within their family for one week. As an intention of the study is to capture the meaning attached to engagement in learning by single parents and to understand how they experience this as part of their life world, parents were given brief, accessible guidance on what constitutes engagement in learning. A booklet (Appendix 10) was provided to support the diary keeping phase. The booklet included blank template diary pages for those who wished to make written recordings and visual prompts in the form of line drawings and photographs. Examples of parental engagement in learning included giving support and showing interest in learning (Harris and Goodall, 2007) and respectful conversation (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Though this risked directing and possibly narrowing perceptions of engagement, the dialogic interview provided opportunities to explore other manifestations of learning in the family collaboratively.

Acknowledging that participants have differing levels of comfort and confidence with literacy, I suggested a choice of 'diarying' approaches. Most participants chose to record incidents of engagement with their children's learning using the diary provided however one used a mobile device to create a photographic diary, one used recall and one brought artefacts to the second interview to reinforce the written diary recordings. The purpose of the 'diary' was to stimulate the informal conversational interview. It is the participants' narration, their story, interpretation and reflections on the diary keeping week, which formed the data. A '*collaborative relationship*' (Seale, *et al.*, 2007: 367) was formed with participants in respect of decision-making about the way materials were used. Ownership of written, visual, audio and artefact materials remains with the participants.

### **3.6. Phase Three: Informal Conversational Interview based on diary keeping week**

The second interview collected evidence of parents' day-to-day experiences of engagement in their children's learning. Diary evidence from Phase Two provided a focus for the conversation and questions emerged from the natural context. Participating in the research process can itself generate new personal knowledge. I consider those taking part in the study as agentic participants and co-creators. In the collaborative conversation perceptions and meanings of parental engagement were constructed. This unstructured approach contributed to increased salience and relevance and allowed the interview to '*emerge*' and be matched to individual circumstances (Cohen *et al.*, 2011: 413). As was the case with the life story interview, the conversational interviews were also digitally recorded and fully transcribed.

### **3.7. Conducting the interviews: Multiple interviews and participant collaboration**

Multiple data collection points were intrinsic to the research design as my intention is to locate single parents' engagement in children's learning within the context of the adults' lifelong learning experience. Although the study's research design was not participatory there was an element of collaboration in that my contact with the research participants was not on a one-off basis and the parents agreed to undertake a data collection activity between our two meetings. In this sense participants collaborated in producing and recording data in the form of their notes or recollections, in various formats, of the diary keeping week. They subsequently shared that data in the second, conversational, interview.

The time between interview one, the diary keeping week and interview two, varied for each participant. Immediately following and between interviews I engaged in a period of reflection which prepared me for the second interview and contributed to the data analysis process. The participants doubtless will also have experienced a 'parallel process of reflection and rehearsal of things they want to say since the first interview' (Flowers, 2008: 26). Flowers (2008) points to the possibility of transference of the 'lead' in subsequent interviews, from the participant to the researcher. The lead in the second interview, with its focus on participants' own data from the diary keeping week, remains with the participant. I consider my role was one of active participation in dialogic interaction. The second interview produced collaborative, co-constructed data as the participants and I considered the experience of engagement with their children's learning. As analysis progresses it may be that analysis of the conversational interview reveals the reflective process participants experienced between the three phases of data collection.

Temporal dimensions of the two interviews differed, one potentially covered the participant's lifespan, the other a period of one week. One could speculate that this could

result in differences in narrative production; alternatively it may transpire that there are similarities in the performance of narrative and perhaps narratives which run in parallel with those presented in the life story. This remains to be seen as the initial step in the analysis framework is to work with the life story narrative. Though some initial familiarisation with the conversational interview transcripts has been undertaken, I am currently endeavouring to complete in depth analysis of the life story interviews as a foundation for analysis of the conversational interviews.

#### **4. Narrative analysis: Arriving at the analysis framework.**

*Arriving at an analysis strategy?! I could call this 'the Search for the Unicorn!'*

Research log entry 11.4.13: Reflection

It is important to develop analytical processes that suit the study (Bold, 2012). In respect of this study, I reached a point at which I could easily have conceded and conducted a ruthlessly efficient thematic analysis, wrenching apart the words of the single parents and constructing well rationalised, well evidenced logically presented categories, representing the narratives in neatly packaged, efficiently justified boxes. I may even have discussed and elaborated on linkages and patterns between categories. Themes may have included: going through divorce and separation; parenting without the support of another adult in the household; the role of grandparents and the extended family; financial hardships; differing needs of siblings; the importance of fathers to sons. However, in the lives and in the narratives of single parents in the study these experiences do not occur in isolated, discrete categories. These themes run and are experienced concurrently, simultaneously. To disconnect them diminishes the complexity of the lived experience. It would be like presenting carrots, onions, stock and beef as separate items, in a deconstructed stew, bearing no resemblance to the hot simmering *tour de force* that is a stew within which one flavour interacts with and subtly changes the other. The combined effect is as different to the isolated ingredients as to be unrecognizable as a coherent culinary dish, or story.

A challenge I faced in creating a framework for analysing and representing the narratives of single parents without deconstructing them into abstractions was that I did not know at the outset of the study what a synthesis of the data could look like. The methodological literature provided a preponderance of forms of narrative analysis and narrative representations of research findings (Bold, 2012; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Elliot, 2005; Czarnowski, 2004; Riessman, 1993, 2008; Lietz and Hodge, 2010). The body of literature and published narrative analysis which I gravitated to advocated the validity and indeed importance of narrative as analysis, yet no one author provided the template. There was no route map, no answer to how to 'do'

narrative analysis. I couldn't envisage or articulate the nature of the end product while in the process of collecting and working with the narratives of the single parents. I could, however, imagine a discussion of inter connecting and interrelated themes which might go some way toward identifying issues faced by single parents in engaging in their children's learning and could even lead to recommendations for educationalists to address the issues and provide support. This would however reinforce the top down approach which Thomas (2008) expressed her aversion to. I want the process to be more egalitarian. I want educationalists to hear the voices and the stories of single parents and understand and connect to them; to see what they do, not what they don't do, to think about how the education system can meet their needs rather than how they should accommodate the needs of the school.

So began a process of working with the data, reading, re reading, taking it apart, putting it together, re assembling. Holding fast to the belief, perhaps not even a belief, an articulable gut instinct. I knew I wanted by some means to keep the stories whole, but questioned the veracity of creating a 'metastory' or hybrid story (Riessman, 1993: 13), a 'meta narrative' (Stanley and Temple, 2008: 279) or a 'representative construction' (Bold, 2012: 34) within which the individual experiences might be lost, swamped, diluted, distorted. As the analysis proceeds and I move from field texts to research texts this question remains.

##### **4.1. The Analysis Framework**

As analysis is in progress, what can be discussed here is an emergent approach. Returning to my previous culinary theme, Fraser suggests 'narrative analysts may be likened to chefs who do not feel the need to adhere to recipes' (2004: 197). This evolving approach is described by Frost, as 'eclectic and flexible' (2007: 1). The use of multiple models of narrative analysis are advocated, 'sometimes applying the same model to different pieces of data and sometimes employing different models to the same piece of data, to uncover layers of meaning within narratives' (Frost, 2007: 1). Ongoing analysis of life story data is currently informing my approach to the analysis of the subsequent conversational interview with its inherent participant analysis of the diary keeping phase.

Initial structural analysis of the life story data utilises Labov's structural narrative analysis method for the purpose of locating narratives within the data. To reiterate, it cannot be assumed that everything someone says is narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narratives are defined by Labov in their most basic form as '*a sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered*' (Labov, 1972: 360). Labov's (1972) analytical model comprises of six elements common to narratives: abstract (summary); orientation (time, place, protagonists); complicating action (events); evaluation (meaning of action); result or resolution (what finally

happened) and coda (returning to the present). A criticism is that the model is too rigid. In my analysis I identify that narrators do not always follow the model in strict order. A reordering can be used by the narrator to create emphasis. LSPF 1 for example presents repeated complicating actions followed by resolutions or results with interim evaluations interspersed, building tension before arriving at a consolidating evaluation which leaves the reader in no doubt over her experience of coming to terms with ongoing mental health issues,

Maternity leave, son's illness and post natal depression:

*Although, kind of, I think... I don't know whether it's that I am just more conscious that, kind of, there is a thing called mental health and sometimes you have like the flu equivalent of whatever mental health it. Or whether there's, sort of, ongoing issues. But I'm certainly more... More conscious of having to look after that aspect of myself.*

LSPF 1 Appendix 5

Labov (1972) in fact reconsidered 'evaluation' as permeating throughout the narrative in different forms as a discrete 'secondary structure' (Labov, 1972: 369) though appearing predominantly within a distinct segment of the narrative. Patterson (2008: 28) suggests that some researchers using Labov's method extract evaluative clauses to present a core narrative, separating out the referential and the evaluative functions of the narrative. This is then bound together with the narrator's evaluation and the researcher's analytic interpretation to form a research narrative. However 'to maintain a strict distinction between referential clauses and evaluative clauses is often problematic' (Patterson 2008: 28). Patterson (2008) explores the relationship between event narratives and experience narratives arguing that event focussed approaches do not acknowledge that narrators select and present narratives. The selection of events can perform an evaluative function by using the vehicle of narrative to communicate meaning attached to personal experience. This has deeper philosophical undertones when one considers the relationship between 'life' and 'story'. This raises issues of performance of narrative and the extent to which our lives can be seen either as a sequence of events or storied constructions which are relational to the audience to which we present our narratives (Riessman, 2008).

A further criticism of Labov's model is that while event clauses in narrations can be identified, persistent experiences or states do not conform to the model (Patterson, 2008). As single parenthood can be experienced as a persistent or episodic experience, additional analytical methods will be utilised to enable the capturing of state-clauses in addition to event clauses (Polanyi, 1985:

193).

Despite criticisms an advantage of structural analysis of narratives is that this strategy enables comparisons to be made across cases (Andrews *et al*, 2008: 18). Comparison of narratives emerging from the life story and the conversational interview may also be possible.

#### **4.2. A significant challenge: Identifying narratives within the narration**

In analysing and interpreting the data it is necessary to identify narrative segments by undertaking close and repeated readings and listenings to the data (Riessman, 1993: 60).

Structural narrative analysis of the life story interview entailed a number of 'false starts' as I began the process of identifying narrative segments from within the life story account. This challenge is acknowledged within narrative inquiry 'Perhaps one of the main challenges ... is trying to disaggregate long chunks of talk into specific stories, or segments of narratives.' (Fraser, 2004: 189). Riessman points to the interpretive judgement required by researchers

*'Deciding which segments to analyse and putting boundaries around them is an interpretive decision, shaped in major ways by theoretical interests. Deciding beginnings and endings of narratives is often a complex interpretive task.'*

Riessman, 2000 – no page number.

Initially I had anticipated that the whole interview would be 'a story', a story of the single parents' life with a focus, as indicated by the nature of the study and by my initial interview question, on learning. I became entangled in my efforts to distinguish between the end of one chapter of the life story, or one narrative, and the beginning of the next. Within some transcripts a chronology was present and the narrator ran smoothly from one life event to the next, others were less fluid and initially it was difficult to identify any narrative form. As I became more confident and gained greater understanding of the nature of narrative analysis and was reassured that not all narration is narrative I began to differentiate between account and story. A break though came when I began to think of the stories the single parents presented to me were selected from a life time of experiences to illustrate and emphasise the meaning they attached to the event. I began to see these illustrative stories as '*parables*'. The word 'parable' has its origins in the Greek *parabolē* meaning comparison, illustration or analogy, a small story set in parallel to the experience being narrated with the purpose of providing an instructive lesson with an associated moral dimension.

Initially I found this greatly challenging, however my confidence grew in tandem with my conviction that this

is not *the* interpretation of the data, but *my* interpretation of the data. (An abbreviated example of initial analysis using Labov's structural narrative analysis is included as Appendix 7).

### 4.3. Validity and trustworthiness

A consideration within this narrative study is action to assure the plausibility of the research narrative I in due course construct. Though the study features participant collaboration it is not a participatory action research project and as the researcher I undeniably have control, I hold the power as I have initiated the study, developed the research questions, identified the participants and constructed the interpretation of the narratives. An earlier intention within the research design was to share a preliminary summary of understandings of the participant's engagement in their child or children's learning with each participant. Factual corrections would then be made and any further comments from participants might subsequently contribute to data analysis and be referred to in the final report. As the study progressed I came to a realisation that this strategy would not contribute to the research aim as any interpretation would ultimately be mine.

Moment, from the Latin word momentum, means *instant* and also, used formally, means *importance*. Inescapably linked to temporality, movement occurs within a time frame and has a beginning, and an end point, a start and stop. If I elicited approval, amendment or correction from participants I lose both the moment and the *importance* of telling. To return to the telling would be to introduce a further dimension by inviting the participant to engage in diachronic analysis, to consider the story over time. Participants might on return to the events recount them with different perspectives; occurrences or reflections in the interlude may have changed their perceptions and the meaning attached to the event, perhaps radically as 'any story represents but one among a number of possible constructions, that is, there may be alternative interpretations, different ways of telling the story' (Barlow-Mead, 2004: 85). Participants may, on reflection temper, alter or retell the event adding a secondary layer. While this can provide a further level of critique and interpretation it is not part of my design and could result in an unproductive cycle of introspection. I would be forever trapped in an iterative loop. I do however intend to provide participants with a debrief sheet, in plain English, of the study's overall findings.

An associated question is, what would I actually be asking participants to check, the veracity of their narrative, or my interpretation of their narrative? Unlike minutes of meetings which are checked for accuracy, the validity here comes from the transparency I provide the reader. I've not produced an account of what happened or what was said (that would be the transcript), I've presented my

interpretation of the data in the context of my own experience and understanding of relevant literature, research and policy context. It cannot be judged as an accurate interpretation by the participant or anyone else, only as *my* interpretation. Indeed data produced from inviting the participants to verify or consider my interpretation would require further interpretation and analysis in its own right. Ultimately I have control over the research process it is my interpretation of the data of the elicited narratives that forms the final document. Interpretation does not end here however, as the reader of the thesis constructs their own interpretation. I'm not aiming for an 'accurate' account of either the participant's life story or of the diary keeping week and their engagement in their children's learning. I've asked single parents to provide me their reflections on their learning journeys and learning in theory family at a point in time and within the context of the researcher/participant relationship. That relationship is dynamic and the process is iterative. If a third meeting had been factored into the data collection and analysis process the meeting would be in the context of a further developing relationship, the development of a research partnership. At first meeting the participants demonstrated significant levels of trust in me by sharing personal experiences far deeper in some cases that I could have anticipated and beyond those that would be shared in the context of many everyday encounters. The ethics process provides assurances of confidentiality and anonymity which it could be speculated, created a conducive, protected, environment for sharing of personal, sensitive information. It could be asserted that perhaps participants entered into the participant/ researcher relationship with beliefs and perceptions that a level of disclosure was expected of them. In the encounter of the second meeting the participant and I had a history; we were familiar to each other, more relaxed, with a clearer knowledge of what to expect. A third meeting would have developed the researcher/participant relationship further, adding a deepening dynamic to the relationship.

### 4.4. Reflexivity

*We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.*

Anaïs Nin

My interest is in interpreting the meaning single parents in the study attach to their experiences, as expressed in the stories they tell and the language they use to communicate those experiences. This of course is moderated by context. The stories participants tell in the data are told to a researcher and academic. Each participant however, knew that my interest in single parents' engagement in children's learning arose, in part, from my own personal experience. We are different in our roles in the research context, yet an aspect of our experience, which the study by its very nature has confirmed as significant in being important enough to study, is a shared experience.

The interview narratives were generated in the context of one single parent relating his or her life story to another single parent undertaking research. Not to a researcher with no connection to the experience of single parenthood but to another identified as sharing a potentially similar set of experiences, role and identity. Though our roles differ there is potentially an element of our identity which resonates. The data are co constructed and I am in effect, a conduit for the voices of single parents. I'm a compatible conduit as I have a shared experience. Using the direct words of participants further adds to assurances of visibility, integrity and authenticity. It is unlikely that anyone has asked them to tell their stories of single parenthood, let alone validated the importance of that experience in relation to their children's learning. They talk of struggles, hard work, of managing 'tricky' situations and emotions, their own, the other parents and their children's; issues I readily identify with.

This is clearly my 'interpretive voice' (Barlow-Mead, 2004: 91) however there is a harmony with the voices of the single parents in that elements of the interpretive voice are the participants', the literature, my voice and the understanding of the reader. It is valid for me to incorporate my own meanings as important, and as part of the analysis. It follows that the reflexive research journal and the researcher 'free-associative self-debriefing' (Wengraf, 2001: 142) which followed each life story interview can justifiably be treated as data too, and analysed.

Each participant became a unique individual in the process of working with the audio recordings and transcripts and constructing life grids. As my engagement with their stories progressed and deepened perhaps they morphed with my own story. The line between their reality, their account to me of their reality and my subsequent interpretation moved the story on, perhaps transcended the moment of telling. Which truth was I telling? A combined truth based on recollected stories re-collected. Collected memories of events, selected and re told. Perhaps in a different context or a different time other events would have been selected and presented in a different order with greater or lesser prominence, with different emphasis to different effect. This is what it is though. The reliability of my study is grounded in the transparency which I offer the reader. As the instrument of research the reader needs to know something about me.

## 5. Summary and next steps

I'm currently *mining* the life story data before shifting attention to the conversational interview. The intention is to create a foundational context for single parents' elaboration of their experiences of engagement in their children's learning. Models of parental engagement in children's learning including Goodall's (2012) six point

model of parental engagement to support children's learning and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) model of parental involvement will provide useful conceptual frameworks for analysis of single parents' narratives. Goodall's (2011) identification of aspirations, interest, moral support and valuing learning as important aspects of parental engagement in children's learning will also contribute to a theoretical framework for further data analysis. Lines of inquiry would include for example;

Aspirations - what aspirations do single-parents express for their children and for themselves? Are the aspirations in single-parent families greater or lesser than those of two-parent families?

Interest - in which ways do single-parents demonstrate interest in learning?

Moral support - How and when do single-parents provide moral support in relation to learning? How do single-parents find moral support for themselves?

Valuing learning - In which ways do single-parents learning histories and current activities demonstrate valuing of learning/ that learning is seen as of value and important? Do the logistical demands of single-parenthood present barrier to active engagement in learning?

As my confidence with NVivo 10 has developed I am using the programme as a repository for both methodological and substantive literature and have begun to use NVivo to construct a more detailed methodology and to complete my review of the literature. In tandem with finalising the literature review and methodology, data analysis is in progress and I am turning my attention to the form the final report might take, to turning 'first order narratives', the stories participants tell, into 'second order narratives', 'the accounts we may construct as researchers to make sense of the social world, and of other people's experiences' (Elliot, 2005: 13) or what Bold refers to as turning 'field texts' into 'research texts' (Bold, 2012: 57). Analysis of the participants' narratives may inform and underpin a narrative analysis in the form of a synthesised 'metastory' or hybrid story (Riessman, 1993: 13) combining pertinent segments of the storied accounts with an interpretation informed by my understanding of the social, political and educational context and academic theory relating to parenting, families and engagement in learning. Eventually in presenting the lived experiences of single parents' engagement in children's learning in the context of their life stories, I wish to create liminal spaces which invite the reader to bring their own experiences to bridge gaps in understanding and create new knowledge of the barriers and facilitators of learning.

