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‘Brown Eyes are not the same as Blue Eyes’

Educational Narratives, Identities and Positioning in Adult Education in Denmark

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In Denmark, the Adult Education Centres have a “sweeper” function for young adults who need to recommence education. This study explores two L2 (Danish as Second Language) students and how their educational narratives confirm or counter the master narratives of adult education. Students at the centres are commonly identified as adults with social and personal challenges, but their educational narratives and experiences are far more complex. As the edifying institutional narratives of the Adult Centres encompass both professionalism and care, the vernacular narratives characterise the centres as hang-outs for problematic adults without the ability to make a persistent effort in their own life. Students at the centres have to navigate and position themselves in relation to these conflicting stories by giving voice to educational struggles, social relations and agency in their own educational narratives.

Keywords: educational narratives, counter-narratives, master narratives, positioning, adult education
Introduction

The present study examines the educational narratives of two young students at an Adult Education Centre in Denmark. In focus is how their narratives confirm, contest or counter the master narratives of adult education. In the study, there is a specific interest in how the students construct identity and social positioning in their educational narratives. A student at a Danish adult education centre is commonly identified as an adult aged 19 to 30, without a qualifying exam and with varying social and personal challenges to deal with. This is partially true, but the students’ educational lives and experiences are far more complex than this. Abir and Faisal, the two student participants in focus in this study, narrate their experiences with education in sophisticated ways and with an agency that does not confirm a view of deficiencies. Abir and Faisal are L2 students and they enrolled in the L2 course as part of their upper secondary education. I will present them and their educational narratives in the following.

In narrative theory, it is claimed that a narrative structuring of our lives and experiences with the world is fundamental for human understanding and interaction with others (Bruner, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Labov, 1967; Ochs & Capps, 2001). We organise and give meaning to our experiences through stories, and the narrative interpretation of the world is both a meaning-making process and part of our identity work and self-construction (Wortham, 2001; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). This identity work is always socially, discursively and culturally situated: “Simply put, 'my story' can never be wholly mine, alone, because I define and articulate my existence with and among others, through the various narrative models […] my culture provides” (Brockmeyer & Carbaugh, 2001, p. 287). So, narratives of education involve the social, the cultural and the historical context in which the student’s experiences are formed (Herman, 2007). Merill and West (2009) developed the terms “learning careers” and “learning identities” for
adult students, incorporating the adults’ biographies and the drift between and in-between educations, characterising adult students’ participation in education. As my focus is the student narratives in upper secondary adult education, I want to accentuate their navigation and positioning in the conflicting landscape of the educational institutions. The student narratives are interpretations acquired in and beyond the L2 classroom, and as such I call them “educational narratives”: they are accounts of how L2 students engage in and position themselves in ongoing, contrasting, institutional and vernacular narratives about adult education. Furthermore, I want to investigate how the students form stories about deviance, difference and sameness in relation to these narratives. In the article, I address the following questions: (1) How can students’ educational narratives be understood in relation to the narratives surrounding the adult centres? (2) How do the students navigate, position and identify themselves by confirming or countering narratives about adult education?

Context - Education in Denmark

In Denmark, primary and lower secondary education is integrated within a single structure as one school from year 0 to 9. Compulsory education lasts 10 years (year 0 to 9) and after that, adolescents can choose one of four upper secondary programmes or vocational training (together referred to as “youth education”). The upper secondary programmes qualify for access to higher education and the vocational education qualifies primarily for access to the labour market. In Denmark, one of the main policy targets concerning education is that 95% of a year group of young people must have completed youth education. Students who enter the Adult Education Centres have mostly tried to get through lower or upper secondary school, but without any success – or passing
an exam. The adult education courses lead to formal qualifications, eligible for further education or for the labour market. The courses at the adult centres include basic adult education and general education at lower or upper secondary level. The target group of adult education is heterogeneous; the age distribution ranges from 18 to 60, but about 80% of the students are between 19 and 30 years of age and with a variety of social and ethnic backgrounds. In a Danish context, this is a diverse group of students, with different qualifications and social and individual resources and challenges. What they do have in common is that adult education is their second, third or further – and last – chance to take a qualifying exam. The students’ stories of former education are often connected to insufficiency, failure, marginalisation, bullying and unsuccessful change of schools, and so the motivation for being at the adult centres varies a great deal due to the students’ previous experiences. Nonetheless, the number of motivated and resourceful students is growing. The centres have the potential to rectify students’ missing exams and to cope with a heterogeneous group of people.

The centres are the only institutions in Denmark which provide upper secondary L2 courses. The L2 subject is particularly designed to meet the needs of non-native, Danish-speaking students, bringing grammar and an appropriate selection of texts into focus. Students who enrol in the L2 course are primarily immigrants, refugees or second generation immigrants. In general, there has been criticism raised against the courses and the educational system for L2 students in Denmark, because of the lack of enabling immigrants and refugees’ academic skills (EVA, 2006; Holmen, 2008; Holmen, 2011; OECD, 2010). How this perspective, with a focus on the possible deficiencies of the L2 courses, has an impact on the student narratives and identifications will be part of this study.
Master and counter-narratives in education

Biographical and life history approaches have increased in the study of education in recent decades, and are mainly concerned with teacher education or teachers’ life experiences (Butler & Bentley, 1997; Dominicé, 2000; McEwan & Egan, 1995; Merrill & West, 2009). In Merrill & West (2009), the concept of “learning careers” of adult students is examined, and in West et al. (2013), the biographical and life history research is connected to the study of adult and lifelong learning. In Korhonen (2014), foreign language learning is in focus as language narratives in adult education, studying the interrelation of agency and identity.

In a Danish context, Horsdal is prominent in the research on adult learning and education in relation to narratives (2007, 2010, Formenti et.al., 2014). Horsdal’s focus has been the individual, developmental aspects of learning. But the concept of master- and counter-narratives in Danish adult education has not yet been examined. This article addresses this need.

In international research, the concept of counter-narratives in institutional settings has played a prominent role, particularly in the educational context of the Anglosphere. Especially the attention to race and ethnicity in higher education has been prevalent, using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the context for describing how race enters and structures student experiences and narratives. In the studies specified below, counter-narratives seem to be tools for resisting “deficit” stories and thereby challenging persistent master-narratives. This perspective informs the present study of Abir and Faisal. Using counter-narratives as a positional tool to deconstruct or nuance master-narratives about particular people of colour is important in Milner and Howard (2013), for example. In their study, they argue that counter-narratives can disrupt or reinterpret dominant discourses of race and ethnicity in teacher education. Critical accounts of positioning people of colour as being “at risk”, with low academic expectation, and pointing to high rates of dropping out
from high school, are in focus in several studies (Amah, 2012; Harper, 2009; Matias, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) point to counter-narratives as tools for resisting “deficit” stories and thereby challenging racism. The majority of studies about counter-narratives in education are positioned as opposing a prevalent deficit view about people of colour. The focus in the present study is both on the deficit view and also on the more edifying perspectives in Danish education regarding non-native, Danish-speaking students. The ethnic aspect of the two students is important, but not exclusive in the study, as pervasive narratives on adult education generally saturate their educational narratives.

Method and participants

Abir and Faisal's educational narratives are part of a larger study on narratives in and about Adult Education. My collection of data for this study derives from four different adult centres in Denmark and consists of observations in L2 courses over a time span of about 30 hours during a year and semi-structured interviews with the teachers of the courses. As observations and interviews with teachers are background data, my key data for this article are narrative interviews with four L2 students at one adult centre in a larger Danish town. The interviews with the four student participants where undertaken during the one-year L2 course. I had three in-depth interviews (Alheit, 1994; Alheit & Dausien, 2006; Horsdal, 2012) with each of them (at the beginning, the middle and the end of the L2 course) and informal talks and text messages about exams, e.g. during their one-year L2 course at the centre. The duration of each interview was about one hour, as agreed upon before the data collection began. In the present article, I will present two of the four participants’ narratives as cases.
By using the narrative interview, the methodology given is interactional and understood as a dynamic co-construction (Bamberg, 2011; Clandinin, 2007; Horsdal 2012; Mishler, 1999). Employing the narrative interview in research, Horsdal accentuates the interpersonal interaction between interviewer and interviewee and points to the relational, attentive and responsive co-construction of meaning in the interview (2012). Mishler accentuates the narrative interview as a dialogical meaning-negotiating process and a way to perform identities (1999, p. 19). This brings attention to positioning and the way students relate to, confirm or contest dominant narratives in their own “storied” educational life. In the interviews, the two student participants, Abir and Faisal, revealed individual, institutional and societal factors, which shaped their experience with the education centres. These findings prompted the use of counter-narrative theory and theories on identities and positioning to examine paths and educational narratives of non-native, Danish-speaking students in relation to the adult centres.

In the larger study mentioned above, I explored institutional narratives of four Adult Education Centres. My interest was the work that narratives perform in institutions to reproduce or challenge their power structures and the identity of the institutions (Linde, 2009), as my participants found themselves in the midst of powerful, contrasting narratives about education, adult institutions and identifications with different dominant narratives. I found at least two different, overarching narratives: the centres’ own narratives and the vernacular narratives about the centres. Looking at the homepages of the four centres, interviewing students, teachers and managers at the centres, and including ministerial documents about adult education institutions, I found the centres’ dominant narratives to be explicit and coherent as expected, thereby positioning the institutions as responsible, caring and professional. The common dominant narrative is that the centres offer students the opportunity to grow and develop, both in academic and in personal ways, with high academic standards and well-educated teachers. One institution expands the mutual and overall
narrative by highlighting the potential of education with four core values in their “value and mission” paragraph: diversity, community, subject knowledge and change (www.kvuc.dk). This centre highlights the potential of social and academic transformation, while another centre enhances a narrative of opportunities with openness, respect, commitment and subject knowledge in their “value and mission” paragraph, thereby highlighting social, personal and academic demands (www.vucsyd.dk). As the centres’ narratives differ in keywords and details, the overarching institutional narratives are stories of opportunities and prosperity with heartfelt respect for the students’ diverse backgrounds and personalities, pointing to aspects of transformation.

The “vernacular narratives”, as I coin the term, are quite different. Besides biased stories about adult education in general, the students’ personal narratives, or re-telling of others about the centres as vicarious narratives or experiences, are part of these vernacular narratives. The Danish acronym for the centres is VUC (Voksen Uddannelses Center/Adult Education Centre), which is commonly referred to as ‘Voksne Uden Chancer’, meaning ‘Adults with no Chances’. This biased “small story” about the centres is well-known in the public and the teachers at the centres find themselves arguing against it. Vicarious narratives about the centres provide characters and events, as first-person narratives do, and they too serve as the students’ evaluative comments and positioning with respect to the institutional and vernacular narratives (Norrick, 2013).

In the vernacular narratives, shared by the population in general, the centres are often identified as pseudo-academic hang-outs for young and adult people with a multitude of problems and there is hardly any appreciation of the social and academic work the centres provide. These stories feature comments on wasted opportunities and the lack of ability to make a persistent effort in your own life, pointing to aspects of transmission or waste. It seems that vernacular narratives on adult education are internalised and popular, recognisable, collective “stories we know” and thereby reproduce, as is the case for the interpretation of the acronym. In Horsdal, the collective “stories we
know” are cultural canonical narratives that are rarely open for discussion and are often connected to shared forms of practice and interpersonal interaction (2012, p. 112). The collective narratives of institutions or nations, for instance, construct who “we” are.

The detrimental vernacular stories surrounding the students have significant influence on their positioning and identity, as we will see in Abir and Faisal’s educational narratives. They too seem to have a strong shaping influence on the students’ expectations for their education, since they provide multiple and conflicting understandings of social, educational and cultural identities. In this area of tension between the dominant institutional narratives and the vernacular ones, my participant students, Abir and Faisal, have had to navigate and do identity work regarding their education at the centres. They can confirm, counter or challenge these narratives, and extend or resist them explicitly or implicitly. And they can position themselves in multiple ways. Entering the Adult Centre, you are in the midst of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As such, the student narratives give voice to educational struggles and social relations in the educational institution and locally embedded cultural meaning (Hymes, 1996).

Theoretical Framework – Master narratives, counter-narratives and positioning

My theoretical approach to explore the students’ educational narratives is by the overarching terms: master narratives, counter-narratives and positioning. As both master and counter-narratives seem to be umbrella terms for stories that either reproduce or oppose normative and culturally accepted stories about, for example, gender, ethnicity or education, I will continue with a definition of both.

Master and counter-narratives can be instrumental in how individuals and groups perceive and define themselves and they can have both cognitive and social functions. A master
narrative is “a script that specifies and controls how some social processes are carried out”, as Stanley (2007, p. 14) points out. According to Bamberg, master narratives to which counter-narratives respond, have been described as “plotlines, master plots, dominant discourses, or simply story lines or cultural texts” (2004, p. 359). Master narratives can be seen as “mental models of how voices of the dominant culture have justified systems and rules […]” (Stanley, 2007, p. 15) and as such act invisibly, because they are the uncontested norm. Acevedo, Ordner and Thompson state that in postmodern and critical race theory, master narratives “denote an all-encompassing and authoritative account of some aspect of social reality that is widely accepted and endorsed by the larger society” (2010, p. 125).

Counter-narratives have been seen as the means for resisting socially and culturally informed master narratives, which are often oppressive or exclude experiences that diverge from those conveyed through master narratives. In this perspective, counter or challenging narratives play a role in how students position themselves against the ideologies or values of master narratives. Counter-narratives refer to “the stories which people tell and live, which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives” (Andrews, 2004, p. 1). The term “counter-narrative” refers to a narrative which takes on meaning through its relation with one or more other narratives. While this relation is not necessarily oppositional (Bamberg & Andrews 2004, p. 2), it does involve a stance towards dominant narratives, and it is this aspect or position that distinguishes counter-narratives from other forms of intertextuality (Lundholt, Aagaard & Piekut, forthcoming 2017). As Bamberg and Andrews explain, “[…] counter-narratives only make sense in relation to something else, that which they are countering. The very name identifies it as a positional category, in tension with another category” (2004, p. 1). As such, counter-narratives provide opportunities to reinterpret, disrupt or interrupt pervasive discourses or master narratives (Milner IV & Howard, 2013). Bamberg underlines that the “social realm of interaction” (Bamberg, 2004, p. 362), in which
counter-narratives are embedded, can be more interesting than the stories itself. The varying
degrees of opposition or resistance between counter-narratives and master narratives should be
taken into consideration; some counter-narratives can partly confirm aspects of master narratives by
adopting structures or meanings from master narratives. That does not indicate an agreement or
confirmation with the master narrative, but points to the positional and complex relationship
between master and counter-narratives (Lundholt, Aagaard & Piekut, forthcoming 2017).

As mentioned above, a defining aspect of the relation between master narratives and
counter-narratives is that of “multiple layers of positioning” (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). As a
social term, positioning has been applied in a variety of fields and is significant in numerous studies
of narrative and identity. Frequently, it is a study of which possible repertoires of meaningful acts
people can perform in the social realm of narratives, in communication or in interactional situations.
In general, positioning refers to the social and emotional stances that individuals take towards real
or imagined others (Bamberg, 1997; Davies & Harré, 1990). Positioning theory typically locates the
construction of selves and identities in interactional sites and focuses on how positions are realised
in particular instances of communication. In Davies and Harré’s (1990) crucial article, positioning
as an interactional and flexible term was introduced as an alternative to “role” or “norms”. Harré
and Moghaddam (2003) point out that positioning is clearly related to power and captures different
rights and the moral potential to perform certain actions. An influential move towards positioning
as a powerful interactional approach is provided by Bamberg, with three analytical, separable but
interrelated levels of positioning (Bamberg, 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). In his
analytical approach to positioning, he generates close connections between positioning and identity
as part of an “interactive engagement” in told narratives. In this sense, master narratives are small or
large cultural standards, into which narrators position their experiences – as confirmative, selective
or oppositional to the culturally valued positions (Fivush & Haden, 2003). Attention to positioning
possibilities and choices provides insight into which master narratives or dominant discourses may be present in narrative interaction (Lundholt, Aagaard & Piekut, forthcoming 2017).

**Narrative analysis – Abir and Faisal**

Before I look at the two students’ narratives on adult education, I would like to provide a contextual footing for my analysis by briefly sketching the institutional and political context for the L2 courses in Denmark. As mentioned, the L2 courses are particularly designed to meet the needs of non-native, Danish-speaking students. With a growing concern over the underachievement of L2 students, changes are being called for to qualify the teachers and the curriculum of the course. It seems that a more inclusive view of multicultural education poses a challenge in the educational system in Denmark. Abir and Faisal – and other Danish as second language learners – are individuals with particular needs and goals, and as such they are learners who are equivalent to other learners in adult education. At the same time, they differ with respect to language and ethnicity. Prejudices based on ethnicity, class and language become more prominent and have significant impact on their positioning and educational narratives. Their educational narratives will be influenced by these prejudices and even racist discourses prevalent in Denmark, as is quite apparently the case for Abir.

*Abir – ‘because Brown Eyes are not the same as Blue Eyes’*

Abir was 19 years old when I conducted the interviews with her. She came from Iraq to Denmark with her family when she was two years old. Abir lives together with some girlfriends in an
apartment in one of the big cities in Denmark. She has a close relationship with her parents and her sibling, who live in the same city. Abir was in kindergarten in Denmark and went to a public school (grades 1-9) after kindergarten. The public school was situated in a ghetto area with a great diversity of population. After grade 9, she went to another public school for grade 10 and thereafter to a Vocational Training Centre. She could not find any required traineeship and had to interrupt her education. After that, she started at the Adult Education Centre for an Upper Secondary exam. She has not yet decided on what kind of education she would like to have in the near future; if she has the possibility, she would prefer to recommence her vocational education. She has been in the Danish school system since kindergarten, but her academic results from grades 1-9, and especially her academic outcome in the subject of Danish, are not sufficient to enrol in a regular L1 course, which is why she was counselled to enrol in the L2 course. She has older siblings, who graduated from upper secondary at an adult education centre after unsuccessful attempts to complete youth education.

Three consistent parts of her educational narrative are persistent throughout the interviews: the indifference regarding academic involvement in public school, the apparent deficit view of student counsellors with regard to L2 pupils and the clash of contrasting narratives from L2 courses in Adult Education.

In the interviews, Abir mostly looked at the bright side of things and trusted that she would get her upper secondary exam. As she stated: “It is my future… An upper secondary exam is wise. It opens up a lot of possibilities”.

Her educational narratives about elementary and middle school encompass contrasting experiences with teachers, subjects and educational advisers. In the restorying of her experiences, she positioned herself outside the course of events, as a child with lesser agency and knowledge of the educational system in Denmark:
In my school we were only foreigners… there was a lot of disturbance in the classroom… our teachers were far too nice… our Danish teacher never scolded us for not doing our homework or assignments. And he never called my parents. […] The teachers never noticed if I kept up with the subjects – and it was unimportant for me. But the social part in school [with friends] was fine.

Retrospectively, she positioned herself as a “foreigner” amongst other foreigners, seemingly well aware that her school differed from other schools with regard to class and ethnicity. By narrating her experiences in public school, the ethnic perspective at her school was highlighted, which positions the pupils as academic low achievers.

When we talked about her experiences with schools, teachers and education, in all three interviews she returned to the same “small story” (Bamberg, 2006; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) about a supervisor at her public school: in 8th grade in Denmark, pupils usually do a one-week internship in one of the three upper secondary programmes or in vocational education. At Abir’s school, the student counsellor’s recommendation for all pupils in Abir’s year group was solely vocational education, because “[…] she didn’t find us suitable for upper secondary…”. Abir and her classmates asked why they could not apply for the upper secondary programme, to which the student counsellor replied: “Because brown eyes are not the same as blue eyes”.¹ This sentence, a condensed “small story” about a deficit view, was repeated by Abir in all three interviews. The adviser had no academic expectations for non-native Danish speaking pupils, positioning them as academically inferior and without the ability to pass an upper secondary exam. One could say that the sentence encompassed a broader and implicit “public school master

¹ One of the other participants in this study confirmed this story independent of Abir’s interviews: She went to the same school and shared this experience with Abir. She was part of the same year group and the same meeting on internship.
narrative” of exclusion and contempt towards ethnic minorities. When Abir's parents asked her teachers and the adviser about the internship, “[…] they made it completely rosy, going to vocational education…. They told my parents that since I am interested in the scientific subjects, I should go for a health care worker education at the vocational education centre”. This experience of being inferior because of ethnicity was an adverse landmark event for Abir and she reflected on this in the three interviews I had with her. She converted its importance by organising and giving meaning to it in a narrative interpretation of her education in progress and transformed the deficit view to rebuild and represent an identity as a competent student, positioning her with agency and self-awareness. She was aware of the ethnic perspective, also in terms of language, and she turned to the homework club when she needed academic instructions:

> In class, when my classmates are talking to me...or asking something in Arabic, I will answer in Danish [...] I don’t want anyone to think bad about me. [...] I go to the homework club, especially with maths…

She was successfully taking the necessary courses for her exam and was vigorously engaging in lessons. She positioned herself as being above the story of ethnic inferiority, but she adopted emotional stances that took prejudice in education into consideration. She resisted the culturally informed, oppressive narrative about L2 students and challenged the supervisor’s voice by raising her own voice against excluding ideologies: “Upper secondary is the right choice. And I am learning a lot in the L2 class”.

Abir recognised the vernacular dominant narratives about adult education as an academic hang-out, and specifically recounted that L2 courses were where “unfit” immigrants could take a substandard exam, compared to Danish as a first language subject: “Well… I don’t know, but
I have heard that it is… like easier than a regular Danish course… more focus on grammar, and at the regular course they read more books and have to present more for the class”. It seems that enrolling in an L2 course calls for arguments, especially how and why you position yourself to the powerful but incorrect presumptions about the course: “You always have to argue for why you enrol in L2 and not a standard course to friends and some family members”.

A rather resistant popular story of L2 as a second-rate course was exposed in all four participants’ educational narratives. Abir was restorying friends’ and family’s small stories on the L2 course:

I didn’t want to take the L2 course at first, because my friends told me that the course does not qualify for universities. And other immigrants I meet are asking me: Why are you enrolling in the L2 course, you speak normal Danish? And then they tell me that I will learn nothing at a course with only foreigners.

Hereafter, she recounted stories that she had been told about other students, overlooked at universities because of an upper secondary degree with an L2 course.

She contested parts of the vernacular narratives, using compensating substitute stories from her older siblings, who were now studying at universities. Her older brothers’ stories are vicarious experiences that serve as evaluative comments to the detrimental vernacular narratives.

By confirming parts of the institutional narratives, she positioned herself as a self-regulating student who avoided being affected by the vernacular narratives - but she still could not free herself from being influenced by them: “Going to an Adult Education Centre for your upper secondary… some people say that the adult centres are only for people who can’t work something better out… but if you know it, your opinion will change”. Abir had varying degrees of resistance between counter- and master narratives on adult education at the centres; she confirmed aspects of
the institutional master narratives on opportunities, but that does not indicate an overall 
confirmation with the master narrative – or the countering one (Andrews & Bamberg, 2004).

Also, parts of the vernacular detrimental narratives about the lack of academic 
resources amongst students at the adult centres came true in Abir's educational narrative about the 
institution: “I’m not saying this to be mean or something, but some in my class… when they have to 
present… they express themselves like… I don’t understand them…” The group of students had 
various academic and linguistic resources, and the variation in resources seemed to be more 
prevalent in the L2 courses.

Abir recognized the institutional narrative about being responsible, caring and 
professional at one point: “… the upper secondary [name] showed us no respect. At the adult 
centres there is a more open culture”. She recounted vicarious experiences from friends, who started 
their education at a regular high school, but replaced it with upper secondary at an adult centre, 
because they – like Abir – “are content with the centres… you can have a close contact with some 
of the teachers”.

In general, the vernacular narratives about the adult centres contribute to an 
ambivalent identification with both the institutional and the vernacular narratives and a positioning 
that aligns Abir with her older siblings. She identified herself as a diligent student, well aware of 
her academic skills and constraints. She knew that she had to work hard on her oral Danish, and that 
maths was a real challenge for her. In her educational narrative, her recent past in public school and 
her present education at the centre was in focus; the drifting in between different youth educations 
and the mosaic plans of the future were not that prevalent in her narrative. At the same time, she 
positioned herself as a “foreigner” in public school, but used the self-description “immigrant” in her 
later life. It seems that her ethnic positioning in education was floating, with a slightly more 
imclusive positioning as “immigrant” in her adult life. Her identity work in the interviews was based
on being “different” from her Danish friends, but not alienated, and a substantial part of her identity was a feeling of community with some of her peers in the L2 course, and a strong ability to connect with her family and close friends, referring to them as an ethnic “us” in the interviews. In some ways, this is opposite to the centre's purpose and stories of academic and personal transformation and individual independence.

Faisal – Resisting “the long way from the very beginning”

Faisal is 22 and came from Afghanistan to Denmark with his parents and siblings four years before the interviews. He moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan during his adolescence, due to better educational possibilities in Pakistan and because of the war going on in Afghanistan. Now he lives in his own apartment, close to his parents, and runs a small mobile phone repair shop along with his education at the Adult Centre. He is a committed student and throughout the interviews he repeated that he is a “learner”; he loves to learn and to engage in a challenging education. He had a high school degree from Pakistan, but because of the circumstances, he could not bring his certificates to Denmark; he had to “go the long way from the very beginning”, as he stated. He had taken the necessary degrees at the mandatory language schools at a fast rate, gaining high marks, and was now eager to finish his upper secondary education so he could apply for further education.

Condensing Faisal’s educational narratives, there were three recurrent stories: stories of “sameness” and “difference”, stories of misleading counselling and stories of concealment regarding studying at an Adult Centre. The stories were elaborated over time and seemed to be a crucial part of his identity work.

His first reflections on being a student at the centre were characterised by being affirmative of the vernacular narratives. He positioned himself as “different” from his (ethnic) peers
due to his academic abilities and at the same time identified himself with “sameness” in relation to his Danish peers:

After getting the highest mark at the language school I was counselled to go to the Adult Centre. So I started at the Adult Education Centre, but after two or three months I didn’t feel I was learning enough…I was together with other [immigrants]… so I wanted to be together with Danes so I could learn more… the students at my course where about 30 or 40 years old and had no educational basis. I felt I was wasting my time, taking L2 at the lower secondary level. Some friends told me to go to the Business School … I really wanted to take a lengthy education. I would still really like to learn more…

He has a strong academic learner-identification, where the ethnic aspect is subordinated. He positioned himself as reflective and judicious, navigating between two dilemmas: Education as the means for ethnical sameness or ethnical difference. The reason for him not enrolling at first in the L2 course at upper secondary was a wish for “sameness”: “Us, as students, we don’t want to go to L2, we want to join the standard Danish course…” On the other hand, Faisal was very aware that his needs were met in the L2 course with its special focus on grammar, and in the second interview he conveyed his appreciation about being in an L2 course – but he was still impatient with the pace of the course. Faisal has developed a conscious conception of himself as an agent in a socially and culturally constructed world of education, and as part of his identification he wants to have control over his behaviour and engagement in education. He is innovative and has tried to find new ways to get through the education system, which he finds sluggish. For Faisal, the
obvious way is to take courses meant for native Danes and to be identified by his academic ability and not by his ethnicity.

The second recurrent story is about all the academic advisers he has been in contact with. Since Faisal had been eager to get his upper secondary degree, he had figured out for himself how the Danish education system works. He could not get any help from the academic advisers, since they only knew about their own educational institution: “Every time this frustration about how to get on… I was very sad that maybe I couldn’t get any help. And the advisers that maybe could help were very hard to find. So I had to fight very much for every little thing…”. Part of the administration, which should facilitate students’ educational choices, seemed to obstruct Faisal’s attempts to get help; he accentuated his own story of how he got through all the obstacles of the different education systems in Denmark. His story runs counter to the institutional narratives about professionalism and qualified advisers with the potential to rectify students’ missing exams. Faisal is aware of this institutional master narrative, but opposes the advantageous interpretation.

He positioned himself as a dynamic agent in his own educational story. He exposed the construction of the institutional dominant story of knowledge and understanding by telling a different story – and by identifying himself in an investigative position that is not fostered inside the system, but outside the system:

I felt like really lost many, many times since I came to Denmark… a lot of young people want to get on with their education… but they lose perspective because they don’t meet … like … a person who can advise them for their whole education and the opportunities in the system. The education system is new to me and I don’t know what way to go […]. Why don’t the academic advisers know anything about the whole educational system?
The advisers seemed to unknowingly obstruct Faisal’s navigation through the education system. His narrative of considerable inertia inherent in adult education runs counter to the institutional narrative:

… the students at the centre are following the ‘defeated way’ and are still taking their lower secondary degree and crawl at a snail’s pace, because they don’t know how to get on. And eventually, they stop crawling because there is a long way to the upper secondary degree and so on…. And they can’t get a job with only a lower secondary degree, and then they just stop and get social welfare instead.

In the interviews, Faisal articulated his frustration with the bureaucratic education system and the hurdles you have to overcome with only your own skills to rely on. Faisal confirmed the vernacular narrative about adult education as an academic hang-out and “waste of time”, but expanded it in favour of the students enrolled in the courses of the institutions; they were the subject of the institutions’ pacifying bureaucracy. Faisal positioned himself as a vigilant interpreter of his and his peers’ educational journey with agency as a prime force.

The third and overlying narrative is that of concealment. Faisal expressed several times that he did not tell people or distant relatives that he was registered at an adult centre, because according to Faisal, it is linked to disgrace. As mentioned above, the vernacular narratives about the adult centres feature comments on wasted opportunities and staying on an educational parking lot, which Faisal could not and would not identify himself with:
I don’t tell people that I am getting my upper secondary at an adult centre, I just state that I am taking the degree … and people are praising me for taking an education. Adult Education Centres are at a lower standard. Another thing is that these centres don’t have… what to say… the acronym is Adults With No Chances…

In conversations with friends, or people he met in his repair shop, he always referred to the fact that he was taking his upper secondary education, but never that the education was located at an Adult Centre. Concealment about the centres was not unusual amongst course participants, but Faisal was very conscious about his omission because of the condescending vernacular narratives. He positioned himself as a fast and agentive “learner”, thereby re-contextualising himself in a privileged social and educational position. It seems that Faisal’s reconfiguration of his educational narrative was not exclusively a cloth woven of different stories. There are constants tying the pieces together. The constants are his agency and his powerful positioning against discourses of exclusion and ethnicity. And this positioning provides stability in an unstable educational life.

Conclusion

The centres’ dominant and official narratives present a relatively straight and consistent way to achieve an upper secondary degree, referring to the institutions’ responsible, caring and professional resources. The aspects of transformation are implicitly incorporated in the dominant narrative. Most of the students at the adult centres are painfully aware that their education path has often been – and maybe still will be – deviant and odd. They cannot identify themselves solely with the dominant or
the vernacular narratives – the latter being stories of educational failure and social deviation. A main problem for Abir and Faisal to be able to adopt the centres’ official narratives uncritically is the lack of ownership of and identification with the stories. Students are given no “agency” in the dominant narratives and Abir, for example, is not looking for transformation. On the other hand, Faisal positions himself as both an unusual student, without marginalising himself as “ethnically different”, and by implicitly approving part of the institutional story of social and academic transformation. At the same time, he is articulating the perspective of “wasted opportunities”.

The rejection of the institutional master narratives is therefore not unequivocal. A common factor in the interviews with the students is that their interpretation of past experiences with education is positively influenced by present experiences at the centre in the L2 course, and so there seems to be the potential for a rectifying narrative with more individual agency. Besides the common deficit view on L2 students, the course provides academic disciplinary qualifications, which both Abir and Faisal acknowledge.

The possibilities of identification with the adult education centres are complicated, insofar as they offer different and contrasting positioning strategies for both Abir and Faisal. By countering either the institutional narrative or the vernacular with their own educational narratives, they can choose a strategy that opens up a larger variety of positioning. According to Abir and Faisal, the narratives about the centres were often reported as comments or remarks and recounts of other students’ experiences. Counter-narratives are means of making sense of the institutional “truth”, as it is experienced by students. They are part of the many currents of communication and teaching that constitute an educational institution. They may challenge institutional or other authoritative narratives that normalise certain forms of educational paths. So, counter-narratives are potentially a source of great insight into the differing interpretations of the institution and can give rise to conflict, resistance or change, as we see with Abir and Faisal. Thus, Abir and Faisal’s
counter-narratives have the potential to become a resource for confronting problematic institutional narratives about education.

Narrative meaning-making seems to be a motivating force for both Abir and Faisal, but that does not mean that their educational narratives overall are well-formed, articulate and coherent. Quite the contrary, in the interviews there are inconsistencies and disruptive “small stories” or countering arguments, which reveal equivocation as stowaways in their educational journey.

The students’ narratives are not solely counter-narratives and there is no overall dichotomy between the narratives circulating inside and outside the centres. It seems that besides more explicit counter-narratives like Faisal’s, both expanding, challenging and partly confirmative implicit and explicit master narratives and counter-narratives are part of the students’ experiences. The interaction of the two overarching narratives seems to have a strong impact on the positioning of the students. And it seems that the institutional constraints have a strong shaping effect on the narratives told within them: the vernacular narratives do not seem to have the same strong impact on the institutional narratives, but seem to have an immense impact on the students enrolled in the centres. Both Abir and Faisal are strongly affected by the vernacular narratives, but sometimes they create and reproduce a more critical or more challenging perspective on them.

Since the vernacular narratives seem to have such a strong impact on Abir and Faisal’s educational narratives, and since they complicate identifications with being a student at an adult centre, it could be argued that the classification of counter-narratives and master narratives shifts. One could say that the relationship between the dominant and the countering narratives is reversed, as the vernacular narratives seem to be the normative and culturally dominant narratives, which the students have to position themselves against, turning the countering narratives to be the master narratives about education. Abir and Faisal’s tasks – and dilemmas – seem to be to navigate their
identification processes and positioning strategies in between these narratives. They fit in with the target group of the Adult Centres, but they aren’t drop-outs or “losers”, nor do they demand academic transformation – they cannot solely identify themselves with the educational institutions or vernacular narratives. The positioning possibilities seem to be most attractive and tenable in between these two powerful narratives. For the students, it is significant to find their own voice and narrative about education, without getting helplessly entangled in the institutional or vernacular narratives.

Attention to counter-narratives can provide insight into how students in institutional contexts are positioned or position themselves. Counter-narratives reveal how Abir and Faisal identify with or against the official values and missions of the institutions. Because positioning is a process for identity formation in relation to others, it can provide insight into the heterogeneity of the student’s identities, and as part of this process, the voicing of counter-narratives can be a means of empowerment, making the heavily asymmetric narratives visible and giving voice to individualised versions of the two overarching narratives.

Counter-narratives may have a stabilising or destabilising effect on institutions. The counter-narratives of adult education seem to be mostly destabilising, making it key to embrace counter-narratives as a resource rather than an obstacle, and by that to facilitate possible change and nuancing of both the vernacular and the institutional narratives.
References


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