Article

Reflections on the Narrative Research Approach

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Abstract

In her reflections on the narrative research approach, the author starts by placing narrative research within the framework of sociocultural theory, where the challenge for the researcher is to examine and understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur and how and where they occur through growth. The author argues that the narrative as a unit of analysis provides the means for doing this. She then presents some of the basic premises of narrative research before she reflects on the process of narrative inquiry and addresses the issue of the "true" narrative. Throughout the article, the author refers to educational research and in the concluding section argues that the results of narrative research can be used as thought-provoking tools within the field of teacher education.

Keywords: sociocultural theory, unit of analysis, narratives, basic claims of narrative research, narrative research process, true stories

As we make our way through life, we have continuous experiences and dialogic interactions both with our surrounding world and with ourselves. All of these are woven together into a seamless web, where they might strike one as being overwhelming in their complexity. One way of structuring these experiences is to organize them into meaningful units. One such meaningful unit could be a story, a narrative. For most people, storytelling is a natural way of recounting experience, a practical solution to a fundamental problem in life, creating reasonable order out of experience. Not only are we continually producing narratives to order and structure our life experiences, we are also constantly being bombarded with narratives from the social world we live in. We create narrative descriptions about our experiences for ourselves and others, and we also develop narratives to make sense of the behavior of others (Zellermayer, 1997). According to Polkinghorne (1988), people without narratives do not exist. Life itself might thus be considered a narrative inside which we find a number of other stories.

Narrative research is increasingly used in studies of educational practice and experience, chiefly because teachers, like all other human beings, are storytellers who individually and socially lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative research is thus the study of how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Even if narrative inquiry is a relatively new branch within the qualitative or interpretive research

tradition, much has already been written on the theme. When reading about narratives and narrative research, one is left with the impression that the focus of attention becomes diffuse, spreading in many directions: Very often, the concept of narrative is used in connection with how to represent a qualitative research study. Thus, it is maintained that a case study, a biographical study, a phenomenological study or an ethnographic study may have a narrative form of representation (Creswell, 1998). The narrative representation particularly appears to be connected to teacher biographies and autobiographies. Within this tradition, it even seems as if the terms biography and narrative are used synonymously (Goodson, 1992). Some researchers have focused on the narrative approach as a method of inquiry (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001), a research genre situated within the qualitative or interpretive research family. Others have claimed that the narrative approach is not a method but, rather, a frame of reference in a research process, wherein narratives are seen as producers and transmitters of reality (Heikkinen, 2002).

My point of departure is that the narrative approach is a frame of reference, a way of reflecting during the entire inquiry process, a research method, and a mode for representing the research study. Hence, the narrative approach is both the phenomenon and the method (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), a postulate that some might find rather confusing and overwhelming. In this article, I therefore intend to present some thoughts on narrative inquiry as being both the phenomenon and method. In doing so, I will present three basic underpinnings incorporated in the narrative approach, then I will examine the narrative research process before finally addressing the question of whether the stories occurring within this field of research are true. First, I will place the narrative research approach within the framework of sociocultural theory, focusing on Vygotsky's (1978) ideas on the developmental approach to the study of human beings, and Bakhtin's (1986) ideas on dialogue.

The sociocultural foundation of narrative research

For centuries, scholars have studied and puzzled over the development of human beings, leading, not surprisingly, to a number of theories. We find models that emphasize the importance of the environment for the development of individuals, and, on the other hand, we find theories that focus on how development is propelled by an inner biological maturing of individuals. Both approaches represent traditional epistemologies. Social constructivism introduces alternative theories on the development of human beings. Although there are different versions of social constructivism, what they have in common is the belief that individuals learn and develop through participation in social activities in the world. Society—or the world, for that matter—has continuous influence on the individual or the mind, and vice versa. Human beings learn and develop in these mutual processes between the individual and society. In this way, the dualism between the individual and her or his social environment, or what is called the mind-world problem, is abolished (Prawat, 1996). Sociocultural theory is one version of social constructivism that connects the entities mind and world.

Vygotsky's ideas on developmental analysis

According to Vygotsky (1978), human learning and development occur in socially and culturally shaped contexts. How people become what they are thus depends on what they have experienced in the social contexts in which they have participated. The social contexts individuals encounter are based on where they are at any particular point in time. As historical conditions are constantly changing, this also results in changed contexts and opportunities for learning and development. Thus, consciousness, or the human mind, cannot be considered as a fixed category, in the sense that it can be described once and for all (Schribner, 1985). Quite to the contrary, it is a category undergoing continual change and development, a change and development that occur in step with historical development and activities on the social plane.

Vygotsky (1978) was critical of research that considered individuals in isolation, and when arguing for his genetic or developmental approach, he contrasted it with approaches that attempt to analyze psychological phenomena without regard for their place in development. In fact, he devoted more than a fourth of his manuscripts to an analysis of the shortcomings in psychological theory and methods responsible for this failure (Schribner, 1985). He claimed that analyses of "fossilized" or static products would often be misleading, as they provided description but not explanation of human mental development, and he maintained that it is impossible to understand human mental functioning without considering how and where this occurs through growth. Genetic analysis, thus, means that focus is placed on the very process by which human consciousness is formed:

> We need to concentrate not only on the product of development but on the very process by which higher forms are established. . . . To encompass in research the process of a given thing's development in all its phases and changes—from birth to death—fundamentally means to discover its nature, its essence, for it is only in movement that a body shows what it is. (pp. 64-65).

Researchers (Dysthe, 2001; Elbaz-Luwisch, Moen, & Gudmundsdottir, 2002; Hundeide, 2001; Moen, Gudmundsdottir, & Flem, 2003; Wertsch, 1991) have increasingly promoted Bakhtin's (1986) theories as a useful supplement to Vygotsky's ideas on a developmental approach to the study of human beings. In particular, they focus on Bakhtin's concept of dialogue.

Bakhtin's concept of dialogue

Dialogue, the most fundamental of Bakhtin's (1986) concepts, is used in a very wide perspective. All human action is dialogic in nature. In its widest sense, even existence itself might be considered to be dialogic. Not only do we conduct dialogues with the surrounding world when we, for example, interact with other people, we also conduct dialogues with ourselves in our consciousness. The dialogue concept means that none of the things we say or do, whether we speak, listen, write, read, or think, occur in a vacuum. To gain insight into what dialogue implies, we must consider three other central concepts in Bakhtin's theory: utterance, addressee and voice.

 Utterance, which is closely linked to dialogue, is a concept that must also be understood in a wide sense. In social contexts, an utterance may be spoken or written, whereas on the inner, mental level, it may be thought. An utterance assumes a person to be speaking to someone, an addressee. Such an addressee may be ourselves on the inner psychological plane, as well as various people we meet on our way through life. Finally, an utterance assumes a voice. An utterance can exist only if produced by a voice. According to this strong emphasis on dialogue, a voice can never exist in isolation. It never exists in a vacuum and is never neutral. The voice producing an utterance always addresses someone. An individual always exists in relation to others, and living means being in an endless dialogue with others. Thus Bakhtin (1986) is concerned with voices that interact and that together create meaning and understanding. Meaning and understanding cannot be transferred from one person to the next; rather, they are created when voices engage in dialogue with each other.

 The voice producing the utterance considers or reflects the person or persons to whom the utterance is addressed. When, for example, a teacher speaks to the children in her class, she behaves differently from when she is talking with her colleagues in the staff room or when talking with the researcher. In addition to having her own voice, she therefore also reflects the voice of the addressee. Thus, an utterance includes at least two voices, and one of Bakhtin's (1986) key points is to ascertain who is doing the talking. Not only does an utterance reflect the voice of the speaker and the addressee, it also reflects other voices that have been experienced previously in life, in history, in culture. Thus a voice is overpopulated with other voices, with the intentions, expectations, and attitudes of others. As the voice producing the utterance also

includes the voices of many others, Wertsch (1991) has argued that it is inappropriate to use the singular form of voice; the plural, "voices," is the more correct term. Gudmundsdottir (2001) agreed with this when she said, "One finds no singular voice, because any claimed voice is a heteroglossia of culturally situated voices that ventriloquate through the singular voice that is claimed by an individual" (p. 235).

Narratives as a unit of analysis

We have seen that Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1986) argued for the need to go beyond the isolated individual when trying to understand human development and functioning. When using their ideas as a theoretical framework, the challenge is to examine and understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur and to consider how and where they occur through growth. The task for the analysis is therefore to find a way to avoid the pitfalls of individualistic and societal reductionism. The narrative as a unit of analysis provides the means for doing this (Wertsch, 1998). Before exploring this issue, let us take a moment to examine Vygotsky's ideas on the unit of analysis.

Vygotsky's (1978) deep interest in methodological problems of science and, in particular, the units of analysis is evident in various areas of his writings; both when he is describing his own studies and in his critique of other researchers' methodological approaches. His preoccupation with methodological issues in general and with units of analysis in particular is not exceptional. Throughout history, many scholars have dealt with the problem of how to understand complex wholes. A major approach has been to break the complex whole down to its constituent parts, which are supposedly easier to grasp. The nature of the complex whole is then explained on the basis of an understanding of these parts (Van der Veer, 2001). Vygotsky warned against the decomposition of the complex whole into elements. In doing so, he employed an analogy from chemistry about the relationship between water, on the one hand, and the elements of oxygen and hydrogen, on the other:

It may be compared to the chemical analysis of water into hydrogen and oxygen, neither of which possesses the properties of the whole and each of which possesses properties not present in the whole. The student applying this method in looking for the explanation of some property of water—why it extinguishes fire, for example—will find to his surprise that hydrogen burns and oxygen sustains fire. These discoveries will not help him much in solving the problem. . . . Nothing is left to the investigator but to search out the mechanical interaction of the two elements in the hope of reconstructing, in a purely speculative way, the vanished properties of the whole (Vygotsky, 1962/2000, p. 3).

When discussing this topic, Vygotsky (1962/2000) said, "By unit (italics in original) we mean a product of analysis which, unlike elements, retains all the basic properties of the whole and which cannot be further divided without losing them" (p. 4). It is on the basis of these postulations that Zinchenco (1985) has outlined criteria in Vygotsky's notion of the unit of analysis: A unit must not be a diffuse, syncretic whole of elements, something that combines everything with everything else. It should, rather, be an integrated whole. The unit of analysis must also be a living part of the whole. It must be a unified system that cannot be broken down further. Any further division of the whole into elements is possible but results in its decomposition as a living and unified entity. The unit must also maintain the characteristics of the unified whole, though internal contradictions and oppositions may exist. Finally, the unit of analysis must be capable of development, including self-development. It must possess the appropriate inherent properties and the potential for being transformed into something that differs from its initial form (Zinchenco, 1985). I maintain that the narrative contains all these criteria. Narratives are not broken into elements; they are neither reductionistic nor static. Narratives, rather, enable us to study teachers and their teaching in movement, in a process of development, and within the teachers' social, cultural, and institutional settings. Bearing this in mind, we can now turn our focus to narrative research.

Narrative research

In Latin, the noun narrario means a narrative or a story, and the verb narrare to tell or narrate (Heikkinen, 2002). A narrative is a story that tells a sequence of events that is significant for the narrator or her or his audience. To repeat, when narratives are looked on within the framework of sociocultural theory, we have to remember the interlinking between the individual and her or his context. As individuals are telling their stories, they are not isolated and independent of their context. On the contrary, it is important to remember that the individual in question is irreducibly connected to her or his social, cultural and institutional setting (Wertsch, 1991). Narratives, therefore, capture both the individual and the context.

Three basic claims about narrative research

In literature on the narrative research approach, we find three basic underpinnings, or claims. We have already seen the first claim in the introduction to this article: that human beings organize their experiences of the world into narratives. Second, narrative researchers maintain that the stories that are told depend on the individual's past and present experiences, her or his values, the people the stories are being told to, the addressees, and when and where they are being told. The third claim, closely connected to the second, concerns the multivoicedness that occurs in the narratives. I will examine these claims in the following.

 The narrative is regarded as "the primary scheme by which human existence is rendered meaningful" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1). Following this line of thought, human experience is always narrated. Narrative research is, consequently, focused on how individuals assign meaning to their experiences through the stories they tell. According to Carter (1993), human beings come to understand sorrow or love or joy in particularly rich ways through the characters and incidents we become familiar with in novels or plays. The richness and nuances cannot be expressed in definitions or abstract propositions. They can only be demonstrated or evoked through storytelling. Narratives are therefore inevitably linked to language. The narration of experience comes naturally, like learning a language. This means that young children learn to tell all sorts of narratives, short and long, as they gradually master the language. As children experience through participation in all sorts of social events in their infinite varieties, they also learn to tell stories about them. In this way, they gradually learn what kind of meaning culture has imposed on the various events (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Thus, storytelling as a way of recounting and creating order out of experience starts in childhood and continues through all stages of our lives. When teachers talk about their lives as teachers, they naturally appropriate a narrative structure (Butt, Raymond, McCue, & Yamagishi, 1992; Casey, 1992).

Like all of us, teachers tell and retell their stories of experience both for themselves and for others in different social settings, at different times and for different addressees. This means that the perspective on their experiences constantly changes form as they gain new experiences and engage in dialogues with other people (Heikkinen, 2002). Stories cannot be viewed simply as abstract structures isolated from their cultural context. They must be seen as rooted in society and as experienced and performed by individuals in cultural settings (Bruner, 1984). Human knowledge and personal identities are therefore continually constructed and revised. Experience of the world, like each person's perception of her- or himself, is a continuously developing narrative that is constantly forming and changing form. Here human knowledge is regarded as a plurality of small narratives, local and personal in nature, that are always under construction (Heikkinen, 2002). There is no single, dominant, or static reality but, rather, a number of realities that are constructed in the process of interactions and dialogues. Human knowledge of the world is thus relative. It is dependent on the individual's past and present experiences, her or his values, the people the stories are being told to (the addressees), and when and where they are being told (Bakhtin, 1986). Bruner (1984) maintained that you always create or hear about a narrative in terms of your life experiences and background. Although research from this perspective perhaps has the ability to produce

some kind of authentic view on reality, the belief in the potential attainment of an objective reality or truth is rejected (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

As stated above, the narrative approach is situated within the qualitative or interpretive research method (Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001). A qualitative approach to the field of investigation means that researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. The immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actor's point of view, are thus crucial (Erickson, 1986). This understanding of qualitative research shifts our focus to the concept of voice. Several educational researchers refer to the voice as the research subject's voice. However, more and more scholars (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002; Gudmunds- dottir, 2001; Hoel, 1997; Moen et al., 2003) within the narrative approach use the term voices rather than voice because they recognize that the narratives are in part personal stories shaped by the knowledge, experiences, values and feelings of the persons who are telling them. At the same time, they are also collective stories that are shaped by the addressees and the cultural, historical and institutional settings in which they occur (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002, 2005).

The process of claiming voice is therefore basically an interaction between the individual's beliefs and experiences and past, present and future external voices. To use Vygotsky's (1978) concepts, it is an interaction between intermental and intramental processes. The notion of intermental processes refers to the social plane, and the notion of intramental processes refers to the inner psychological plane. In this way, narratives connect the individual and her or his social context, and therefore a multitude of voices are present within an individual's stories. All the three basic claims presented here are closely linked to the above-mentioned ideas of Vygotsky and Bakhtin (1986), and, I would add, important aspects to keep in mind during the entire narrative research process.

The narrative research process

As will be shown below, one of the main characteristics of narrative research is the collaboration process between the researcher and her or his research subjects. Within this approach, the research subject is regarded as a collaborator rather than an informant guided by the agenda of the researcher (Altork, 1998). This is the reason why I prefer research subject rather than the more traditional term informant. Other terms I just as easily could have preferred are collaborator or participant.

In narrative research, stories of experience are shaped through discussions with the research subject in a dialogue. A number of data collection methods can be used, as the researcher and the research subjects work together in this collaborative dialogic relationship. Data can be in the form of field notes; journal records; interview transcripts; one's own and other's observations; storytelling; letter writing; autobiographical writing; documents such as school and class plans, newsletters, and other texts, such as rules and principles; and pictures (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To this list, I would add video recordings, as these are also useful data in narrative research. Although other qualitative research approaches, such as case studies, biographies, phenomenological studies, grounded theory studies, and ethnographic studies, are described in detail, the literature on narrative research appears to be rather vague about concrete inquiry procedures. In this section I will focus on three recurrent issues in discussions on the narrative research approach. First is the relationship between the researcher and her or his research subjects. The second is how a narrative is developed from an experienced and orally told story into a written text, and the third is the hermeneutic or interpretive nature of narrative research.

Several researchers (Altork, 1998; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Heikkinen, 2002; Kyratzis & Green, 1997) have been interested in the collaborative, dialogic nature of the relationship between the researcher and her or his research subjects. What seems to be important when discussing this issue is the necessity of time and space to develop a caring situation in which both the researcher and the research subjects feel

comfortable. It has also been claimed that a sense of a nonjudgmental attitude (Fetterman, 1998) and a sense of equality between the participants is particularly important in narrative inquiry, because teachers have traditionally experienced that they do not have their own voice in the field of educational research and might find it difficult to feel empowered to tell their stories. The ideal is that the narrator and the researcher reach a joint intersubjective understanding of the narratives that occur during the research process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

However, a dilemma can occur if the researcher and the research subjects interpret specific events in different ways or if the research subjects question the interpretive authority of the researcher (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). Closely connected to this dilemma is the question of whether the research subjects always have a better appreciation of their actions than the outside observer. Must the accounts of those individuals whose customs or actions are being explained always be accepted as the "correct" account of the phenomenon in question? According to Phillips (1997), it is difficult to tell if a particular story is a reflection of the facts in the case or whether it has been shaped by the storyteller. In my opinion, the dilemma outlined here could and should be solved by including both the researcher's and the research subject's points of view in the research report. Perhaps in this way, the multivoicedness of the narrative would appear more clearly than it would if the researcher and the research subject have a joint understanding of the narratives that occur during the inquiry process.

Creating a narrative implies a process whereby an accurate story that occurs in collaboration between the researcher and the research subject becomes fixed in a written text. Ricoeur (1981) has provided useful theory that helps us understand this process. First, in the dialogic collaboration process between the researcher and the research subject, one or more stories are written down and become fixed in a text. This means that the narrative in question is no longer tied to the moment in which it occurred. Second, by fixing the narrative into a text it becomes "autonomized": It has been detached from the moment it occurred and has assumed consequences of its own. Third, the narrative can, in this way, assume importance that goes beyond the initial situation and becomes relevant in other contexts. The story has been liberated from its origin and can enter into new interpretive frames, where it might assume meanings not intended by the persons involved in the original event. Fourth, the narrative that is fixed in a text is thus considered an "open work" where the meaning is addressed to those who read and hear about it. Looking on narrative as an open text makes it possible to engage in a wide range of interpretations.

Creating a narrative is primarily a process that organizes human experiences into meaningful episodes. The "raw material" for the narratives comes from intermental life experiences and intramental images that are not accessible to direct observation. The individual stories that emerge in texts in the creation of narratives are, however, available for direct observation and interpretation (Polkinghorne, 1988). In this way, any narrative functions at two levels. The first level comprises the story that has been carefully selected out of a complex situation and has been fixed in a narrative. By selecting one episode from a complex social situation, the event has already been interpreted and infused with meaning: meaning ascribed to it by the narrative under construction, which is the second level (Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001).

Implicit in what has been discussed so far is that narrative research is an ongoing hermeneutic or interpretive process. The interpretation starts immediately when one story is selected out of any number of other possible stories, and it continues during the entire research process. Above we have seen that both the researcher and the research subjects participate in this interpretive process during the entire research period. We have also seen that the interpretation does not end with the finished research report. Quite to the contrary, the final narrative opens for a wide range of interpretations by others who read and hear about the report (Ricoeur, 1981).

I will end this section with some reflections on the interpretive role of the researcher. Often, researchers occupied with teaching practice are former teachers themselves. When they enter the classroom to collect their data, the scene is so familiar that it might be difficult to see anything at all. The researcher may, however, distance him- or herself from the everyday life of a classroom, making it unfamiliar, by looking at it through theory. Theoretical perspectives enable us to gain further understanding and insight. Researchers using a narrative approach employ theory in systematic ways both when they approach the field and when they give reasons for the interpretations (Gudmundsdottir, 1992). Thus, it is the constant interaction between theory and empirical data that makes it possible to understand and gain new insight. The stories that occur within the narrative research approach are therefore always told and interpreted within a theoretical framework (Gudmundsdottir, 2001).

The "true" narrative?

According to Bakhtin's (1986) notions of utterance and addressee, the narratives can differ depending on to whom the stories are being told, and this naturally raises the question of whether the stories are true. When it comes to this crucial element, it is important to remember the second basic claim of narrative research. In fact, this fundamental claim makes the question irrelevant. According to this view, there is no static and everlasting truth. Instead there are different subjective positions from which we experience and interpret the world (Peshkin, 1988, 1991). Nevertheless, the question about the truth seems to be a recurring theme within the literature on narrative research on educational practice (Goodson, 1992; Gudmundsdottir, 1997; Heikkinen, 2002; Phillips, 1997). Phillips, for example, claimed that a narrative often must be true to be considered acceptable. The point he is making is that we do not always know, or are not always aware of or honest about, the reasons underlying our actions. Consequently, he suggested that the account of an outsider might be more truthful than the first-person story of the research subject. He argued that at special times, such as when policy or future important actions rely on the acceptance of the narrative, it is particularly important for the account in the narrative to be true. The point Phillips was making here took on special significance during the political crisis in January and February 2003. In the political discussions on what was called the "Iraqi conflict," the U.S. president, George W. Bush, and the U.K. prime minister, Tony Blair, appeared to have one story about Iraq and Saddam Hussein, whereas countries such as France, Germany, and Russia seemed to have another. The crucial question at that time was what kind of story the United Nation's Security Council would accept. This issue also has special interest today when we listen to various stories about the war between Israel and the Hezbollah. When discussing the issue of the "true" story, Phillips did not touch on questions like what truth, whose truth, from what context, what social location, and so on.

Denzin (1989) contended that narratives are fictional statements that, to a varying degree, are about real lived lives. During the collaborative process of collecting and producing narratives of experience, the researcher and the research subjects inevitably remove themselves from the real lived event that was the starting point for the story in question. Consequently, narrative research always presents stories about remembered events and how these were experienced. The notions of facts, facilities, and fiction are used in this reasoning. Facts refer to events that are believed to have occurred, and facilities describe how those facts were lived and experienced by the interacting individuals. Fiction, then, is a truthful narrative that deals with the facts and facilities, and is faithful to them both. True stories are, thus, stories that are believed.

Bruner (1984) followed the same line of thinking when he made a distinction between a life as lived, experienced, and told. A life lived is what actually has happened. A life experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is. A life told is a narrative or several narratives influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context. One can imagine a life that is lived, experienced, and told about in a way that depicts a complete relationship between these three terms. In real life, however, there are inevitable gaps

between reality, experience, and expression. Goodson (1992) has developed Bruner's ideas, claiming that in narrative research, there are not three but four levels. The life is told by the person who lived and experienced it, and it is then retold when the storyteller and the researcher collaborate to produce an intersubjective understanding of the narrative. According to Goodson (1992), there is a distinctive relationship between life as lived and experienced and life as told and rendered in text. In a study where, for example, one particular teacher is in focus, it is important to remember that the written text is a representation of her or his life as a teacher, not her or his life as lived or experienced (Bruner, 1984). However, the written text should be produced in a way that achieves as much harmony as possible across these levels. It is also important to bear in mind in this context that narrative inquiry in the social sciences is a form of empirical narrative in which empirical data and theory are key elements in the work. Thus, in every narrative from educational practice, there will always be some facts (Denzin, 1989) or particles of truth (Lincoln, 2000).

When asking whether a story is true, another question naturally arises, that is, how to ensure the quality of the study. This is, needless to say, a recurrent concern when reading about qualitative methods in general (Creswell, 1998; Krathwohl, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1990). Here, it is repeatedly argued that other terms than those used within the quantitative research tradition should be used. However, the language and criteria for narrative inquiry are still under development, hence the suggestion that each researcher must seek and defend the criteria that best apply to her or his work (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In pointing out several important aspects when discussing how to ensure the quality of a study, Wolcott (1990) maintained that in the qualitative research process the inquirer is in the field to be studied for a long period. He added that the researcher has to listen to the research subjects, because the most important aim is to capture each research subject's voice. He also pointed to the importance of beginning writing early, reporting fully, and writing fieldwork notes accurately. Moreover, the researcher has to be candid and at all times aware of her or his subjectivity. In this way, Wolcott (1990) claimed, qualitative researchers are always striving "to not get it all wrong" (p. 126), and bearing this in mind, I would suggest that narrative research is trustworthy or reliable because of the extensive data generation procedures and the entire narrative research process outlined above.

Several scholars have suggested various verification procedures to ensure the quality of qualitative research. First, there is a focus on prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field, whereby the researcher works with people day in and day out for a long period. This includes building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking to ascertain whether there are any misunderstandings and misinformation. In triangulation, researchers make use of multiple and different sources of data. This process involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or a perspective (Creswell, 1998). In negative case analysis, the researcher refines the working hypothesis as the inquiry is advanced in light of negative evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994). When looking for negative evidence, the researcher actively looks for disconfirmation of what she or he thinks is the case. During this process, the researcher constantly reconsiders the working hypothesis until there is no disconfirmation. In member checks, the researcher solicits the research subject's view of the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and this technique can be considered "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). This verification procedure involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the research subjects so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account.

To understand a human being, her or his actions, thoughts, and reflections, you have to look at the environment, or the social, cultural, and institutional context in which the particular individual operates. Within the framework of sociocultural theory, this idea is stated repeatedly throughout this article. Together with all other qualitative researchers, Denzin (1989), therefore, talked about the importance of using thick description in narrative studies. By this, he meant that the narrative presents both the context and the web of social relationships. Rich, thick description means that the researcher describes in detail

the participants and the settings of the study. In this way, the inquirer enables readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics (Creswell, 1998). By using these verification procedures, we as narrative researchers are faithful to both facts and facilities (Denzin, 1989), and we can develop the narratives from the research field into stories that are believed.

Final comments

In this article, I have situated the narrative research approach within the framework of sociocultural theory, and I have presented some of my reflections on narrative research as being both the phenomenon and method. In the final part of this article, I shall add a few comments on narrative research and, in particular, argue for the use of narratives in the field of teacher education.

Classroom reality is complex, multidimensional and, occasionally, hard to understand (Doyle, 1986). One way for researchers to deal with this complexity is to divide it into elements. Following Vygotsky's (1978) line of thought, this carries the risk of losing sight of the whole. In narratives, the complexity of the classroom is not broken down and divided into elements. On the contrary, narratives from classrooms capture both the complexity and, as we have seen, the multivoicedness of teaching. I reiterate that narratives retain all the characteristics of the whole and that they occur as an integrated and living part of the whole. When appearing as a whole rather than elements, narratives are not abstract, remote, or inaccessible. Instead, they can rather be perceived as familiar, informative, and relevant for those who hear about or read them. In this way, narratives bring practice up close (Carter, 1993), contributing, we hope, to provoking, inspiring, and initiating discussions and dialogues, something that is crucial for reflection on practice and its development. Approaching it in this way, narratives are understood as cultural scaffolds or thinking tools that can be used to develop the profession and the field of practice (Carter, 1993; Gudmundsdottir, 1997). In my view, narratives are not thinking tools only for teachers practicing in the field. Those of us who are narrative researchers would also like our stories to be thinking tools for the politicians who are making decisions affecting our schools. We would like the stories to be thinking tools for our research colleagues, as new inquiry questions might arise from the narratives. Finally, we would like the stories to be thinking tools within the field of teacher education. In the following, I shall look at this last wish.

When student teachers enter teacher education, they have been students for many years themselves. Thus, they enter teacher education already knowing and believing a great deal about the field, and assuming they know a lot about teaching (Richert, 1991). According to Lampert and Ball (1998), student teachers, therefore, believe that what they need to learn during their teacher education is what to do, not to think or reflect on what they are seeing or hearing. Dewey (1904/1965) maintained that as the classroom is a well-known arena, it is difficult for prospective teachers to consider alternative visions and ways of teaching. Student teachers do not stop, think, reflect, and ask questions in the same way they might have done if they had entered a more unfamiliar arena. This is a major challenge within the field of teacher education, one for which a number of "solutions" or perspectives have been proposed. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) have organized these into three categories.

The first perspective is referred to as knowledge-for-practice. The focus here is on formal knowledge and theory, and the assumption appears to be that teacher learners can be good teachers with more theoretical knowledge. The second perspective—knowledge-in-practice—highlights teachers' practical knowledge. Here it is assumed that teachers learn when they have opportunities to probe the skills embedded in the work of expert teachers and to develop their own practical skills when they are teaching in classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). These two perspectives on student teachers' learning point out the traditional dualism, or the distinction between theory and practice.

The third perspective, knowledge-of-practice, does not have this distinction between theory and practice. The aim is, rather, to link field-based school experiences and theoretical perspectives. Within this perspective, knowledge is understood not as fixed and forever lasting answers but as a "terrain to be explored by multiple journeys through it" (Lampert & Ball, 1998, p. 45). It is within this perspective that narratives can be located. Narratives from classrooms and teaching incorporate both empirical data and relevant theory. When student teachers read or hear about a narrative, it will appear that the constant interaction between theory and empirical data is where it is possible to understand and gain new insight. Hence, I would suggest that narratives are particularly suitable for teacher education.

Finally, a great number of voices are heard in public debates on teaching. Our politicians have their ideas and visions, and, thus, voices. Researchers studying teaching from different theoretical perspectives have their particular voices. School administrators have their ideas. From time to time, the voices of pupils' parents are also heard in the media. Their voices seem to be particularly public when funding problems are the issue at hand. What is remarkable is that the voices of teachers are virtually absent from the public debate on teaching. Teaching has become increasingly demanding, and teachers' classrooms today are characterized by diversity and variety, full of complexities and multidimensionality. In these environments we expect that the teachers will teach our children to be reflective, thoughtful, responsible, and active human beings. This demanding task does not have any simple solutions; there is no tried and true formula. Narrative research in which teachers' voices are heard in their stories of experience offers an opportunity to present the complexity of teaching to the public.

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