

Towards a Methodological Improvement of Narrative Enquiry: A Qualitative  
Analysis

By:

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**Abstract:**

The article suggests that though *narrative enquiry* as a research methodology entails free conversations and personal stories, yet it should not be totally free and fictional as it has to conform to some recognised standards used for conducting educational research. Hence, a qualitative study conducted by Russ (1999) was explored as an exemplar study employing narrative enquiry as a main research methodology that included the techniques of conversation and story. Through a qualitative critical analysis of the study, the article focuses on improving narrative enquiry as a qualitative research method which is used when deeper understanding of a phenomenon in its natural setting is the target. Russ' (1999) study titled, "Professional conversations: New teachers explore teaching through conversation, story, and narrative" delves deeper into the teaching profession as practiced in reality by focussing on undergraduate students and recent graduates of an urban teacher education program who came together regularly to talk about becoming reflective and effective teachers. The researcher employed a qualitative data analysis of the conversations which resulted in a rich picture of the complex learning at the heart of

teaching. The study draws attention to factors in teacher education and schools that support and hinder new teachers work in urban schools, and contradicts established developmental models of expertise. Additionally, the study highlights the potential of conversation and story telling to sustain teacher learning and inquiry and to meet local needs for teacher learning, teacher research, and teacher-directed professional development.

Specifically, the article explores how the study can be qualitatively and methodologically improved as far as narrative enquiry as a research methodology is concerned. It starts with an exploration of the epistemology and context of the study, and the type of research questions posed in an attempt to provide more robust research questions. Then, it addresses issues of research design and data collection methods suggesting some alternative procedures that could have improved the narrative enquiry as used by the researcher, especially in terms of reliability. Also, data analysis was critically discussed and an alternative (i.e. a table for organising recurring themes) was suggested to overcome some weaknesses of data analysis based on narrative enquiry. Finally, some ethical considerations were tackled to draw attention to some faults that researchers may unconsciously commit.

*Epistemology, Context, and Research Questions:*

The subjective tone that characterises qualitative research is felt from the very first lines that the researcher wrote to introduce her context. More specifically, the researcher communicates the idea that she deals with her research topic from her own perspective *as a teacher-educator* and in natural situations that were free from any controlled conditions. This tone was evident throughout the whole research process. This subjectivity characterising qualitative research in general, and narrative enquiry in particular, is emphasised by Schwandt (1998: 221) who argues that the world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors.

As it seems, the researcher is convinced with the idea that “what we know in education comes from telling each other stories of educational experience” (Webster & Mertova 2007: 7) and that the stories we bring as researchers are “set within the institutions within which we work, the social narratives of which we are a part, the landscape on which we live” (Clandinin & Connelly 2004). The researcher starts her research report by narrating a real story of a meeting that took place with a new teacher in her first year. This experience made the researcher, as a teacher-educator, think of something: Why are some first-year teachers successful in (and satisfied with) their profession, while others are not?

Considering the research questions of this study, the researcher should have formulated and phrased her questions more clearly, regardless of the fact that she was reporting her research in a narrative fashion. In this regard, Flick (2006: 105-106) states that formulating research questions is a first and central step for a qualitative research to be successful as these questions are supposed to guide the research process and remove any danger of being at a mess. On the one hand, the questions, here, are stated in the context of a story that the researcher told as an introduction to her research. In this way, the story was the stimulus that motivated the researcher to ask many questions which needed a tremendous effort to be answered. The good point

here is that the questions were contextualised, and this goes with one of the core premises of qualitative research: The “*social world needs to be studied from within*” (Grix, 2004:83) and that there must be a social context from which the research springs and in which it should take place.

On the other hand, though the researcher, after visiting the new teacher, mentioned having many “*powerful and troubling questions*” about many things (e.g. the work of teacher education and instructional supervision and support for professional development), it can be noticed that the specific questions she stated did not cover the three main categories she mentioned. Besides, the question beginning with “why” and the so many “yes/no” questions used here are not the best types of questions for a qualitative study using narrative enquiry. Interpretive research questions should begin with ‘what’ or ‘how’ to convey an open and emerging design. ‘Why’ suggests cause and effect, an approach consistent with quantitative research (Cresswell 2003: 106).

Hence, research questions could have been formulated more appropriately to cope better with the research objectives. In particular, questions like the following could have been used: (1) What are the factors in teacher education and schools that support and hinder new teachers’ work in urban schools?; (2) is it possible for conversation and story telling to sustain teacher learning and inquiry and to meet local needs for teacher learning, teacher research, and teacher-directed professional development?; (3) how does conversation about ideas and experiences support the development of higher order reasoning or increase knowledge for teachers?; and (4) in what ways can conversation, story, and narrative enable us to understand the process of learning to teach?

#### *Research Design and Data Collection Methods:*

Conversations that included narratives and life-stories were used as a tool for collecting data. Conversations might have been appropriate in this context because they are natural and realistic containing a rich amount of information. Besides, as

Richards (2003:26) notes, “ordinary conversation provides a unique insight into the ways in which people understand and represent their social world”.

Hence, using a Narrative Inquiry Methodology in this research design was appropriate for the following reasons:

- 1) Through stories, the researcher could investigate the ways in which the teachers experience their teaching context with all its complexities because such stories “provide the researchers with a rich framework through which they can investigate the ways human experience the world depicted through their stories” (Webster & Mertova 2007: 1).
- 2) The topic tackled by the researcher (i.e. teacher education and teaching experience) represents a complicated phenomenon which can be approached by many perspectives. Hence, narratives allow the researcher much space to present any phenomenon holistically “with all its complexities and richness”. (ibid: 2).
- 3) Teaching experience is of a central focus in this research and “experience happens narratively, and therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (Clandinin & Connelly 2004: 19).
- 4) Narrative inquiry, as suggested by Webster & Mertova (2007: 3) aims at capturing ‘the whole story’, whereas other methods tend to communicate understandings of studied subjects or phenomena at certain points.
- 5) Teachers’ classroom knowledge contains a great amount of contextual knowledge, the understanding of which facilitates the interpretation of what teachers say. This type of knowledge, a combination between context and event, is expressed by the stories/narratives (Shabani Varaki 2007).

A main principle that educational researchers in general and qualitative researchers in particular should consider when employing any research methods or tools “fitness for purpose” in the sense that the research method should be employed to serve the study purposes and objectives, not vice-versa (see, for example, Cohen et al. 2007). Rationale should be provided to justify the choice of a specific methodology, not another. Here, the researcher did not give adequate justifications for using narrative enquiry as a research methodology. She could have provided a description for it and

stated the reasons why she used it in this particular context. Further, the phenomenon studied here was very complicated encompassing many directions; it is related to the teaching-learning experience from the perspectives of different categories of people (i.e. Preservice teachers, inservice teachers [first-year and second-year teachers], and teacher educators), how it is affected by factors at schools and other factors involved in the training programme provided by teacher educators, and how conversations (that include stories and narratives) might be useful in the professional development of the new teachers.

Studying such a complex phenomenon needs a *triangulation* of different methods, especially one method after another, as suggested by Grix (2004:136). In this sense, the researcher could have followed the conversations she used with semi-structured or narrative interviews and some few case studies. That is to say, based on her analysis of the conversations, she could have selected some teachers who were involved in the conversations for further interviews so as to obtain deeper and focussed understanding of the complex phenomenon under investigation shedding some light on specific areas of professional development. Pring (2004:39) suggests that the interview, especially when it is semi-structured, gets over the problems experienced by other tools as the good interviewer can draw out from the interviewee the deeper significance of the event.

If an interview was used in this study, the speech of the participants, as I think, would be more meaningful, more organized and, above all, more focussed. This interview may have directed their speech and helped the researcher to avoid many unnecessary details. Also, it could have helped the researcher to understand the significance that the participants could attach to the narratives and stories they have already told.

Besides, using triangulation in this context could have assisted her to overcome the weak reliability and validity in this study keeping in mind that reliability and validity as concepts related to quantitative research have a different nature in qualitative research. For example, there are many terms which express the concept of reliability in qualitative research such as “*Credibility, Neutrality or Confirmability, Consistency or Dependability and Applicability or Transferability*” (Golafshani 2003).

To make conversations reliable, the researcher should bring the same participants again and again to talk about the same issues, something that would be very exhausting. Therefore, the best thing to do, in my reckoning, is to use triangulation in the sense that other methods should be used to reinforce the data collected. Triangulation “overcomes the weaknesses of subjectivity” (Ernest, 1994:24) and is regarded by many authors as “a powerful way of demonstrating concurrent validity, particularly in qualitative research” (Cohen, et al. 2007:141) because the more methods contrast with each other and vary, the greater the researcher’s confidence.

A good thing the researcher did was using one of her colleagues as a participant-observer with whom she discussed some issues in the evenings. This practice is good for two reasons. First, it would help her to overcome the natural weak reliability of the narratives. Second, participant-observation is very important in this context because the data observed through this method “serve as a check against participants’ subjective reporting of what they believe and do” (Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector’s Field Guide, no date:14). It is also useful for gaining an understanding of the physical, social, cultural, and economic contexts in which participants live and so many other issues which may inform the researcher’s perspective.

However, there is a weak point related to the method used for recording the participants’ conversations; the researcher admitted that she did not use a tape-recorder to record the participants’ conversations to make them feel at ease and speak naturally disregarding the fact that the existence of an observer in itself, as Richards (2003:178) notes, does not make people act naturally. Therefore, it is suggested that she should have used a tape recorder to record her participants’ conversations doing her best to minimise the effect of its existence. For example, she could have obtained the participants’ permission to be recorded, and then concealed the fact that she was recording by hiding the recorder, or she could have turned it on before the arrival of the participants so as not to make them always remember that they were being recorded. Besides, with time, participants would forget about its existence once they got used to its existence. Therefore, there was no logical or convincing reason for her

abandoning the use of a tape recorder that could have made her data more authentic and facilitated the data collection process for her.

The issue of sampling is one of the important issues here. It seems that the researcher used 'purposive sampling' as she wanted a certain audience (i.e. teachers, teacher educators). This was a good method because qualitative research usually, as stated by Punch (2005: 187), uses "some sort of deliberate sampling" or purposive sampling which involves the existence of "some purpose in mind". This enabled the researcher to go directly to her point. But, the drawback related to sampling here is that in spite of the fact that the researcher classified her sample theoretically into three types (i.e. Pre-service teachers, first-year in-service teachers, and second-year in-service teachers), there was no balance between those three groups. This imbalance was reflected in reporting that "the second-year teachers came less frequently as the year wore on". Another weakness was that the sample itself was not stable. She mentioned that "others joined the group over the year" and that many "new faces" were seen till the end of the study. It could be better if the researcher concentrated on a few number of cases to get deeper understanding.

#### *Data Analysis and Findings:*

To analyse conversations qualitatively, the researcher identified the methods which she used: She relied on "a system of grounded theory analysis" which is appropriate here free conversations are used and a theory is targeted; the researcher was supposed to get out with a theory or some conclusions out of her analysis that would be beneficial for future teachers going through the same stage and the same experiences. Consequently, she made "analytic memos". Karmaz (2006: 72) states many advantages for writing memos: For example, memos catch one's thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections one makes, and crystallize questions and directions. Throughout writing memos, one constructs analytic notes to explicate and fill out categories. A grounded theory-based analysis has systematic steps which involve "generating categories of information (open coding), selecting one of the categories and positioning it within a theoretical model (axial coding), and then explicating a story from the interconnection of these categories (selective coding)" Cresswell (2003:191).

It was good to look for the patterns in the ways stories emerged and were told and the types of the stories. But this process is not too simple to be mentioned in such a brief way. More elaboration on, and clarification of, how she used these methods of analysis is really needed.

There is an important notice related to the organisation and presentation of data and findings; it would be more appropriate if she tabulated these categories and used some quantitative data analysis methods to reflect the number of occurrences of each type of stories connecting them with each other. The quantitative methods could have helped her in her discussion. A quantitative table expressing the “recurring themes” would do a good job. She mentioned that there were many recurring themes, but she did not organize them. Wellington (2003:136) stresses the importance of coding and categorizing patterns or recurring themes because they can be gradually used to “make sense” of the data. Therefore, I suggest the following table to overcome this weakness.

**Table (1): Frequency of Recurring Themes**

*(\*Note: All these themes and numbers are not precisely based on the real data of the study)*

Themes	Frequency of Occurrence			Comments
	Preservice Teachers	First-Year Teachers	Second-Year Teachers	
Lesson Planning	20	10	5	This issue was more prominent in the conversations of preservice teachers who seemed to be

				worried about it.
Motivation	10	30	15	It was prominent among first-year teachers some of whom thought of leaving their jobs.
Classroom Management	30	20	15	It seems that with the increasing experience, the issue becomes not of great concern!
Students' Misbehaviour	40	20	10	It seems that graduate students suffer a lot from this problem!
Social Support	10	10	11	The issue seems to be of the same concern to all the groups.
Experience	15	25	30	It seems that the more teachers are

				involved in the teaching profession, the more likely they raise such an issue.
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Another point in this respect is that she did not refer to teacher educators in her analysis and how they might have influenced the pre-service and in-service teachers, though their role is so important that it should not be ignored. Qualitatively, the comparison the researcher made between those first-year teachers who were successful and their counterparts who were not very successful appealed to me as it was logical and organized. But it would be more organized if the researcher used tabulation and some numerical data to make things more concrete instead of just mentioning the teachers' names which is regarded as an unethical practice.

Another important point is that, while analysing this large volume of data that emerged from the participants' conversations, the researcher did not refer back to her research questions as guidelines on the basis of which data should have been organized and interpreted. Wellington (2003:145) stresses the importance of matching units of data to questions. Besides, her findings were not clear; they revolved around the advantages of conversations and narratives and the personal stories of the participants, the importance of learner-centred instruction, and the power of a conversation group. She did not refer to the recurring themes raised by the participants and their significance.

These questions were not explicitly answered in this research project. There were no clear or direct answers from the researcher who admitted that she "began to find answers" to her questions. Instead, they led to some other open questions at the end which needed further investigation by other research work. Throughout the research process, the researcher could have answered those open questions. It is possible that an interpretive research ends with open questions to make the research wheel go on,

but there should be some straightforward findings reached by this research study, especially in this case (in which participants spent two years meeting and having long conversations).

*Ethical Considerations:*

Grix (2004:120) argues that “ethical considerations are thought to be greater for those conducting qualitative research, given the direct contact researchers have with people, their personal lives and the issues of confidentiality that arise out of this”. In this respect, the researcher considered some ethical issues and disregarded others. On the one side, she used a straightforward and simple language that conveyed the idea easily to the reader, although she used many unnecessary unrelated details (such as taking off a jacket or having lunch) as if she was writing a novel or a story, not a research report. In addition, she dealt with the participants in a respectable way.

On the other hand, there are many ethical weaknesses in this research. One of these relates to the confidential and anonymous treatment of data. For example, the researcher mentioned a big amount of names of participants (e.g. Christie, Lee, and Rebecca) and personal information about children in a classroom, including their social and/or financial conditions. This might have a negative effect in the future as the people whose real details were mentioned may feel ashamed if they happen to read this research report, especially because the information revealed about them is sensitive and shameful. The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants’ data is considered the norm for the conduct of research (BERA, 2004).

Another weakness relates to debriefing the participants with the purposes of the study so that the individuals understand the nature of the research and its likely impact on them (Cresswell 2003: 64) and the benefits that they may gain after their participation to motivate them to participate. The study was conducted as a part of a project that extended over a long period of time requiring much effort from the participants who were supposed to meet on a regular basis. It would be ethical if the researcher told the participants about the benefits that the research would bring and to what extent their performance (as teachers) might be improved as a result of these regular meetings. In

this context, Cohen, et al. (2007:60) highlight the importance of disclosing any social, academic or professional improvement that might occur as a result of the subjects' voluntary participation in the study.

The researcher conducted the study as part of a project that was sponsored by a funding body. Therefore, she should have kept in line with the objectives of this funding body taking them into consideration during her formulation of research questions. "Researchers must fulfil their responsibilities to sponsors to the highest possible standards. It is in the researchers' interest that respective responsibilities and entitlements should be agreed with the sponsors at the outset of the research" (BERA, 2004).

The researcher did not mention anything about where and how she stored her data and whether she took the participants' consent to deal with the personal information she used in her research report (i.e. personal names, social conditions, jobs, names of cities) . In essence, "people are entitled to know how and why their personal data is being stored, to what uses it is being put and to whom it may be available. Researchers must have participants' permission to disclose personal information to their parties" (BERA, 2004). Besides, she could have avoided mentioning the participants' names by using aliases or pseudonyms for individuals and places to protect identities (Cresswell 2003: 64).

In addition, she did not mention any thing about sharing the research findings with participants though it is recommended by BERA (2004) that researchers should "debrief participants at the conclusion of the research and to provide them with copies of any reports or other publications arising from their participation". In this context, sharing the research findings with participants has many implications:

- 1) Participants may feel that their participation was effective and beneficial (and was not a waste of time), and therefore, may participate in future research studies conducted by the project;
- 2) based on the findings, they may reflect more upon their teaching performance aiming at improving it;

- 3) they will feel confident that the project is concerned with their academic and professional development;
- 4) they may contact each others involving themselves in future conversations that may help them improve their teaching;
- 5) they may implement some practical ideas that resulted from each other's stories inside their classrooms.

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