USE OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY TO UNVEIL NOVICE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

This study proposes using narrative inquiry in researching issues in teacher education. Through this methodology, an individual expresses their thoughts on particular life experiences (Chase, 2005). The current research pays a particular attention on the narratives made by two Thai novice teachers revealing their professional identities through their "stories to live by" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 4). Their 15-week practicum experiences were explored allowing the researcher to understand how they become teachers through the process of forming their professional identities. Narrative inquiry treats each of the two stories as a journey during the formation of their teacher selves. By nature, in the process of narration, multiple threads of stories are generated concurrently and repeatedly. Researchers need to bear in mind of these mechanisms and design their investigation accordingly by oscillating through the data. This paper will provide some insights into utilizing this method of inquiry and present stories of the two teacher trainees to illustrate the process and outcome of the method.

1 Introduction

Narrative inquiry is progressively being used as a method to research educational experiences. The basic premise of using this method lies in the claim that humans are storytelling organisms. Therefore, a researcher can gain deeper understanding of the way persons experience the world through delving into narrative data, or stories that people tell.

Before looking at how narrative inquiry intersects with educational research, the terms story and narrative need to be clarified. Though they may be interchangeable terms, their analytical processes are different. A story can be regarded as primary data where a teacher tells about him- or herself and how he or she copes with educational changes. On the contrary, a narrative is that actual analytical process of a story (Frank, 2000). Hence, the focus of narrative inquiry is to analyze stories about participants' life, whereby the stories told are considered gateways into participants' lives.

In terms of analytical approach, a story told can be analyzed through various approaches such as the psychosocial developmental approach, sociological approach, narrative ethnographic approach, autoethnographic approach and identity approach (Chase, 2005). Since this study is interested in the shifts in identity during their practicum experiences, the identity approach was deemed suitable. Narrative inquiry assumes that meaning may be accessed through the telling of stories. Moreover, the narrative analysis of stories told will yield a rich emic view of pre-service teachers' identities as a storytelling process approximates actual life events compared to other methods of research (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). Aside from gaining an insider's view in narrators' lives, narrative inquiry is reflexive in that it allows educators and researchers to develop deeper understandings of aims, methods, and outcomes of their work with beginning teachers (Loughran & Russell, 1997).

The purpose of our paper is to highlight how narrative inquiry, as a methodology, offers ways of understanding how student teachers' professional identity is narratively constructed. Experience of how to justify the selection of the method, as well as the process of utilizing a theoretical framework is also presented.

2 Why use narrative inquiry?

Scholars point out that stories can be used as a powerful method for capturing complex processes of learning to teach and becoming teachers (e.g. Carter, 1993; Doyle & Carter, 2003; McCormack, Gore, & Thomas, 2004; Richert, 2002). Apart from that, researchers can also learn about emergent identities because the process of becoming a teacher is closely linked to the acquisition of ones' identity (Danielwicz, 2001).

Most narrative inquiries begin with asking participants to tell their stories; however, before doing so, the researcher needs to justify why telling a story would be useful in doing the research. Clandinin and Huber (2002) offered three issues to take into consideration before conducting narrative research. These considerations include personal, practical and social justification. The personal justification relates to the position of researchers in relation to the phenomenon under study while practical justification focuses on the possibility to change practice by deepening the understanding of the happenings. Social justification pays attention to the possibility of providing new methodological and disciplinary knowledge.

For this study, we justify our work based on practical justification because we hope that our student teachers would deepen their understanding of who they are as teachers while engaging in story telling process. Our interest in narrative inquiry as a tool to understand the identity of a student teacher is fueled by our interest to gain a deeper understanding about the process of becoming a teacher. Furthermore, narrative inquiry is sensitive enough to allow the investigation of whether our student teachers comply with the Thai Ministry of Education's initiative aimed at "transforming the teacher and learning of languages to be more communicative" (Ministry of Education, 2006). As teacher trainers, we hope to see how well-prepared our student teachers are when they teach in actual classes. Hence, to analyze the student teachers' narratives, we need to also consider literature on teacher professional identity.

2.1 Professional identity

The study of teachers' professional identity has attracted widespread attention (Beijaard et al., 2004). Scholars have studied the formation of teacher communities and the possibilities they provide for the development of teacher knowledge and teacher identities, particularly for new teachers (see Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 2008). The importance of these studies lies in the fact that teachers with a strong sense of who they are would deliberately make learning more pleasant time for students.

While participating in teacher education, a student teacher will be engaged in meaning-making, knowledge construction, which subsequently shapes their professional identities. The development of teachers' professional identity begins with their first thoughts about becoming a teacher and continues throughout their teaching practice. Nonetheless, the notions of the type of teacher they want to be are implicitly instilled even prior to entering the teacher training program and develop in making sense of who they are professionally while involving in teaching community (Olson, 2000). Life of student teachers in transition, especially during teaching practicum, is crucial as it serves as a major crossroad for student teachers' professional training and learning (Gebhard, 2009; Tang, 2004). It is a journey where their thoughts about teaching fluctuate, consistent to how they cope with classroom. This, in turn, will determine their future professional practice.

2.2 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is defined by Clandinin and Connolley (2000) as a way of understanding experience through stories lived and told. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants who come up with mutual understanding of phenomena within context. In terms of research, the method is placed within a constructivist stance with reflexivity, interpretivism and representation, which serve as a primary feature of the approach.

Narrative inquiry was initially used by educational researchers in the early 1990s, a number of researchers, i.e. Carter (1993), Connelly and Clandinin (1990), and Van Manen (1991) paid attention to the collection of teacher stories in order to capture the richness and indeterminacy of teachers' experiences (Carter, 1993). Later, the method was widely used to provide a rich backdrop for understanding the contextualized situations in which teachers come to know what they know and make the decisions that they do.

Based upon the assumption that narrative inquiry can be used as a means to enable the researcher to gain further understanding and insights (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we would now consider how this research method is useful for the teacher training context.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

There were two participants involved in this study. Both of them were students enrolled in Master of Arts (English Language Teaching) which required them to engage in a fifteen-week teaching practicum in a high school. This requirement is geared to help prepare student

teachers for the realities of student teaching in an authentic school context. They were purposively selected due to their limited teaching experience.

The first participant was Maysa (pseudonym). She received a bachelor's degree in English, and decided to pursue a graduate degree in language education. Her background in teaching was limited since she worked in the hotel industry prior to entering the Master Degree program. The reason for pursuing a graduate program was the perception that teaching would give economic security to her life in the long run.

The second participant was Roberto (pseudonym). He also completed a bachelor's degree in English. Prior to graduate school, he was an apprentice for an airline. Teaching and teachers' life was familiar to him since both his parents worked as teachers. He reported that the influence from his parents was important in his decision to pursue his degree in teaching.

3.2 Context

The participants were enrolled in a course called "Teaching Techniques in Practice". The course aimed to improve pre-service teacher's teaching methods and to expand professional education skills. All pre-service teachers were assigned to teach in the same school but in different classes. For each class, there were two pre-service teachers in charge for managing teaching content and preparing materials, while working under the supervision of a lecturer from the faculty. The supervisors went to observe the pair teaching in the actual classroom. Afterwards, feedback was given for improvement.

The school where Maysa and Roberto did their practicum was a medium-sized school which had grade seven to grade twelve classrooms. At the time of data collection, the school was considerably new, having only been established for six years. There were new facilities in each classroom such as computers and overhead projectors. Their teaching lasted for one semester, beginning in May and ending in September 2013. They were responsible for the teaching of grade 10 students who were considered high school students. All pre-service teachers taught on Wednesday morning for one hour and forty minutes. The total number of students was forty. They were teenagers ranging from ages 15 to 17. Students' English proficiency level was considered to be at lower intermediate.

3.3 Data collection

Student teachers participated in fifteen semi-structured interviews during their practicum in the 2013 academic year. They allowed the researchers to interview them once every week after they had completed their teaching. Each interview lasted about thirty to forty-five minutes. Before the first interview, all participants were informed briefly about the research. The role of the researcher and the confidentiality of the interviews were described to the participants. All the interview sessions were carried out at the Resource Centre at School of Liberal Arts, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi because the participants were familiar with the place, so they could feel free to talk about their experience. In each interview, participants were encouraged to reflect upon their teaching practice, the interaction between students, co-teacher and supervisor, and how they viewed themselves at the time of interview when they recalled each teaching experience. In addition to general reflections, they were asked to evaluate their practice and talk about expectations of being teachers. The

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themes of the semi-structured interview such as classroom practice, striking events in class, students' responses and the way they view themselves were basically used as starting points for discussion instead of a strict series of question and answer.

3.4 Data analysis

To understand an individual's stories, holistic perspective is often mentioned in literature as an appropriate way. In narrative inquiry, Riessman (2008) pointed out those stories need to be considered as a whole unit and analyzed with a holistic approach. Holistic analysis retains the temporal dimension of each individual's story so that the parts within the story are interpreted in relation to other parts of the story and the outcome of the story.

However, narratives can be processed analytically by dissecting them in to themes to develop general knowledge stories (Lieblich et al., 1998). The strength of this form of analysis lies in its capacity to reveal core themes that make up the content of the stories generated. However, there have been some criticisms of using this approach to analyze individual experience since it might lead to the separation of experience from the experiencing subject. With this in mind, researchers can try to overcome its limitation by keeping memos of every participant to balance the criticism of fractioned data (Iborra, 2007). These memos are helpful in reflecting upon the categories, their connections and the new themes that could emerge during the cyclical process that took place during the analysis.

The combination of holistic and categorical approach as a way to see an individual's development as a whole is an alternative to analyze narratives (Burn & Bell, 2011). Within this approach, trying to understand how their participants construct their understanding of themselves as teacher can be done first by the categorical approach. The approach can be employed to analyze the narratives in order to identify different positions which each participant mentioned when talking about their teacher selves. Later, holistic approach was employed to analyze the way their participants used these positions to signify possible professional identities.

In this present study, researchers decided to use Burn and Bell's (2011) framework as a guideline for data analysis. The reason for choosing the combination of the two approaches was because, firstly, these two approaches could help to describe the person's meaning-making process. Secondly, the categorical approach should allow us to see the general themes of roles that each participant viewed as vital for their identity formation while a holistic approach would lead us to see the developmental process as a whole.

3.4.1 Analysis procedures

First, the researchers decided to use a categorical approach to develop a general knowledge about the main themes covered by participants in their stories. Steps in the process of data analysis used in this study adapted those described by Burn and Bell (2011). We used categorical approach in the first attempt to delve into our data by

Step 1: Verifying transcript validity through the review of transcribed text by the participants

We started our analysis by asking our participants to check their transcribed narratives for accuracy and allowed them to make adjustments.

Step 2: Reading multiple times to gain understanding of details in text

We read through transcriptions to identity interpretive categories and any ambiguities in language. From this multiple readings, we began noticing some dominant roles which each participant often mentioned throughout their stories

Step 3: Keeping memos of possible emerging themes while reading; the theme in this case referred teachers' role that each participant made references to selves as teachers

For this step, when seeing key ideas which participants attribute as being vital to them in teaching, the researcher would highlight that in the memos to see if it would be possible to create a theme out of that. For example, Maysa mentioned about the role of a teacher who creates positive classroom atmosphere from time to time. Memos from beginning of the teaching practicum until the end were kept, and it was discovered that this role was quite vital for her.

Week 2

"I think I make myself looks trustworthy, maybe a part of it. It's more likely to be a comfort zone where students feel free to ask".

Week 12

"Teacher should make students happy in learning. I mean make the classroom atmosphere be positive to make them stay motivated while learning. Teacher should accept all answers from students and also treat students equally. If low proficiency level students want to try answering, teacher should pay attention and provide help to let them think and answer. I think this is the way to make them become more active learners".

From these two extracts, we classified her roles as comfort zone creator since she pointed out her belief that a teacher should prioritize a positive classroom atmosphere by allowing students freedom to answer and ask questions, creating an approachable character, and providing extensive use of scaffolding.

Step 4: Creating the list of roles

Researchers defined and identified roles that each participant often mention through their fifteen-week practicum which we then grouped into dominant and supporting roles. The dominant roles referred to those which participants viewed as vital in their teaching, and is performed more often than other types of roles.

Step 5: Presenting the analyzed data in order to see the development of each participant from the beginning of the practicum until the end

4 Results

4.1 Results based on categorical approach

After analyzing the data through the lens of a categorical approach, we listed both dominant and supporting roles mentioned by each participant throughout their entire practicum. Although each transcription may include several mentioned roles, we tried to select roles that participants seemed to refer to the most within each period of time.

Table 1. Maysa's categorical analysis

Maysa		
Week	Dominant roles	Supporting roles
1-3	Comfort zone creator	Prompter
	Def: Make an effort to promote positive classroom atmosphere by allowing students' interaction and avoid using negative feedback	Def: Give appropriate prompts to promote students interaction
	Trouble shooter	Observer
4-6	Def: Try to solve problems in the classroom and develop decision making skills to cope with various situations	Def: Go around and monitor students individually to make sure that they are ontask
	Strategic controller	Organiser
7-11	Def: Aim to make students behave by utilizing interesting activities, thought provoking task to grasp their attention instead of being strict	Def: Design activities and tasks that students can carry out *Resource provider*
		Def: Give instruction about how to use materials and letting students explore
10.15	Comfort zone creator	Strategic controller
12-15	Def: Make an effort to promote positive classroom atmosphere by allowing students' interaction and avoid using negative feedback	Def: Aim to make students behave by utilizing interesting activities, thought provoking task to grasp their attention instead of being strict

Table 2. Roberto's categorical analysis

Roberto		
Week	Dominant roles	Supporting roles
1-3	Controller	Assessor
	Def: Control the pace of learning and being strict to make students behave	Def: Correct mistake and organising feedback

4-7	Entertainer	Controller
	Def: Strive to make students have pleasant times in learning by using a variety of stimuli, recognising students need and promoting confidence	Def: Control the pace of learning and being strict to make students behaved
8-9	Strategic controller	Observer
	Def: Attempt to make students behaved by utilizing interesting activities, thought provoking task to grasp their attention instead of being strict	Def: Go around and monitor students individually to make sure that they are ontask
10-12	Entertainer	Strategic controller
	Def: Try to make students have a pleasant time in learning by using a variety of stimuli, recognising students need and promoting confidence	Def: Aim to make students behave by utilizing interesting activities, thought provoking task to grasp their attention instead of being strict
		Observer Def: Go around and monitor students individually to make sure that they are ontask
12-15	Strategic lesson planner Def: Consider purpose of each lesson and plan connected structure	Entertainer Def: Try to make students have a pleasant time in learning by using a variety of stimuli, recognising students need and promoting confidence
		Organiser Def: Design activities and tasks that students can carry out

4.2 Results based on holistic approach

The holistic approach was found to be helpful because we could see the development of each participant's professional identity. At this stage of analysis, relation of parts of each person story was weaved into a single narrative tapestry. Repetitive reading of our analytical memos and transcriptions guided us to decide on some focus which we could follow throughout the stories. We also paid attention to transitions between the shifts of roles in order to see some of the factors contributing to these changes.

We kept in mind that all individuals have their unique developmental process, which can be displayed though common roles found during categorical analysis. We then made use of those roles as the core to grasp the way in which each participant form their professional identity. Since the underlying assumption was that teacher identity formation is an individual phenomenon, we came up with the story of each participant through the holistic views, which is as follows:

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Maysa initially attempted to create a pleasant atmosphere in her class. That was the main reason she viewed herself as a comfort zone creator by valuing student questions, promoting student-centered approaches and ignoring misbehaving manners in the first few week of the practicum. She also emphasized the role of a prompter who stimulated students' interactions. However, she gradually realized her lack of skills in managing the classroom. She was somewhat uncertain about her authority in the class, so she was confused when any problem occurred. For this reason, during the fourth to the sixth week of teaching, being trouble shooter who could manage both her own competence and the neatness of the class was mentioned from time to time. She became aware of a need for further development in her problem-solving skills and took the role of an observer to make students more aware of her existence. Maysa then tried to survive by taking on the role of a strategic controller at the seventh week. At this time, her view of her own controlling ability changed slightly because she could see herself as a strategic controller who gathers students' attention into the lesson content by using games, activities and interesting visuals. The supporting roles of being an organizer and resource provider sustained her ability to ensure that her students were always on task. From week twelve until the end of the practicum, Maysa could pave her way back to becoming a comfort zone creator, while simultaneously being a strategic controller, since she felt confident enough to raise the quality of instruction after knowing how to employ several strategies into her teaching.

When viewed holistically, Maysa's belief seemed to overrule everything that she was encountering during her practical. She shifted her role according to several factors she had faced i.e. subject content, students' behaviors and classroom management. Her main belief about being a comfort zone creator ran as a core principle in her teaching. This belief was modified when found in conflict with her classroom management skills. After she discovered her inability to manage the classroom, she tried to fix her inability to manage the class by changing to a trouble shooter role. After adopting new ways to control her class, she would revert back to becoming a comfort zone creator again.

The second student teacher, Roberto, was a self-regulating student with a drive to develop as a teacher. He was able to conceptualize his own professional identity quite clearly. He could point out the factors that contributed to the performing of certain roles throughout his practicum experience. At the outset, he started seeing himself as a controller because of his students' behaviors. The role of an assessor also came along because he spent a copious amount of time giving feedback and making corrections to ensure that his students learn. After keeping his students in place, he could perform the role of an entertainer who made the class enjoyable and cheerful. However, he did not neglect the role of a controller as he wanted to make sure that the class pace went as he wished. Then, Roberto tried to seek new techniques to control his students in a way by turning himself to become a strategic controller at the mid of the practicum. He used his sociable personality to direct students into the way he wanted them to behave while performing the role of an observer. He had a clear vision about being a teacher as he often mentioned that being an entertainer was a vital role in his professional identity. On the other hand, being an entertainer when he got to know his students better was different than the first half of the practicum since he enacted in himself the roles of a strategic controller and an observer to implicitly manage his students' behaviors. Moreover, being a strategic teacher who could unite the act of teaching in various situations was one role Roberto often mentioned. For this reason, when approaching the end of the practicum, he gave the role of being a strategic lesson planner to himself since his aim was to expand students' capacities to reason and explain as well as nourish their imagination. At this point, he combined the roles of entertainer, organizer and strategic lesson planner to capture students and make them learn in enjoyable ways.

Roberto was confident in his teaching since he presented his readiness to deal with all kinds of situations throughout his story. His core belief about teaching was that a teacher should have the ability to adapt to any states of affairs. This principle guided him to maintain equilibrium in his class by adopting a diverse range of teaching strategies. He started by being a controller since he would like to ensure his ability to manage the class. However, another principle he realized was that learning should be pleasant, so he regularly viewed himself as an entertainer. However, when faced with students' undesirable manners, he would switch his role to be a controller without any reluctance. With the attempt to manage the class, Roberto could adapt himself to be more strategic in order to deal with his vibrant classes. He gradually boosted his confidence about being a strategic teacher who planned lessons according to students' interest, teaching style and content. His development in teaching showed that Roberto felt connected to students, school and teaching community.

5 Conclusion

Narrative inquiry was found useful for us as teacher trainer since the method allowed three of us to see shifts and changes in student teachers' journey in the process of becoming teachers. Our practical justification of using narrative inquiry seemed to align with the results obtained from this study. Since we aimed that conducting this piece of study might be useful in allowing us to deepen our understanding the process of becoming teachers, it appeared that we have learnt a lot from the two journeys. Also, for teacher trainers, we have learnt some different perspectives about how our student teachers made decisions in how to improve their teaching practice through the power of reflective thinking. For our student teachers, multiple reflections seemed to increase their self actualization which is essential to the formation of their professional identity. When telling stories about their teacher selves, they became conscious of what being teachers meant to them. In these times, they mentioned that having chances to reflect on their teachings facilitated them in bringing their hidden assumption about teaching into the conscious level. Narrative inquiry also allowed researchers to understand people' experiences by allocating hidden assumptions to surface. Our efforts to learn about our student teachers' view of their own professional identities became successful when we investigated their stories as connected, changeable, and contextualized.

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