Chapter 19

WRITTEN NARRATIVES:
Potentialities for research and teacher professional development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents some results from an investigation conducted along with a teacher professional development program called "Programa de Desenvolvimento Profissional de Formadores e Professores dos Anos Iniciais do Ensino Fundamental no Local de Trabalho: uma Parceria entre Universidade-Escola – UNESP". In light of this context, we seek to understand the contributions of this program based on a university-school partnership developed and implemented collaboratively at the school. The tools that were employed for investigation and continued education consisted of written narratives from the participating school administrators' and teachers' reflective journals collected at weekly in-person meetings with the researchers. Participants included administrators and teachers from a public school and researchers and undergraduate and graduate students from two universities (one public and one private) in the State of São Paulo, Brazil. The results indicate that written accounts are a useful tool for professional development by means of formative and investigative proposals and point to changes in the ways participants perceive themselves and others.

Keywords: teacher education; written narratives; public school; teacher professional development.

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of narratives in research involves the deconstruction/construction of one's own experiences. It requires the establishment of a dialogic relationship, thereby giving rise to involvement in a two-way discovery process, i.e., while one is discovered in the other, phenomena are also revealed in oneself. Narratives do not only constitute a research method; they also provide an opportunity to construct reality, since they are ontologically grounded. Individuality is explained not only by extra-territorial references, but also by understanding subjectivity, which is a sine qua non condition for social knowledge construction.

"Not only do narratives express important dimensions of lived experience, but they also, more radically, mediate experience and shape the social construction of reality. […] The play of subjectivities, through a dialogic process, turns out to be a privileged means of constructing knowledge" (Bolivar Botía, 2002, p. 4).

In order to better understand narrative research, we based our study on Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 20), who define narrative investigation as a way of understanding experience. It implies the collaboration between researchers and participants over time, at a place or set of places, and in social interaction with their peers.

A narrative constitutes the structured quality of lived experience perceived as evidence. A narrative setting comprises an argumentative plot, a temporal sequence, characters, and a situation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is a mode, a means of providing the self with an identity, of becoming. The act of narrating gives meaning to events of experience itself as well as revisits meanings produced by past actions.

We presuppose that narratives constitute a mode of knowing that enables the characterization, understanding, and representation of human experience (Rinaldi, 2006). In this study, *lived stories* were experiences and *narratives* or *recounted stories* laid the grounds for studying them or, according to Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 415), "people live stories and by recounting them they reaffirm them, modify them, and create new stories". As an assertion, they indicate that whenever people point something out in their own experiences, or even in others', they are not merely keeping record of experiences, but registering them in a storied way.

A story, therefore, is not just an "[…] unfinished sentiment nor a cultural form; it is both things. In fact, stories are the closest we can ever get to experience, as we and others recount them" (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994, p. 414). Hence, narratives or recounted stories are the grounds for studying experience. In this sense, narratives comprise both the *phenomenon* and *method*, and as such they determine the structured quality of experiences to be studied as well as the standards of inquiry, herein understood as reflection, for studying them.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) suggest that the *phenomenon* should be designated as *story* and *inquiry* or *reflection* as *narrative* in order to preserve this distinction. Teachers' knowledge is seen in terms of narrative life stories, i.e., as storied life compositions that are both personal - in the sense that they reflect a personal story - and social - since they mirror the environment, the contexts in which teachers live. Thus, when teacher knowledge is shaped and expressed in context, it constitutes a story and has moral, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted at a public elementary school in the State of São Paulo, Brazil. The research implied the participation of seven researchers, fifteen undergraduate students, and six graduate students from two universities (one public and one private) as well as sixteen teachers and four administrators from the said school. From 2012 to 2013, the participants met in person on a weekly basis at the school in question in order to devise and assess activities for a professional development program developed and implemented with and for schoolteachers and administrators.

In general, the "Programa de Desenvolvimento Profissional de Formadores e Professores dos Anos Iniciais do Ensino Fundamental no Local de Trabalho: uma Parceria entre Universidade-Escola - UNESP" (Professional Development Program for Teacher Educators and Teachers of the First Years of Elementary School at the Workplace: A University-School Partnership – UNESP) was planned to take 180 hours. Its syllabus addressed themes such as philosophy and education, teaching of elementary school mathematics, in-service teacher education, teaching of Portuguese focusing on the analysis of the teaching material "Ler e Escrever" (Reading and Writing), differences between learning difficulties and disorders and intervention strategies, school management and collective work as a strategy for coping with daily challenges, democratic spaces for the construction of moral values and their effect on (in)discipline: actions and interactions, and so forth.

The program was implemented by the researchers with the help of the school staff and faculty. It was a collective endeavor from beginning to end, which implied the establishment of a relational basis and bonds of trust among team members, the expansion of the knowledge base on the first five years of elementary education with an emphasis on the teaching of Portuguese and Mathematics, and the endorsement of the educational

proposal on the part of administrators of the city where the school is located. At first, it embraced the participating teachers' and school administrators' knowledge about their school, students, specific contents from diverse curriculum components, educational theories and proposals, public policies (with special emphasis on external assessment exams and full-time curriculums). It also included their pedagogical content knowledge, which encompasses how to teach and how to evaluate some curricular content and implies different 'translations' in order to make a specific content teachable and understandable by students in light of its specificities and those of the population that attends the school in question. In addition, it enabled the expansion of general content knowledge, including dilemmatic issues, e.g., inclusion of special education students and school violence, which was initially understood as a problem of indiscipline in the said context.

The methodological approach to the research was qualitative in nature; it was presumed as a *reflectivity-based process*, i.e., "by taking into account those who are doing the research, identifying the personal and theoretical assumptions that modulate their actions as well as their relationship with other participants and the community in which the study is being conducted" (Sandín Esteban, 2010, p. 130). In line with the research design adopted, i.e., a constructive-collaborative intervention research design, we sought to build a partnership between the university and the school. More precisely, this type of research design is not aimed at immediate change in existing structures or actions since change is seen as resulting from the establishment of new relationships between theory and practice and subject and object. Therefore, this study was based on an intervention-research design which sought to establish a partnership between school faculty and administrators and university academics and students. Likewise, this research did not aim at changing instituted actions straightway as change is assumed to derive from the establishment of new relationships between theory and practice and subject and object.

In addition, written narratives constituted the main raw material for this study. Narratives are viewed not as merely describing reality but as capable of producing knowledge that act as both vehicles and conductors. Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 11) state that "the main reason for using narratives in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms, organisms that live recounted lives individually and socially... thus, the study of narratives is the study of the ways individuals experience the world".

In this case, the participating teachers' texts were assumed to be narratives, i.e., a form of knowledge that enables characterization, understanding, and representation of human experience (Vaz, Mendes, & Maués, 2001). Moreover, lived experiences are understood as *lived stories* and as a starting point for reflective processes whereas *narratives* are *told stories* (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994).

The decision to adopt the writing of reflective journals (written narratives) in order to identify and understand the participating teachers' and administrators' personal views was based on the assumption that they would enable the researchers to elicit knowledge and beliefs that support their pedagogical practices. According to Kramer (2000, p. 112), "writing helps stories to acquire new meanings […]. […] Text writing is similar to story writing. Moreover, in formative terms, working with language, reading, and writing can promote reflection, thinking about the meaning of individual and collective life" (p. 114).

It should be emphasized that we have employed this strategy to investigate what teachers and administrators *know*, which in turn is closely related to *what they say they know* (Freeman, 1996). Words are considered the means of thinking and can represent that which exists in people's minds in an isomorphic way, i.e., their words 'comprise' their thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, and feelings. From this perspective, "people are taken for what they say" (Freeman, 1996, p. 754). Therefore, with regard to the data analysis of

narratives, we conducted a *representational* reading of participants' accounts of their experiences as teachers and administrators.

3. REFLECTION IS A PROCESS OF MEANING ATTRIBUTION

Reflection is a process of meaning attribution that takes learners from one experience to the next at a deeper level of understanding of its relationship with previous experience and connections to other experiences and ideas. This is what makes continued learning possible and ensures growth for the individual, and ultimately, for society. It constitutes one of the means to moral ends.

An essential aspect of experience is the *interaction* (*relationship*) between the individual and the world and its dialectical effect, which modifies both the self and the world. *Continuity* is another important aspect. Reflection can be characterized more broadly so as to include the "march of civilization" or "social continuity." In a more restricted sense, it implies that people attach meaning to new experiences based on their prior knowledge of the world. Without interaction, learning is sterile and passive; it never changes the learner. Without continuity, learning is random and unrelated to the learner and the world.

While experiences constitute the basis for learning, they are not always constructive or educational. When they are constructive, they can broaden the scope of experience, knowledge, and awareness. Otherwise, they can lead to immoral conducts or routine actions, disregarding their effect on the environment.

The function of reflection is to attribute meaning, to establish *relationships* and *continuities* among multiple aspects of an experience and among different experiences. In the case of reflective teachers, they should not merely seek solutions nor act in mindful of their work sources and impacts. On the contrary, they should seek to assign meaning to and construct theories and stories based on past experiences, which can provide structure for their growth and their students'. A theory should always underlie their practice until it no longer fully applies. Then, through reflective processes, the theory in question is revised, polished or discarded and a new theory is constructed.

There follow some notes on the use of narratives in the professional development of the teachers and administrators in the context of this study.

4. SOME NOTES ON THE USE OF NARRATIVE WRITING WITH TEACHERS AND SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Narratives have been used for a long time as a data collecting tool in qualitative research, which has enabled researchers to explore and organize this human potential and thus produce systematized knowledge. The kind of research design that makes use of narratives presupposes a collective process of mutual explanation in which the researcher's experience is enmeshed in the subject's.

The longitudinal examination of the process inherent to this type of formative proposal points to some peculiarities in the way the participating teachers and administrators' narratives are structured. Initially, the participants merely described their previous impressions, usually guided by prior experiences.

> I was very apprehensive at first because I had very high expectations about meeting with you here at the school. I believe that all that is 'new' in our lives makes us a little uneasy, anxious, and insecure. […] We think that we cannot

> make mistakes, because we are teachers and you are here to check whether we're doing the right thing. I thought I would be unable to establish a good relationship with you, since most university people come to the school to collect data for research and never come back (Teacher 3's journal entry on March 27, 2012).

Over time, as mutual respect, conviviality, and trust were established among teachers, administrators, and researchers, the school professionals began to write in their reflective journals that were experiencing anxiety, insecurity, and anticipation as well as a host of practical worries, conflicts, and dilemmas with no predetermined solutions. Notwithstanding, they seemed to believe that they could rely on the group to reflect and solve these issues together.

> I have to find a resolution to a student problem with a teacher that doesn't participate in this program. It is about a student that speaks at the top of his voice in class the whole time, I mean, very loudly, as if he were in a world of his own imagination. The noise he makes and his lack of interest are 'petrifying' the teacher. […] What could be done about that? I've studied and thought about the whole thing a lot, but I would like to discuss the issue of discipline with you. I want to help the teacher, I have some ideas, but I want to discuss them with you because I think I cannot deal with this problem by myself (Pedagogical Advisor's journal entry on March 31, 2013).

The excerpt above indicates that reflective narratives can be considered "thinking aloud written on paper" (Clark &Yinger, 1996, p. 176). They provide researchers with written information about what teachers think during the planning process or during any other activity performed by them, as shown in the aforementioned reflective journals (Teacher 3's and Pedagogic Advisor's).

Another example of the effectiveness of narratives as a research and educational tool can be seen in Teacher 14's journal:

> [...] I can't recall seeing that when I studied mental calculation. I don't feel comfortable with Math; that's why I don't feel confident enough to teach it. I have difficulty in solving Math problems both in the classroom and my everyday life (Teacher 14's journal entry on August 27, 2013).

This is one of the excerpts in which it was possible to notice some participating teachers' shortcomings relating to the specific knowledge (Shulman, 1986) vis-à-vis curricular contents that directly impact their teaching. In addition to reiterating the need for in-service teacher development, this fact alludes to major problems, which cannot be addressed by a program of this kind. They demand a more intense, systematic process of teaching teachers how to teach curriculum contents. Therefore, it is vital to acknowledge the social importance of teaching and make sure teachers have time to study, beyond that of HTPC (Collective Pedagogical Work Time). Likewise, it is mandatory to raise their wages as this is a sine qua non condition for helping them change their everyday practices and promoting the construction or development of their pedagogical content knowledge as defined by Shulman (1986).

In general, as the program unfolded, it was possible to conduct a type of narrative inquiry in the manner indicated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), because the researchers relentlessly asked the participating teachers and administrators to define clearly their teaching practices and other activities conducted over time, the personal and social conditions of those involved in them, and surrounding forces/factors.

Furthermore, we believe that everyone involved participated in a reflective cycle in that the researchers encouraged the school teachers/administrators to develop their ability to observe, chronicle, and think critically about students and their learning processes, taking into account the curriculum, specific content, and the contexts in which these aspects interacted.

5. TEACHERS' ACCOUNTS ABOUT THE TEACHING OF PORTUGUESE: READING

With respect to narratives written by the teachers of Portuguese (mother tongue), this article only presents two participants' accounts, in keeping with the initial proposition: "Relate your experience as a reader, a text producer, and a teacher that teaches reading and text production".

It is important to point out that some information relating to the teachers' college and continued education was included in the analyses of the two accounts so as to contextualize their formal education process.

Teacher 1 had attended Teachers College, had not specialized in any of the areas of pedagogy, and had been teaching for 12 years at the time of data collection. She stated that her college education had not provided her with knowledge about reading and text production. Here's her account:

> "I love to read, but I would like to devote more time to reading, reading everything I can and have to read unhurriedly. When I'm teaching, I read various texts every day at the beginning of class. As a result, students quiet down and it is much easier for me to conduct other activities. On the topic of text production, because I always teach the first grades, I begin with collective text production and later I introduce individual production activities. I begin the story for them to come up with an ending; I provide pictures or drawings for them to organize and make up a story. Thus, they gradually lose their fear of writing and start writing on their own."

Teacher 2 had a secondary school-level teacher certificate, had majored in History in college, and had specialized in psycho-pedagogy. At the time of data collection, she had been teaching at public elementary schools for six years. It should be mentioned that her secondary school-level teaching program had not provided her with knowledge on reading and text production. There follows her account:

> "Ever since I was little, when I was learning to read and write, I have delighted in reading and in handling books. I believe that it was due to my having been born into a family in which mother and aunts were teachers, in whose house there was a small private library with several books at my disposal (because my mother let us free to explore the bookshelves). I was encouraged to read books in spite of not having much money to buy them. Then, I'd go to public libraries or exchange and borrow books from friends. I still do that. Based on that experience, I try to bring reading to the classroom, sometimes for pleasure and relaxation and at other times for defined educational purposes. One of the activities that I've carried out with students, last year and this year, is to get them to use a loudspeaker and microphone to read texts or poetry of their choice to their classmates. They really like that. It is also a quite relaxed activity because I let them decide whether or not they want to participate. In spite of that, student adherence is very good. Text production can derive from an oral activity like the one I've just mentioned."

In the following excerpts from the above accounts, both teachers write about what they think of being a reader and their viewpoints on a pedagogical discourse that values the reading of diverse texts. Although these teachers refer to reading or to the teaching of reading in the classroom (Excerpts I and II), they express misconceptions about reading, i.e., they mention the use of a loudspeaker/microphone when reading poetry and reading as a way of getting students to quiet down so as to be able to carry out other activities. They fail to mention activities related to the teaching of reading strategies, visits to the school library, use of newspapers, and so forth. It should be emphasized that there is nothing wrong about the activities they mentioned, but it is necessary to go beyond reading as mere decoding and to teach reading as a social practice, rising above the classroom context. It is necessary to teach reading as a meaningful, interactive, and reflective process, according to Koch and Elias (2007), Jolibert & Jacob (2006), and Kleiman (1989).

[1]
T2: "I read various texts every day at the beginning of class. As a result, the children quiet down and it is much easier for me to conduct other activities."
[2]
T3: "Based on this experience, I also try to bring reading to the classroom, sometimes for pleasure and relaxation and at other times for defined educational purposes. One of the activities that I've carried out with students, last year and this year, is to get them to use a loudspeaker and microphone to read texts or poetry of their choice to their classmates."

Orlandi (2012) claims that *speech* should not be seen as something separated from the *society* that produces it, since historical contexts are linked to it and interfere with its production. When the participating teachers talk about their reading experiences or the paths they've trodden to become readers, the emphasis they attach to this practice becomes evident. However, it is important that they go beyond the concept of reading as decoding or hobby. At the school under investigation, we noticed an appreciation for reading experiences and a steadfast interest in finding new knowledge on which to base these classroom practices.

6. FINAL REMARKS

The prospect of working with narratives is aimed at helping individuals become visible to themselves. It consists of a dialog between lived practices and theories constructed during and about these experiences.

As to being readers and teachers who teach reading, the participating teachers value reading, are eager for new knowledge and related methodologies. However, they need to internalize and change their inadequate conceptions of reading. The experience acquired great importance to the teachers and researchers involved in this study. By means of written accounts, the participating teachers were able to express their opinions and thoughts on being a reader and a teacher who teaches reading.

The strategy of reflecting on practice with the help of written narratives was shown to be one of the best tools for individual and collective learning per se. From the lived experiences narrated through written accounts, it was possible to notice that the development of teacher professional learning processes (for teachers, managers and researchers) is complex and involves playing a variety of roles such as those of advisor, critic, consultant, teacher educator, researcher of one's own practice, among others. These

roles imply the undertaking, at the workplace, of numerous activities related to the group's educational needs, to collectively established goals, and also to the students' needs.

It is, however, a challenging activity due to a combination of factors - some of which bear a close relationship with interactions maintained among the school administrators, teachers, and researchers: conflicts of ideas and attitudes; lack of trust; incomplete information; mismatch among schedules; communication difficulties; challenges regarding investment in professional advancement, and so forth.

Given the above, it is possible to say that the contributions of a program of this kind were as numerous as its challenges. However, educational processes must be designed from an integrative perspective that encompasses the notions that teaching and learning are interrelated processes, that people construct their own knowledge based on their personal experiences, in order to help students construct their own knowledge (learn to learn), that greater understanding of meta-cognitive processes and their application as in reflective practice is necessary, and that reflective teaching requires support and a type of structure that can be adopted by teacher educators in the school context.

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