

A CASE FOR NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION

СЛУЧАЈ НАРАТИВНОГ УПИТА У НАСТАВИ ГЕОГРАФИЈЕ

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ABSTRACT: *This paper attempts to discuss a relatively new social research approach, narrative inquiry, in respect to research in geography education. It first briefly sets the context for narrative inquiry within a wider debate on educational research stating that particularly 1980s and 1990s were caught up in a new interest in subject and subject's practice in educational studies leading researches focusing on "voice" of teachers. Then it moves on to narrative inquiry and explores the emergence of it within educational research. The process of narrative inquiry and why it could be used in geography education as a research tool and a mean for reflective practice are explained next. Finally some ontological considerations are carried out. In this respect, narrative inquiry considered to be positioned within constructivist stance with reflexivity, particularism, blurred genres of knowing and interpretivism being important dimensions of it.*

Key Words: *Narrative inquiry, geography education, teacher, voice, reflective practice*

INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE CONTEXT

*'Every life is an attempt to put together a convincing
and meaningful story within given constrains'*

J. Bruner

1980s and 1990s were caught up in a new interest in subject and subject's practice in educational studies. Qualitative research methods started to be used to examine the interrelation of subject (teachers, heads and principals, students) and functions of school-

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ing in new ways. This had extended by the late 1980s to examining the 'voice' of teachers as well as action research as used by teachers and researchers (Wells, 2011; Clandinin & Connelly, 1998; Hargreaves, 1996). The criteria for evaluating educational studies were changing from 'controlling all the extraneous variables' (Kennedy, 1997: 5) to 'accommodating other variables' (Brows, 1992, cited in Kennedy, 1997). The analysis of educational studies was changing from providing objectivity to reaching 'concrete reality' which 'teachers would, could, and should implement' (Kennedy, 1997: 4, Goodson, 1994) to 'the subjective meanings that teachers attach to their work' (Hargreaves, 1996: 12).

This was because teaching as a job varies in the degree of satisfaction it offers for each teacher. Teachers, as other professionals, are human beings; they have ambitions, desires, goals, experiences and personal values, so they have different feelings, as Fessler (1995: 171) stated, towards their jobs:

For some, teaching is filled with excitement and enthusiasm, with each day bringing new opportunities to positively influence the lives of children. For others, to complexity of job is overwhelming with details and pressures that seem impossible to master. For still others, teaching is just a job to get through.

Therefore, some critical performance characteristics that most dramatically influence the thinking, decisions, learning and actions of teachers are of great importance when thinking about teaching and learning procedures. For example, teachers' performance could be affected by various levels such as individual (learning needs, moral dimension, sense of efficacy), school (overload & time and isolation), professional level (career stages and live histories). However, although 'teaching and learning are at the heart of education... , sometimes they are seen overly instrumental and cognitive terms: there is neglect of the way they are embedded in the lives of both children and teachers' (Hammersly, 1999: 1). This notion is followed with a conviction that educational study also need to consider processual, personal and social characters of education (Hammersly, 1999).

This is where narrative inquiry comes into play as the idea of it is that "stories are collected as a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through both research and literature" (Savin-Badin & Van Niekerk, 2007: 459). Elbaz-Luwisch (1997) states three different assumptions about narrative inquiry as follows; the first assumption comes from the idea of 'giving voice' to teachers to understand their practice and teaching better. The second assumption is that if we want to improve teaching, 'top-down' prescriptions will not work so we need insiders working together to improve practice. The last assumption is that the purpose of narrative research is not only to develop knowledge to improve things but also to understand and empower all participants in the process.

One of the major strengths of such a means of conducting inquiry is the ability to allow readers who do not share a cultural background similar to either the storyteller or the researcher to develop an understanding of motives and consequences of actions described within a story format. Narrative is powerful and different way of knowing (Gray, 1998: 1, cited in Bell, 1999: 17). Writing in 1991, Elbaz (1991) notes that, 'the notion of

voice has been central to the development of research on teachers' knowledge and thinking' (Elbaz, 1991 cited in Hargreaves, 1996: 12) as it is now (Bold, 2011). Furthermore, Hargreaves (1996: 12) explains why teachers' voice became almost central to the some of the educational studies;

The concern with voice has come to relevance for the place teachers occupy and the role they play in school restructuring and reform; and how research knowledge about teachers and their work generated. What part do teachers play, what say do they have in educational change? How well or poorly are their perspectives represented in the discourse of policy and research on education? These are the issues to which the concept of voice speaks especially well.

Attention has been increasingly being given to an awareness of the social (e.g. family and class), personal (gender, race) and professional (life histories, career stages) lives of individual teachers as stated by Clandinin and Connelly (1998: 150) in the following:

As our work progressed, we came to see teacher knowledge in terms of narrative life history, as storied life compositions. These stories, these narratives of experience, are both personal- they reflect a person's life history- and social-they reflect the milieux, the context in which teachers live.

As can be seen, they consider teacher knowledge as "storied life compositions". "Even though the use of story as a research tool is relatively new concept in the social sciences, historically story has been an accepted way of relating knowledge and developing self-knowledge" (Gray, 1998: 1, cited in Bell, 1999: 17). Likewise, Turner (1992), a professor of cognitive sciences at Stanford University, states that "most of our experience, our knowledge, and our thinking is organised as stories". And he argues that narrative has not had a peripheral role but a dominant one in the organisation and acquisition of conceptual structure;

Rhetorical powers of mind, such as the figural and narrative, are not peripheral. Indeed, they appear to be fundamental, ineradicable, and ubiquitous in the meanings we do attribute. They appear in fact to play a dominant role in capacities that were once thought to be where all the action is: categorization, deduction, reasoning, argument (Turner, 1992).

Similarly, Van Manen (1994: 158) points out that 'narrative argument can persuade at both a noncognitive (emotional, moral) and a cognitive (intellectual) level by bringing about 'understandings' of evoked meanings, human truths, and significances that something can hold'. Narrative is, then, a concept through which 'we achieve our personal identities and self-concept' (Polkinghorne, 1988: 150, cited in Bullough & Baughman, 1996: 387). On this account, Czarniawska (2004: 15) makes a forceful point that "everything is narrate or at least can be treated as one". If human experience can be defined through narrative configuration, then educational research can employ narrative inquiry as a means of research methodology.

PROCESS OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Wells (2011) defines narrative inquiry as first-person oral narratives obtained for the purposes of research. Thus people's stories are considered as valuable sources of data (Savin-Baden and Niemerck, 2007; Bell, 1999). "Researchers describe lives, tell stories about them and write narratives of experience" (Savin-Baden and Niemerck, 2007: 464). Having given a brief explanation, a more through explanation would be as follows in Gray's words:

It involves the collection and development of stories, either as a form of data collection or as a means of structuring a research project. Informants often speak in a story form during the interviews, and as the researcher, listening and attempting to understand, we hear their 'stories'. The research method can be described as narrative when data collection, interpretation and writing are considered a 'meaning making' process with similar characteristics to stories (Gudmundsdottir, 1996: 295). Narrative inquiry can involve reflective autobiography, life story, or the inclusion of experts from participants' stories to illustrate a theme developed by the researcher. A narrative approach to inquiry is most appropriate when the researcher is interested in portraying intensely personal accounts of human experience. Narrative allows voice- to the researcher, the participants and to cultural groups- and in this sense they can have the ability to develop a decidedly political and powerful edge (Gray, 1998: 1, cited in Bell, 1999: 16).

However, it should be noted that narrative inquiry is not 'just collection of stories or life histories' because if one study is going to be categorised as research, it must be a systematic inquiry with a clear structure. Here the emphasis is on to understand the experiences, life histories, perspectives and actions of those involved in the research through their stories (with their own words) in a structured way. Then, narrative inquiry should have a methodology according to which data collection and development of clusters, themes and analysis are set. In this respect, there are different approaches in collecting data (the ways researchers pose the questions, setting of the interview environment) and analysing it (see Wells, 2011; Bold, 2011; Clandinin, 2007). One of way doing it is explained as follows:

The skill of the narrative researcher lies in the ability to structure interview data in a form which clearly presents a sense of a beginning, middle and an end...Data collection for narrative research requires the researcher to allow the storyteller to structure the conversations, with the researcher asking follow-up questions. So a narrative approach to the question of how mature-age undergraduates perceive their ability to cope with the experience of returning to study would involve extended, open-ended interviews with one or two mature-aged students. This would allow the students to express their personal experience of the problems, frustrations and joys of returning to study. It might also involve similar 'conversations' with other stakeholders in their education- perhaps family members; their tutors, and lecturers- to provide a multiple perspective of the context of the education of mature-aged undergraduates. Gray (1998: 1, cited in Bell, 1999: 17).

As opposed to stories emerging from interview questions asked by the researcher, those from interpretive tradition would tend to “ask participants to tell and define their story in a way that would convey the meaning that they, as participants, would wish to be heard” (Savin-Baden and Niemerck, 2007: 463).

Although narrative research may take the forms of ‘field notes of the shared experience, journal records, interview transcripts, others’ observations, storytelling, letter writing, autobiographical writing, documents such as class plans and newsletters, and writing such as rules, principles, pictures, metaphors, and personal philosophies’ (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990: 5), it is to large extent based on audio-recordings of interviews (Wells, 2011). In this setting the researcher should see the participant as a storyteller rather than as a respondent making the agenda of interview open to development and change in accordance with the story being told (Savin-Baden and Niemerck, 2007). The power of a story is dependent on the storyteller’s ability to use language and describe his/her experiences (Gray, 1998). “Thus in telling a story the narrator takes responsibility for making the relevance of the telling clear—so that meaning is created between storyteller and listener.” (Savin-Baden and Niemerck, 2007: 464). Put differently, the researcher and the respondent must construct the narrative in a way that it will be a medium through which the respondent conveys his/her message as clearly as possible. This is to say that every narrative is not to be regarded as a process of two factors- the teacher and his/her stories- but a process that consists of three factors; the teacher, his/her stories, and the researcher understanding it and telling his/her stories. To achieve such an end, Connelly and Clandinin (1990: 4) argues that the researcher should make sure to construct a collaborative relationship in which “both (the respondent’s and the researcher’s) voices are heard”. What have been said above could also be summarised in three points made by Savin-Badin & Van Niekerk (2007: 462) as follows: The researcher should:

- listen to participants’ stories;
- acknowledge the mutual construction of the research relationship (both researcher and participant have a voice with which to tell their stories);
- acknowledge that people are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect on life and explain themselves to others.

Narrative, therefore, can be defined as an act of collective perception and modification of reality. This is to say that every narrative is not to be regarded as a process of two factors- the teacher and his/her stories- but a process that consists of three factors; the teacher, his/her stories, and the researcher understanding it and telling his/her stories. Therefore, the researcher perceives a part of the respondent’s reality and, in his/her act of doing so thereby transmutes the stories told to him/her to a socio-cultural phenomenon or a theory (e.g. from an analysis of an event to a practical/actual process). Thus, the researcher and the respondent must construct the narrative in a way that it will be a medium through which the respondent conveys his/her message as clearly as possible. To achieve such an end, Connelly and Clandinin (1990: 4) argues that the researcher should make sure to construct a collaborative relationship in which ‘both (the respondent’s and the researcher’s) voices are heard’. Furthermore, based on Hollway & Jefferson

(2000) Savin-Baden and Niemerck (2007: 462) suggests the following four principles that facilitate the production of the interviewee's meaning:

- Use open-ended questions: 'Tell me about your stories of doing fieldwork.'
- Elicit stories: 'Relate examples of learning in fieldwork that are particularly memorable.'
- Avoid 'why' questions—these tend to encourage intellectualization and can be threatening.
- Follow up using respondents' ordering and phrasing: 'You said working in a different environment was very complicated, can you tell me some more about that?'

When stories are collected, there is even harder business of analysing them. Wells (2011) states three different methods for analysing stories namely as; holistic content analysis, critical discourse analysis. For Savin-Baden and Niemerck (2007), analysis of stories involves examining the epiphanies (manifestations) and metaphors inherent in the stories. Here epiphanies are considered as turning points that made a significant change in one's life. Based on Denzin, Savin-Baden and Niemerck (2007: 465) proposes four different types of epiphany:

- Cumulative epiphany: an event that is symbolic of profound changes that may have been going on for a number of years or be a turning point in one's life caused by the accumulation of numerous related experiences.
- Illuminative epiphany: a point in time or particular experience that reveals insights; or an event that raises issues that are problematic.
- Major epiphany: such as an event or experience that is so traumatic or challenging that its meanings or consequences are immediate.
- Relived epiphany: an event or issue that has to be relived in order to be understood.

Furthermore, metaphors are also important means for analysis as they provide us important findings how people who take part in the inquiry view and theorise about their world and "can help us see the influences of class and culture in their lives" Savin-Baden and Niemerck (2007: 465). The detailed explanation of how to carry out analysis of narrative inquiry is not one of the intentions this paper would like to achieve. For that it would be sufficed to note that analysis of narrative inquiry, as in any other research endeavour, will to large extent depend on researcher's ontological and epistemological basis and aims of the inquiry.

NARRATIVE INQUIRY IN GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION

What could be drawn from the preceding sections is that narrative inquiry could be used with two different purposes in geography education. First area of use would be as a research method in geography education that might provide researchers with a very useful tool to examine what people really think and feel with regards to issues at hand. Second area of the use of narrative inquiry would be reflective learning process that could be used in both pre- and in-service geography teacher education.

Almost three decades of research on teachers gives an impressive rationale for narrative research in terms of hearing teachers' voice and understanding their 'feelings, attitudes, and values and how these are infused in their knowledge and practice' (Gudmundsdottir, 1996: 293). When one conducts research in geography education, at some point s/he has to deal with geography teachers and student teachers as teachers are usually thought to be at the centre of all educational debates (Hargreaves, 2010). More particularly research in geography education should also focus directly on what teachers and student teachers feel their conditions are and should be, which would include the curriculum (including ITT institution), feelings of insecurity (politically and socially), desires, needs for professional development, lack of resources and support when teaching geography. The teacher's life history, critical incidents, and continuing professional development are inclusive to the nature of experience itself, which is appreciated through personal meaning and social (and political) consciousness; that is what people feel is happening to them at a particular time, how this relates to self as well as others, and in which ways they express these feelings. Certainly, one of the best ways to express the experience is through narrative inquiry.

Achieving such a study will, most probably, reveal, from the teachers' point of view, 'a valuable range of insights upon the new moves to restructure and reform schooling (geography education), upon new policy concerns and directives' (Goodson, 1994: 31), pedagogy and new curriculum ideas where whole education is strictly centralised and curriculum is prescribed. However, such studies of narrative inquiry origin would give teachers and researchers a tool for critique for 'top-down curriculum development and of process –product research on teaching' (Elbaz-Luwisch, 1997: 77).

Narrative inquiry could also be placed perfectly in a case study design (Wells, 2011) as particularly stories of the past that teachers narrate are a very important source for understanding teachers' present thinking and actions (Day, 1999). This issue is particularly of importance particularly in Turkey because Turkish geography teachers generally have a tendency to think geography very traditional ways (Öztürk, 2012). Many geography teachers were not aware the wide range of theoretical tools and studies available in particularly human geography as they appeared not to have been in contact with any of those in their lifetimes (Öztürk, 2012). Finding out what geography teachers think is really important for the work we carry out because "the interpretation of teachers' autobiographies identifies the nature, sources and manner of evolution of the special kind of thinking, action and knowledge that pertains to their teaching" (Butt et al 1992: 51). Likewise,

...the present has a living connection with the past. Current meanings and interpretations are shown to have grown and developed over time. In tracing teachers' own histories, we acquire a fuller, deeper and richer understanding of them. Examining the interrelationships of incident, thought, people and place that underpin the current person provides a context that is just as relevant as, if not more than, the prevailing social, institutional and situational (Woods 1993: 450)

When studying the role of teachers in change process, teachers' live history and narrative inquiry is particularly significant in that the answer of their reaction to change

is hidden in their histories (stories). This is particularly important for Turkish context because although the geography curriculum was changed in 2005 and has been implemented in schools since then, many teachers are still struggling with the requirements brought by the curriculum. By narrative inquiry it is easy to trace change of their mind and practice often explained in a thoroughly abstract way, but having practical results such as resisting/supporting change. Woods et. all. (1987: 162) states this in these words:

The life history.... is particularly well suited to the appraisal of practice and career, especially at times of crisis or change. At such moments, it provides both a window on the world and deep insights into the self. It puts the present, crises or not, into perspective and in context, thereby increasing understanding and perhaps one's powers of copying.... the life history offers opportunities for reappraisal, suggesting perhaps new permutations and combinations of events and trends or reawakening old interests and desires temporarily submerged in answer to the experiences of those times.

Secondly, narrative inquiry could be used in geography education as a mean to reflective practice. Reflective practice could be defined as “the capacity to reflect on action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning” (Schon, 1983). According to another definition, it is “a set of abilities and skills, to indicate the taking of a critical stance, an orientation to problem solving or state of mind” (Moon, 1999: 63). When students analyse, evaluate and think about their personal experiences and attempts to make decisions on that thinking, they do reflection (Cowan, 1999). It is not only limited to analysis or evaluation as reflective practice include hesitation, amazement, dilemma, questioning, hunting, being suspicious and finding out materials or ways to solve the issue (Kızılkaya & Aşkar, 2009).

The most of the students and teachers would not be aware of on what grounds they do what they do and believe in terms of theoretically and philosophically. But people do know something, because they are practicing it. Schon (1987) calls this ‘knowing-in-action’. Bengtsson (1993) defines ‘knowing-in-action’ as skill and argues that once people acquire it (through repetition), it tends to become habitual and not formulated in words. For him, the best way to avoid this ‘enclosedness’ and gain some perspective on it, is through ‘reflection-in-on-for-about action’. Schon (1987) defines reflection-in-action as ‘the capacity to respond to the surprise through improvisation on the spot’. ‘This reflection-in-action is tacit and spontaneous and often delivered without taking thought, and is not particularly intellectual activity’ (Schon, 1987). But the rest (reflection-on-for-about action) involves some kind of distancing from the self. What goes on the minds of students and teachers, indeed, can only be articulated through distancing.

It is this practical reflection on experience that often takes narrative forms (Van Manen, 1994: 157). Telling a story about one’s own life and experiences provides displacement from anxiety, boredom or confusion as well as allowing oneself to conceptualise events and learn. Huber and Whelan (1999) put this as follows; ‘the storytelling context, shaped by a responsive audience, was profoundly educative in that through the sharing of this story, the meaning of it was reshaped from beginning images of hopelessness to the those of possibility. Telling a story, then, is one of the two main ways of dis-

tancing from the self (the other way is writing). And when one does this, one is involved in a reflection-on action which 'is an intellectual business, and it does require verbalisation' (Schon, 1987). As teachers, this is what we have to try to achieve- encourage students to reflect-on action through their narratives.

For example, Savin-Badin & Van Niekerk (2007) use narrative inquiry in field work as a reflective learning process. They state that their interest in narrative inquiry emerged from their experiences of using stories in their teaching as both of them "told stories to illustrate points and used stories and case studies for small-group teaching". (Savin-Badin & Van Niekerk, 2007: 460). They also report examples in action. One of them is about students' experiences of learning in higher education level and how narrative inquiry is used to bridge the gap between students and of the people they work with. This was a reflective process in the sense that narrative inquiry is incorporated in the curriculum to help students and lecturers construct an understanding of others. In the second example they used narrative inquiry to understand the stories and journeys of staff as they developed in the role of facilitator in problem-based learning (ibid.: 468).

Summerby-Murray (2010) used first-person creative writing in cultural geography course to engage students with the course concepts. Although the students had an initial scepticism, Summerby-Murray (2010) reports, they eventually achieved a constructivist engagement by internalising concepts, reflecting on experiences or creating applications for theoretical ideas. Fuller et. al. (2003) used narrative inquiry to compare students' experiences with and without fieldwork. Hughes (2004) scrutinizes the spatiality of lone parenting concluding that lone parents highly depend on their spatial context and social circumstances through narrative inquiry.

Some ontological and epistemological considerations

As would be gathered from the discussion carried out so far, narrative inquiry is an approach deeply embedded in qualitative research tradition. Qualitative researchers are concerned with how best to describe and interpret the experiences of other people and cultures (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Within the broad spectrum of qualitative research, more particularly narrative inquiry "tends to be positioned within a constructivist stance with reflexivity, interpretivism and representation being primary features of the approach" (Savin-Baden and Niemerck, 2011: 460). Put differently, Stefnee and Gary (2007) summarises four turns with regards to narrative inquiry: "the attention to relationships among participants (the researcher and the researched), the move from numbers to words as data, the focus on the particular rather than the general, and the recognition of blurred genres of knowing" (Stefnee and Gary, 2007).

What they indicate by "blurred genres of knowing" could be better understood by the Lyotard's (1979: 18) following quotation: "Knowledge is not the same as science, especially in the contemporary form". At this point, it is useful to note Bruner (1986)'s distinction between two modes of knowing as logico-scientific or also referred as paradigmatic, and narrative. These represent two modes of knowing and thought leading distinct ways of constructing reality (Bruner, 1986). Although paradigmatic mode is concerned with universal truths, grand theories, abstract thinking and empirical works,

“the narrative mode of knowing consists in organising experience with the help of a scheme assuming the intentionality of human actions” (Czarniawska, 2004: 7). Since it is concerned with particulars of experience, it is focused on subjective world of meaning.

In this respect, narrative inquiry could also be placed in a wider context that created by postmodernist practices in our lives. It emphasises on human agency in the creation of their own worlds in the sense of empowering individuals to think and act for themselves as well as being able to make criticisms of traditionally accepted social constructs (e.g. schooling, family, modernity), which has a pragmatic, ad hoc, contextual and local nature. Thus it gives ‘voice’ to those practitioners that affected by various processes.

CONCLUSION

In this paper a case for narrative inquiry in geography education has been put forward to bring the merits of narrative inquiry into attentions of the researchers in geography education. Although it is a relatively new method, it could be very useful to explore underlying motives, understandings, feelings and thoughts of people, more particularly teachers, student teachers and students of geography. It allows us to address the structural causes of the inadequacies in geography education from the perspectives of teachers, students and other stakeholders. Narrative inquiry is particularly well suited to current Turkish context as teachers of geography like other subject teachers have been placed in a complex and difficult situation resulting from curriculum change in 2000s. When studying the role of teachers in such a change process, we could try to understand their present role, and their experiences and conditions, which most probably will have an impact on their future role as change agents because we tell storied compositions of our lives to ‘define who we are, what we do, and why...’ (Connelly & Clandinin, 1998).

Narrative inquiry could also be used as a mean for reflective practice for teachers so that they could deal with the demands of educational change process and geography curriculum. When used in pre- and in-service geography teacher education, teachers could critically reflect upon (Phillon, & Wang, 2011) new understanding of geography curriculum and education. They could be better prepared for change because they could do critical analysis and synthesis through stories of themselves and others.

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