

# NARRATIVE INQUIRY: A CLASSROOM FULL OF RESEARCHERS

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## BOOK REVIEW

Sisk-Hilton, S., & Meier, D. R. (2017). *Narrative inquiry in early childhood and elementary school: Learning to teach, teaching well*. New York: Routledge.

Since time immemorial, stories have changed the world and influenced all of its civilizations. Listening to and narrating stories are natural human activities that often comprise much of human communication. Stories are vital in childhood as children use them to discover the world and mediate their experiences for adults (Corsaro, 2015). They are similarly vital in adulthood as adults use them to express their experiences, feelings, hopes, and dreams and also to form their identity. The word “story” describes any connection of events which includes a sequence structured both temporally and causally. On the most general level, every narrative has two aspects: story and discourse. Chatman (2008) and Herman et al. (2008) define a story as the content of a narrative which describes the characters and the chain of events of their actions and doings. They further understand discourse as the means to express such content. Put simply, a story describes what happens in a narrative and discourse describes how it happens. Yet, as civilizations and people age—and the pace of life quickens—narratives evaporate from our day and lose their power. We tend to forget that narratives are still with us and wait for us to discover and tell them. The book in question presents a return to stories. It asks what narratives are, why we tell them, how they influence our lives, and how we can research them with the help of the narrative inquiry method.

As M. Souto-Manning writes in the foreword to this book, “Narrative inquiry is a methodology that takes stories, as they appear or are constructed from a variety of experiences and artifacts, as the unit of analysis for understanding relational aspects of human experience” (x). Narrative inquiry

pursues three goals. First, it helps teachers to get to know their classes. Second, it can encourage teachers' professional growth and development. Third, it enables observation of how students learn. Teachers who follow the narrative inquiry method object to teaching that can be summarized by saying, "I taught it! Why didn't they learn it?" Narrative inquiry thus represents teachers' reaction to teaching based on standardized procedures. At the same time, it is a departure from a rushed life full of routine in an attempt to embrace teaching steeped in observing and understanding what happens in the classroom.

C. K. Riessman's seminal *Narrative methods for the human sciences* (2008) describes narrative inquiry—or narrative analysis, to be more precise—as a collection of methods that academics can use to analyze texts. Nevertheless, *Narrative inquiry in early childhood and elementary school* understands narrative inquiry differently, and it does so in three regards. First, it posits that it is teachers who are the researchers in narrative inquiry, not academics. Second, it claims that not only texts are good sources for narrative inquiry but visual and audio materials are similarly good. Third, it makes the case that what distinguishes narrative inquiry from other research methods is the fact that it focuses on natural and constantly ongoing classroom occurrences, which narrative inquiry can capture in both their complexity and original particulars. This is possible mostly because the teacher is present in the classroom at all times and can collect an immense wealth of data. For this reason, the teacher can identify successes (and what led to them) as well as shortcomings, opportunities for further growth, and challenges. All of this is possible because of teachers' or students' reflections, both of which are essential components of narrative inquiry. In short, as Sisk-Hilton and Meier claim, "narrative inquiry can look for possible new plotlines from an initial puzzle by examining specific aspects of classroom environments, materials, curriculum, teaching practices, children's conversation, student work and play samples, and student ideas and feelings" (14).

*Narrative inquiry in early childhood and elementary school* is full of intriguing stories from teachers and students which are accompanied by numerous photos and copious notes. The 130 pages cover 15 fifteen teachers and their students. For example, there is the teacher Stephanie who is trying to understand her students' behavior during her teaching. Then there is the teacher Danielle who reads stories to her children and monitors how their language skills develop. Then we meet Marthy who describes her students and their improvements on her school's website, Gita who takes students out into the country, and Tiffany who is interested in the reflective stories which her students tell about her teaching. The seventh chapter examines an example of a narrative inquiry project led by one of the teachers, Michael, who invests a great deal of time into helping his students to get to know the

natural world and the surroundings of their school. The chapter also includes Michael's notes from observations and interviews, photos of his students at work, their results, and most importantly his own reflections on the entire process and his final conclusions.

Sisk-Hilton and Meier open the book by writing that "[t]his book offers practical strategies for incorporating narrative tools structures into the classroom, and encouraging effective conceptual, pedagogical, and personal avenues for engaged teaching and learning across language and culture" (2017). All of this comprises the eight short chapters which detail how teachers can use stories and narrative inquiry. In what follows, I will briefly introduce the contents of some of these chapters.

The first chapter, "Why narrative inquiry?", examines the background to this research method. The chapter describes key aspects of narrative inquiry as a method in qualitative research and discuss its place in educational research. It also includes the authors' objection to the commonplace suggestion that the pre-designed, controlled test model is the gold standard of research. The main aim of narrative inquiry is to understand the stories that occur in the classroom in all of their complexity and to act upon this knowledge. The authors claim that "narrative inquiry is a process of remembering, reliving, and reflecting and that it has implications for changes in our identities as educators and narrative inquirers." For this reason, narrative inquiry demands a high degree of reflexivity and sensitivity in order to understand what and why is occurring in the classroom. In this way, the authors follow in the steps of Schön (1983), who described reflective professionals/practitioners who reflect on their own teaching. Narrative inquiry thus has the potential to inform us about occurrences in the classroom and to transform them through our reflections or self-reflections. This is enhanced by methods of multimedia data collection which allow teachers to return to collected data at a later point and examine them from more angles and with hindsight.

Another key theme in this book is how narrative inquiry should be implemented. The book describes "the power of narrative as a tool to identify and explore puzzles and problems of practice of data collection." The authors remind us that teachers themselves are researchers in narrative inquiry. Teachers who use, or would like to use, the method often ask where to start, how to collect stories, which types of stories they should collect, how to evaluate them, and when to stop. The authors illustrate their answers through the examples of teachers described in the book. Even though stories created by teachers are dominant at school, students can also become researchers and storytellers. In this light, it appears that the classroom is full of researchers and the authors show how teachers can make use of this fact.

The book also focuses on examining tools and methods for collecting and analyzing narrative data for teaching. The book claims that stories have

many different forms and that they can be oral, written, drawn, photographed, dramatized, and so on. Consequently, the book also lists tools teachers can use to implement narrative inquiry. Such tools include short texts based on observations, photographs, letters to a pedagogical luminary, video recordings of taught classes, students' video-recorded responses to a given topic, blog entries, and students' creations. It is apparent that narrative inquiry provides teachers and students with a number of tools that can be employed either independently or in combination. The resulting material can therefore be used for further analysis, reflection, classroom decoration, as a resource in meetings between teachers and parents, and as material to represent the school.

This book also has another key theme of students and their stories. The authors base their approach on the fact that teachers spend a great deal of time on preparations for teaching, creation of educational materials, and methods in the hope that their students will benefit from all of these activities. Teachers who use narrative inquiry can easily perceive their students as co-inquirers and can invite them to tell their own stories and by doing so to change the currently ongoing story. Narrative inquiry thus enables teachers to collect stories, base their teaching upon them, and then implement these ideas in the classroom. It can therefore be said that narrative inquiry also includes students' voices (Rudduck, 2007). For example, the fifth chapter describes how the teacher Nicole discovered that her students were not content with their literacy blocks. Nicole could have reasoned that there was something wrong with the students, but instead she concluded that something was wrong with the learning environment. She therefore tried to shape subsequent literacy blocks more in line with her students' visions and wishes. Again, this shows how narrative inquiry enables teachers to observe the reactions of their students to changes in teaching. In this way, they can use students and their stories as a source of feedback on their own teaching and by doing so work on improving the quality of the teaching.

The introduction to the book mentions that stories and research are two entirely separate matters. Since research searches for the truth and seeks answers to questions, it can be likened to the mode of logical-scientific thinking described by Bruner (1986). On the other hand, stories are based on understanding and creating meaning from experience. As such, they can be likened to Bruner's narrative mode of thinking which unities thinking and acting into a single unit, e.g. a story. This is exactly what makes this book unique as it perceives research as based on stories and at the same time links back to the ideas of Shön (1983) regarding the teacher's dual role as one who teaches and researches at the same time. This connection leads to a new type of teacher, a teacher-researcher, who can research educational reality through stories which happen in the classroom and which s/he can reflect on.

In summary, the book meets the expectations of those who open it. It meditates on how stories influence (or could influence) both our private and professional lives. It discusses how micro-stories can be located within the macro-stories of the classroom, the school, and education, and how they can be analyzed and used for the practice of teachers. The book also exceeds possible initial expectations by including examples of stories told by teachers and students, practical instructions, and advice on how to use narrative inquiry. Even though the book is primarily intended for teachers in kindergartens and primary and lower secondary schools, I believe it can be inspiring even for teachers in higher stages of education as well as for leisure educators, social workers, and many other professions.

It is indeed fascinating to realize that our lives are made up of stories, we live some of them, and they can easily become the subject of our research. Reading the book has changed my own teaching practice as I now use some methods of narrative inquiry. It is astonishing to see how much authentic data is accessible to teachers on an everyday basis thanks to these methods which remain out of the grasp of researchers. I find myself at the beginning of a long journey because storytelling is a never-ending story and narrative inquiry is never-ending research.

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