Narrative inquiry in early childhood education

Travis S. Wright, Elizabeth E. Blair

Published online on: 12 Oct 2015

How to cite: Travis S. Wright, Elizabeth E. Blair. 12 Oct 2015, Narrative inquiry in early childhood education from: The Routledge International Handbook of Philosophies and Theories of Early Childhood Education and Care Routledge
Accessed on: 13 Dec 2023
Narrative inquiry in early childhood education

Pursuing the promise

Travis S. Wright and Elizabeth E. Blair

Narratives both define us and connect us with others – bringing the past into the present, shaping how we understand the future and ourselves. For narrative scholars, stories are central to the way humans make sense of their experiences, and the study of narrative is the study of the way people construct and experience the world (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Bruner 1990; Huber et al. 2013). Drawing from a variety of philosophical, methodological, and analytical traditions, the field of narrative inquiry is focused in generating, analysing, interpreting, and constructing narrative accounts. Narrative research is typically focused on documenting the particular over the general, exploring individual cases in depth rather than aiming to summarize broad patterns across people (Bruner 1990; Garro and Mattingly 2000; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Chase 2011; Schwandt 2007; Riessman 2008). As a result, narrative research tends to capture the complexity of human experience and represents the ‘messiness of lives’ (Squire 2012; 2011; Mishler 1986).

Narrative researchers have struggled to create a definition of narrative inclusive enough to capture the broad range of scholarship that falls within the field, but also specific enough to hold meaning. Some researchers use the term ‘narrative’ interchangeably with ‘story’, while others suggest that narrative includes a range of spoken and written text and visual representation that does not fit the conventions of traditional stories (Binder and Kosopoulou 2011; Sumsion and Goodfellow 2012). For the purposes of this chapter, we conceptualize narrative as the ordering and connecting of particular subjects, events, actions, and experiences in a causally or temporally meaningful sequence or whole (Holstien and Gubrium 2012). Narrators, consciously or unconsciously, orchestrate this ordering for an audience, using socially, culturally, and/or historically available tools and signs (Freeman 2002). Most narrative scholars can find a home within this definition – however, key debates remain within the field about the origins, meanings, qualities of data, analytic approaches, and ethics of narrative inquiry arising from the diverse epistemological, methodological, and disciplinary positions of narrative researchers (see for example Ryan 2005 and others listed above).

This chapter aims to support a recent call and growing interest among early childhood education scholars to turn towards narrative inquiry as an expansive qualitative approach with potential to bring new lenses to our understandings of children, teachers, early childhood classrooms, institutions, and policies (Meier and Stremmel 2010b). As story listening and
storytelling are fundamental aspects of childhood and the pedagogies underlying early childhood education, there is a strong narrative tradition in the fields of early childhood education and childhood studies (Engel 2005, 1995; Reese et al. 2010; Meier and Stremmel 2010a). However, many scholars in early childhood education with research questions amenable to narrative methods do not utilize narrative approaches nor explicitly conceptualize their work within the tradition of narrative inquiry. In this chapter, we seek to both draw attention to and honour the narrative tradition in early childhood care and education (ECEC), call scholars in the field to more explicitly embrace identities as narrative researchers, and explore the methodologies associated with narrative inquiry. By joining the community of narrative scholars in education, we can both deepen connections and sharing of ideas among early childhood researchers and engage in critical conversations about the role of narrative research in promoting social justice.

In this chapter, we explore key facets of narrative inquiry to suggest how they might be utilized by early childhood researchers to expand the scope and reach of the field. We begin by locating the field of narrative inquiry and exploring the philosophical underpinnings of the varied approaches taken up across the field. Next, we summarize narrative research in the field of early childhood education, highlighting exemplary scholarship and emerging trends. Then we delve more deeply into narrative methodologies, describing shared elements of these diverse methodologies and briefly explicating central analytic approaches. We conclude by exploring potential new directions for narrative inquiry in this area.

**Theorizing narrative inquiry**

The field of narrative inquiry is driven by theories about how narratives are created and what they do in our lives. Narrative theory is diverse and sometimes contradictory, but in this section we aim to highlight key theories undergirding the research approach. We explore scholarship on narrative’s role in cognition and meaning-making, the construction of narrative, the link between narrative and identity, and scholarship that particularly focuses on the development or emergence of narrative in the lives of young children.

Narratives have many functions: to argue, to entertain, to mislead, to create empathy, to maintain systems of power, to organize for action, to transmit traditions, to shape memories, to educate, to imagine, to make meaning. Perhaps most importantly, narratives support us in understanding ourselves and the workings of the world. Narrative construction is an active and engaged process that requires the negotiation of cultural tools and social conventions. Individuals formulate narratives by drawing on their personal, social, and cultural resources for rhetorical purposes, to highlight particular versions of self and experience, for a particular audience and specific purposes. Storytelling functions to create order and manage emotions in challenging times, creating a structure for drawing meaning and facilitating connection and empathy with others. Narrative helps us negotiate deviations from established cultural patterns and restore a sense of continuity in life (Engel 1995). Narratives both determine and create opportunities for negotiation of meaning.

Bruner (1990) argues that narrative is an essential structure in human meaning-making, perhaps innate, that plays an important role in social negotiation and identity formation. Indeed, some scholars argue that the way we story, or narrate our lives, is the essence of human experience. Certainly, narrative provides crucial support for cognition and identity development, as we use narratives to create order and meaning from the world around us. Indeed, scholars suggest that identity is constructed through ‘internalized and evolving life stories’: recounting lived experience allows us to produce a coherent yet fluid identity (Chase 2011: 422; McAdams...
et al. 2006; Deciu Ritivoi 2005). Identities are the dynamic and shifting stories we tell ourselves and others about who we are, to account for the complexities of experience, and the modern processes of both being and becoming (Yuval-Davis 2006). Personal narratives also mediate our relationship with morality: humans use narratives to make sense of morally ambiguous or problematic experiences and we respond to the social call to be moral subjects through our construction of self-narrative (Butler 2005). At the same time, understandings of narrative across the field rest on varied epistemological and ontological positions: scholars in the post-structural tradition have more recently emphasized the multiplicity and contradictions of personal narrative and narrative’s inadequacy at fully holding or ordering the messiness of experience (Squire 2012). So while some theorists suggest narratives create order in our lives, others claim this order as ephemeral.

**Narrative in the lives of young children**

Enter any early childhood classroom and you will find children captivated by stories; narratives are omnipresent in early childhood educational settings. From storybooks read aloud, to engaging in pretend play, to trading stories of a child’s day at school pick-up, young children are immersed and engaging in the challenging work of making sense of narrative and its role in identity and culture. From a young age, children attempt narrative through words, movement, and gesture and their stories are complex in form and topic.

Scholars suggest that young children engage in learning about the process of narrative construction even before their second birthday, and that this engagement is deeply informed by context (Engel 1995, 2005; Miller et al. 2014). Researchers propose that children enter narrative worlds and develop the skills of storytelling through collaborative social interaction. Engel (1995) highlights two main contexts for narrative development in early childhood: reminiscing with caregivers and symbolic play. Parents and children begin to collaboratively craft life stories through reminiscing, recalling important or significant experiences in the child’s past. Strong relationships and thoughtful engagement by parents and teachers can support increasing complexity in children’s narratives, facilitate understanding of cultural conventions through storytelling, encourage sequencing of life events, foster self-concept, and promote comprehension of others’ perspectives (Osgood 2010; Mulvaney 2011; Gjems 2010).

In symbolic play, children explore and act out real and imaginary narratives collaboratively. Researchers document how young children try on, negotiate, and perform cultural, religious, and gendered identities through enacting storylines and tropes in their pretend play with peers (for example superhero and princess play) (Giugi 2006).

Scholars suggest that this narrative work is central to child development. Researchers propose that children begin to construct identities, personalities, and self-concepts through building personal narratives and nascent life stories in early childhood. Narratives serve as tools for children to organize their experiences and thoughts, acquire a sense of mastery or control, and gain distance from emotionally fraught experiences (Bruner 1972; Mulvaney 2011). Engel (2005: 206) describes the central role of narrative in children’s lives: children use narratives to ‘solve emotional and cognitive puzzles; to establish and maintain friendships; to construct and communicate a sense of self; to recast events in ways that are satisfying; to participate in the culture’. Narrative helps children make their way in complex and often mysterious worlds.

Developmental researchers argue that children engage deeply with story listening and storytelling from a young age. Almost immediately following the emergence of speech, children begin to communicate in ways that express emotional and evaluative perspectives that will become central in narrative construction (Engel 2005; Reese et al. 2010). Between
18 and 36 months, children often rely on a conversation partner to help them to construct elaborated oral narratives. Around three to four years, children begin to narrate stories about past events and personal narratives. In early childhood, these stories often show few causal connections and these links are often supported through collaboration with adults. At four, some children begin to explore narrative genres and imaginative storytelling (Engel 1997). Across this literature, scholars suggest that narrative is central to children’s engagement in and meaning-making of their sense of self, social interactions, and cultural contexts.

Theorists argue that narrative fundamentally structures the way young children learn, and that narrative is central for the transmission of culture — young children are taught the beliefs, conventions, and central ways of interpreting experience through listening to and learning to tell stories (Bruner 1990; Garro and Mattingly 2000). For this reason, narrow definitions of narrative conventions can have serious and unjust effects in early childhood. Riessman (2008: 77) explains, ‘The development of “narrative competence” remains a primary goal in preschools and elementary grades in the United States, although the narrow way that competence is defined can impede social justice’. When children are taught that their cultural approaches to narrative are unacceptable, their contribution is neglected and cultural knowledge is dismissed (Brice Heath 1983).

Narrative research in early childhood education

Across the field of education, narrative research explores students’, teachers’, administrators’, families’, communities’, and institutions’ educational experiences (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Cortazzi 2005). For example, education scholarship has included in-depth exploration of classroom learning and teaching, investigation of the use of storytelling in the classroom, exploration of the narratives of marginalized students, and inquiry focused on the life stories of teachers, and has traced policy narratives of educational research quality (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Huber et al. 2013; Meier and Stremmel 2010b; Engel 1995; Tobin 2007). Narrative researchers often consider how schools influence the ways students, teachers, and communities construct the meanings of their lives, and the ways that these actors may resist or complicate these narratives (Riessman 2008). Frequently, narrative researchers in education also aim to bridge the accounts of students’ and teachers’ life experiences inside and outside of school.

There is a strong narrative research tradition in the areas of early childhood education and childhood studies, though relatively few early childhood scholars identify explicitly with the field of narrative inquiry. In the past five years, these numbers have been growing, particularly among scholars outside the United States. Below we highlight key contributions to narrative scholarship in the field of early childhood education, focused on children, families, trauma, curriculum, teachers, evaluation, and post-humanist approaches. While omissions are inevitable, through this summary we aim to give readers a rich overview of the field.

Young children

Education scholars have taken up narrative approaches to explore the rich experiences and viewpoints of young children and relationships with their teachers. Vivian Paley’s efforts to document children’s perspectives inside her classroom are probably the best-known examples of scholarship with narrative at its centre in the field of early childhood education (McNamee 2005). Through a process of documentation and reflection, Paley has fruitfully explored collaborative play (2010), moral development (1992, 1999), negotiating race in the classroom
Narrative inquiry: pursuing the promise

(1989, 1995), gender socialization (1984), and student–teacher interactions (2001, 1989), among other topics. A particular focus of Paley’s work is tending to the conversations children have when adults are not present, and she developed a system for audio recording the stories children tell each other when adults are not directly involved with their conversations (Paley 1986). Through a process of transcription, reflection, and engaging children in reproducing the stories in the classroom, Paley honours the importance of children’s perspectives and extends their learning through engagement with them. By sharing this process with a broader audience, Paley demonstrates a powerful model of listening, relating to, and teaching children.

Similarly, other researchers have focused on the use of narrative to deeply explore the experiences of young children and their teachers and to create scholarship intended to reach a broad audience. Though not identifying explicitly with the tradition of narrative inquiry, Coles (1989, 1990, 1997, 2003) has created a deep repertoire of scholarship focused on children’s narratives, with a particular emphasis on their spiritual and moral development. In her classic work, Brice Heath (1983) explores and compares sociocultural approaches to communication, storytelling, and the narrative construction of lives in two diverse preschool communities.

Wright’s (2007, 2010) scholarship is centrally concerned with the role of relationships between young children and their teachers, and has utilized narrative inquiry to document the stories and relationships they develop together. Wright has extended the use of portraiture, a narrative approach, to examine the impact of challenging life circumstances on young children’s gender identity (2007) and social–emotional development (2010) in early childhood settings. Davies (2003) investigates how narrative and sociocultural discourse influence young children’s negotiation of gender in early childhood classrooms. Souto-Manning (2014) uses narrative inquiry to explore how young children negotiate, learn about, and transform conflict in a universal preschool classroom (see Chapter 12). Narrative methods have been utilized to explore the experiences of children before language emerges: Sumsion and Goodfellow (2012) investigate the visual narratives of a 14-month-old child in an early childhood educational setting through analysis of gaze and gestures in video data, and interviews with school staff and family members. Across these examples, scholars aim to richly represent the experiences and perspectives of young children in early childhood settings.

Families

Narrative work also documents the experiences of diverse families of young children (Wright 2007, 2010). Researchers have explored the often contrasting perceptions of preschool education by immigrant families and teachers through interview and visual narrative approaches (Tobin et al. 2007) and suggest that narrative inquiry can ease transitions and facilitate connections between newly arrived immigrant/refugee families and early childhood educators (Prior and Niesz 2013). Vandenbroeck et al. (2009) found that the everyday reciprocity between early childhood educators and immigrant mothers promoted these mothers’ capacity to develop nomadic/hybrid identities and help their families adapt to their new homes.

Childhood trauma

Researchers have also used narrative approaches to both document and treat experiences of trauma in early childhood. One exemplar is Rogers’ (1995) moving narrative account of coming to terms with her own history of childhood trauma while training as a child psychologist and supporting a young child working to make sense of his own traumatic past.
Scholars have explored the qualities of narratives that young children are able to provide in investigations of child abuse (Hershkowitz et al. 2012). Researchers have also documented innovative narrative therapy approaches that are being used to promote resilience and support the emotional lives of young children who have experienced trauma (May 2005; Billington 2012; White and Epston 1990; Wright 2007, 2010).

Curriculum

Narrative inquiry has been integrated into early childhood curricula. Researchers have documented the ways that multimodal, arts-based, narrative approaches (e.g. drawing, sculpture, quilt squares, poetry, oral and digital expression) can be used in educational settings to facilitate narrative construction and literacy, and to honour, empower, and ‘raise the volume’ of children’s voices in the classroom (Binder and Kosopoulos 2011; Faulkner and Coates 2011; Burke 2012; Lotherington et al. 2008; Barrett 2009). The Reggio Emilia documentation style has also been celebrated as exemplary for using narrative approaches to capture young children’s engagement and learning (Edwards and Rinaldi 2009; Meier and Stremmel 2010a). Narrative researchers also illustrate how varied narrative practices can promote early literacy (Lotherington et al. 2008; Burke 2012), numeracy (Burton 2001), and (cross)cultural competency (Lotherington et al. 2008; Khimji and Maunder 2012).

Teachers

Teacher narratives have also been a primary focus for much of the work occurring in early childhood education. Researchers have documented the use of narrative inquiry in a variety of forms (e.g. memoir, journals, poetry, interviews) to promote reflective practice and advance reflexive negotiation skills of teachers in a range of early childhood teaching and leadership roles (Miller et al. 2008; Hendricks 2013; Caudle et al. 2014; Meier 2008; Meier and Stremmel 2010a; Court et al. 2009; Sing Wong 2003; Wright 2007, 2010; Katch and Katch 2010). These studies take up diverse approaches and topics – for example, Court et al. (2009) develop a narrative history of preschool teachers’ personal and professional lives, Wright (2007, 2010) weaves narratives of teacher identity throughout his representations of young children living complicated lives, and Meier (2008) evaluates a narrative inquiry course for early childhood educators to facilitate insight and reflection. Scholars document how practices of narrative inquiry can be particularly useful for preservice early childhood teacher preparation by fostering reflection on their own schooling and early childhood experiences (Hirsch 2012; Lamorey 2013). Narrative inquiry has also been taken up to evaluate the professional development of early childhood education faculty in higher education (Dietze et al. 2014).

Evaluation

Narrative inquiry has been utilized as a mode of evaluation of early childhood education programmes, particularly New Zealand’s ‘learning stories’ style assessments, which include teacher (and sometimes family) narratives with visual representation (including photos, pictures, storybooks, maps) of the children’s experiences in the classroom (Hatherly 2006) (see Chapter 32). Scholars both applaud the possibilities of exemplars of this approach and raise questions about implications for empowerment, as children’s experiences and representations may be co-opted for adult purposes (Waller and Bitou 2011). Narrative inquiry has also been
used to engage child therapeutic staff in evaluating the quality of their relationships with, and
efforts to promote resilience in and empower, young children (Billington 2012).

**Post-humanist inquiry**

In an emergent, provocative line of scholarship, researchers such as Taylor et al. (2013: 49) push the boundaries of the field of narrative inquiry by using narrative to explore the ‘post-human landscape’ in early childhood by collecting everyday stories of ‘unexpected partners’ that destabilize the conventions of early childhood care and context. Drawing on her own stories and her experience in a Swedish preschool community, Davies (2014) explores how deep, affective listening to and between young children can construct openness to dynamic ways of being and broaden possibilities for becoming. Post-humanist ontologies urge the field of narrative inquiry to move beyond the centrality of human experiences to consider the ‘assemblages’ of people, objects, places, and time and destabilize familiar meanings and narratives about the lives and experiences of young children and their teachers to open up new potentialities (Blaise 2013; Delueze and Guittari 1987; Barad 2007) (see Chapter 17).

As we have shown, narrative inquiry has been applied to the field of early childhood education in varied ways, taking up diverse topics, approaches, and modes of inquiry. Narrative approaches show promise, yet there is further opportunity for developing understandings of the diverse lives and relational experiences of children, families, and teachers engaged in early childhood education. Next we zoom back out from early childhood research to consider the central methodological considerations in the broader field of narrative inquiry.

**Defining narrative and the traditions of narrative inquiry**

The field of narrative research is diverse, dynamic, and expanding. A subfield of qualitative research, narrative inquiry includes a range of epistemological and methodological approaches to research, drawing on theories and methods across the social sciences. Narrative research is most often rooted in humanistic traditions and centres on exploring ‘life experiences as narrated by those who live them’ (Chase 2011: 421). Questioning the positivist notion that we can ‘objectively’ describe experience, narrative researchers often go beyond descriptive accounts to inquire how accounts are constructed (Riessman 2008; Creswell 2013) (see Chapter 20). Narrative researchers aim to more deeply represent the texture of lives often smoothed out by ‘objectivist disciplinary conventions of academia [that] reduce the complexity of goodness of individuals’ lives to patterns, trends, and problems’ (Wright 2007: 168). Some researchers further pull back the curtain of objectivism by explicitly focusing on crafting their own narrative of the research process and findings while eliciting and analysing the stories of their participants (Riessman 2008; Josselson 2007; Behar 1996). Reflecting the strong social justice orientation of the field, narrative researchers often aim to raise the voices of those who are silenced in society, investigate participants’ accounts of social change, or explore how narrative can be used as a tool for social change (Chase 2011; Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Huber et al. 2013; Atkinson 2002). Scholarship under the narrative inquiry umbrella explores a broad and diverse range of social science questions, topics, orientations, and units of analysis.

**What kinds of questions can be investigated through narrative inquiry?**

Given the diversity of perspectives and questions narrative researchers bring to their work, narrative analysis occurs at a variety of levels of inquiry. Across these levels we also see a range
of epistemological approaches and engagement with theory as a tool of interpretation (Holstien and Gubrium 2012). Some narrative researchers focus on individuals negotiating their life stories and identities, often drawing from the field of psychology. At the individual level, some narrative research investigates the relationship between life stories and quality of life (Chase 2011; Clandinin and Rosiek 2007), while others explore the dynamic identity work of narrative (e.g. McAdams et al. 2006). Many narrative researchers investigate the collective, social, and cultural influences on storytelling. Some researchers explore the agency and social constraints individuals encounter in narrative construction. Others deeply engage the cultural and social contexts and discourses that inform narrative practices. Researchers at this level often go beyond interview, utilizing ethnographic approaches to document the local context and resources available for narrative production. Some narrative researchers locate their own narratives of the research process as central to their inquiry (Behar 1996; Rogers 1995). Researchers utilizing this approach aim to shine an analytic light on both the participants and themselves, to explore the reflexive nature of the research process and consider practical or theoretical dilemmas (Holstien and Gubrium 2012).

What kind of data are used in narrative inquiry?

Narrative researchers utilize a range of data in their inquiry including in-depth interviews, everyday talk and storytelling, field notes and researcher observations, historical documents and artefacts (letters, newsletters, reports, diaries, memoir, autobiographical writing, blogs), interpretive accounts by the researcher of original data (e.g. participant profiles derived from interview transcripts), and the responses participants or readers construct after interacting with researchers’ data or interpretations. More recently, visual material, including video diaries, photographs (photovoice), collage, paintings, and maps, has also been included as narrative data. Autoethnography and performance approaches weave together researcher and participant stories and aim to unsettle the power and politics of traditional research data and practices. The definition of narrative data is also operationalized differently along disciplinary lines; for example, sociolinguists focus on discrete units of discourse, precisely transcribed and analysed, while anthropologists may weave together participant life stories from interview texts, artefacts, and field notes.

What analytic approaches are used in narrative inquiry?

While narrative approaches are eclectic and varied, Riessman (2008) identifies four central approaches to narrative analysis that capture the breadth of the field: thematic, structural, dialogic/performance and visual analysis. Below we highlight central elements of each, and we highly recommend Riessman’s 2008 volume for more detailed discussion and powerful exemplars. Narrative scholars often take up and combine multiple analytic approaches.

Thematic analysis is one of the most common approaches to analysing narrative. Researchers identify narratives in their data and look for patterns in the content of the narratives. The approach differs from traditional thematic analysis in qualitative research because rather than coding small chunks of data into categories, narrative scholars explore whole narratives and build theory and interpretation by comparing cases. Narrative content, rather than the narrator and context, is central to this approach.

Structural analysis of narrative attends to the structural components of narrative speech, how narrators build stories and they become whole. Structural analysis takes language seriously and through microanalysis of speech investigates how participants use language to construct
Narrative inquiry: pursuing the promise

histories and identities (Riessman 2008; Labov and Waletzky 1967). Structural analysts unpack narrative complexity by exploring conventional and exceptional narrative forms, and the function of discrete clauses in spoken narrative (Gee 1991; Labov 1982).

Both dialogic and performance analysis traditions explore how speakers interactively produce and perform narrative. These approaches closely attend to the context of narrative production, including setting, social circumstances, and influence of the researcher. Dialogic/performance approaches position narratives as sociocultural artefacts and share an interest in interrogating how reality is constructed through everyday social interaction, within a socio-historical context.

Finally, visual analysis is a relative newcomer to narrative inquiry. Moving beyond a realist approach, researchers utilize both ‘found’ and ‘made’ images, including photos, paintings, collages, videos, and maps, as texts to be interpreted. Researchers investigate how and why images are created and received, often in conjunction with thematic/dialogic interpretation of spoken and written text. Visual approaches are more common in early childhood research perhaps than in other fields, because documentation of learning mixing photos, art, and teacher narratives has a long tradition in early childhood education (Edwards and Rinaldi 2009).

Methodology

Narrative inquiry spans a range of methodological and epistemological traditions and explores research questions at a variety of levels. Narrative researchers draw on methodological approaches from across the social sciences, including life story, case study, biography, lifespan development, ethnography, autoethnography, metanarrative, testimonio, oral history and folklore, historiography, and sociolinguistic analysis, and draw from a range of disciplinary and theoretical traditions (Atkinson 2002; Pinnegar and Daynes 2007). While diverse, narrative inquiry is a case-centred approach. In this section, we explore some confluences in narrative inquiry: focus on particularity, emphasis on transferability, reflexivity of the researcher position, social justice orientation, and particular considerations of in-depth interviewing.

Particularity

Narrative scholars emphasize the importance of the particularity of narratives (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Bruner 1990; Squire 2012). Narrative inquiry is a case-based approach, focused on investigating the narratives of individuals, groups, communities, organizations, and nations (Riessman 2008; Mishler 1996). Narrative researchers maintain this particularity in their analysis by engaging extended narrative accounts as whole analytic units, rather than fragmenting data into thematic categories (though close analyses of specific cases are sometimes combined with more traditional coding in research products). Narratives are rooted in particular contexts, socially constructed within a specific sociocultural and historical moment. The particularity of narratives means that they cannot be reduced to general theories – instead, meaning is located in the specificity of the narrative. However, this characteristic does not preclude the possibility that the research audience will build connections and use the particular cases as lenses for their own inquiry.

Validity and transferability

Traditional notions of validity centre on an objective relationship between researcher and researched, and a search for the ‘truth’ of a phenomenon. However, as discussed above, narrative
researchers do not hold to these positivist conceptions of knowledge (Pinnegar and Daynes 2007). Narrative researchers are not concerned with the veracity of participant accounts, rather they seek to understand the meanings and identities that participants construct through their narratives, to ‘think beyond the surface of a text’ (Riessman 2008: 13). Narrative researchers aim to present a ‘viable interpretation’, rather than ‘control[ing] and predict[ing]’ phenomena (Chase 2011: 424; Pinnegar and Daynes 2007: 30).

Scholars caution narrative researchers to be thoughtful about the production of the research narrative. When researchers present ordered events and experiences, temporality can create a problematic ‘illusion’ of causality, an ‘interpretive force’ that researchers may be tempted to take up (Connelly and Clandinin 1990: 7). Furthermore, writing conventions can lead researchers to engage in ‘narrative smoothing’ that neglects the messiness and contradictions of participants’ stories. Researchers instead acknowledge the potential for multiple interpretations and perspectives, and recognize the influence of their own positioning in the findings they construct (one way this multiplicity can be operationalized is by including cases that do not fit one’s claims, opening the opportunity for readers to take up other interpretive positions).

Finally, narrative research is grounded in the particular, so scholars look for ‘transferability’ rather than generalizability in their research findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Readers can draw from particular cases to make ‘conceptual inferences about social process[es]’ and produce metaphors or heuristics to apply to new contexts, an approach that has a long legacy in sociology and anthropology (Squire 2012).

**Researcher position**

Scholars suggest that narrative research is a close and collaborative process. Researchers often work with research participants in the formulation of the research data (particularly in-depth interviews and observations) and, to varying degrees, consult or collaborate with participants in the analysis and production of research products (Johnson 2002). A predominance of narrative research involves creation and use of in-depth interview data, and scholars suggest that researchers must begin by engaging in deep listening to the participant’s life story to both empower and give voice to participants. Narrative researchers acknowledge their role in the construction of research data, both through their presence as an audience and inquirer in the research interview, and through their interpretation of the research data. Connelly and Clandinin (1990: 5) explain, ‘The two narratives of participant and researcher become, in part, a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry’. In the creation of a research product (most often a paper or book), researchers construct a ‘hybrid story’ about participant narratives through the interpretation, shaping, and editing of participant words into a ‘metastory’ (Riessman 2002b: 226; Wright 2010, 2007).

Narrative researchers acknowledge their active interpretation of narrative data and the role subjectivity plays in the construction of the research and the conveying of meaning. To ensure you ‘do justice’ in your interpretation, Riessman (2002a) advocates engaging reflexively with the data to consider how your social position (race, class, gender, etc.) influences what you see and do not see in your analysis and explore what the research communicates both about the data and about yourself. After giving space for reflection alone and with an interpretive community, Riessman (ibid.) advises being explicit with your readers and communicating the limits of your research.
Narrative inquiry: pursuing the promise

Social justice orientation

Narrative researchers are often ‘compelled by the relationship between their work and possibilities for change and social justice’ and construct research questions rooted in exploring the depths of human understandings of experience, and often engage questions aimed at making the stories and voices of those on the margins more visible (Chase 2011: 427). Many narrative researchers view the research–participant relationship as central to this social justice stance. Narrative researchers view the act of bearing witness to others’ stories as a central, and potentially transforming, element of the research experience. Some see narrative inquiry as a collaborative process in which researchers and study participants partner to construct and ‘re-story’ the research account together. Others emphasize that the process of narrative interpretation can open up new ways for us to understand our experiences by destabilizing dominant, often oppressive ways of understanding.

Narrative researchers connect their work to social justice at a number of levels. Some researchers focus on the healing nature of voicing narratives (e.g. narrative therapy): participants are able to share survival stories or rewrite personal traumas and transform their understanding of themselves and their experiences (Atkinson 2002; Chase 2011; Rogers 1995). Other researchers see their calling as bearing ‘second-order witness’ and sharing the narratives of those on the margins (e.g. testimonios, stories of war refugees, holocaust survivors) (Gergen and Gergen 2007). Some researchers aim to collect and connect individual stories to map broader collective stories of marginalization, and through these collective narratives to spur or support reflection and social change (e.g. mobilizing stories of sexual-abuse survivors to demand social change, Plummer 1995). At the same time, some narrative scholars critique the seeming simplicity of some narrative scholarship that aims to ‘give voice’ to those on the margins, by raising questions about the ethics of co-research with children and the influence of researcher agendas and emotional costs of engaging in narrative inquiry for children and early childhood practitioners (Osgood 2010; Huber and Clandinin 2002; Waller and Bitou 2011). Finally, some researchers use narratives to construct cultural and artistic events (e.g. ethnotheatre), that open up public dialogue and political action. Narrative inquiry can create opportunities for public dialogue on critical social issues through traditional and non-traditional expression of research findings (Chase 2011).

Conclusion

Narrative inquiry represents a paradox in early childhood education scholarship: on the one hand, narratives are essential to the everyday practices of teaching and learning in early childhood settings and, on the other, the narrative inquiry frame has not gained wide purchase within early childhood scholarship, and is noticeably limited among scholars in the USA. We offer this overview of narrative inquiry as foundation for new collaborative spaces within the early childhood education field that can accommodate a variety of post-positivist perspectives and can document the everyday, micro-events in early childhood classrooms and young children’s lives. Our hope is that early childhood researchers will take up the call to engage with and claim membership in the community of narrative researchers, to stimulate broader conversation and collaboration across the field, raise new questions, and open up new narratives and potentials for promoting social justice for children, educators, and communities.

Moving forward, we also call on the current community of narrative researchers in early childhood education to continue to engage and legitimize young children’s perspectives and experiences, to value the sophisticated teaching approaches of reflective practitioners, and to
more deeply consider our own roles as scholars in promoting social justice. We encourage researchers to continue to assess critically the ethics of narrative research with young children. We embrace the potentials of narrative inquiry to resist the tyranny of positivism in the current moment in educational research and policy. We invite researchers to experiment with moving beyond thematic analysis, to explore new narrative inquiry approaches, and epistemological and ontological stances, to open up the stories of early childhood. We call on researchers to discern the affective flows of relationships between children, teachers, and families, and to create room for multiplicities that can spur social change.

References


Narrative inquiry: pursuing the promise


Travis S. Wright and Elizabeth E. Blair


Narrative inquiry: pursuing the promise