

## Narrative Inquiry and Stories— The Value for Early Childhood Teacher Research

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From time immemorial stories have played a vital role in the lives of people around the globe — in every village, region, country, and continent. Stories emerge spontaneously as an integral part of conversations, and in the retelling of events and in ordinary interactions with others. Oral stories have informed and entertained us, captivated our imagination, and linked us to our communal past as well as to our own diverse cultural histories.

— María de la Luz Reyes  
in *Here's the Story*,  
by Daniel Meier

Just as stories help children to grow and learn, so too do stories help us as early childhood educators to observe more keenly, understand children's learning more deeply, and share and grow as adult learners. Stories are also a powerful way to sharpen our inquiry skills, bringing us closer to moments and incidents of learning both for children and for ourselves. As we make a conscious and deliberate effort to embed stories in our daily observations of children at work and play and to use stories as a way to reflect and change our teaching, we elevate stories to the level of teacher growth and educational change. This article provides helpful background information and illustrative examples for educators interested in exploring narrative-based inquiry work.

### Narrative inquiry and stories

Narrative inquiry in qualitative research is a process of studying and understanding experience through storytelling or narrative writing. For Connelly and Clandinin (2000, 2006), pioneers in the field of narrative inquiry, our lives consist of stories. Stories have been referred to as universal mirrors that show us the truth about ourselves—who we are and why we do what we do. When we look into this mirror, we see the ordinary and mundane transformed into the extraordinary and profound (Livo & Reitz 1986). Thus, narrative inquiry, as both a method and phenomenon of study, is a way of thinking about and making sense of experience.

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Through the telling of their stories, practitioner researchers gain insights into what they are doing and why they are doing it.

Those engaged in narrative inquiry study the stories people live and tell, and seek ways to enrich and transform lived experiences for themselves and others. The process of story living and telling, and reliving and retelling, are central themes in narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2006) and Pushor and Clandinin (2009) see connections between narrative inquiry and action research primarily in the sense that both are focused on change and action. For example, both narrative inquiry and action research can make explicit practitioner knowledge gained through the inquiry process. In particular, narrative inquiry enables practitioner researchers to tell the stories of how they have taken action to improve their situations by improving their own learning (McNiff 2007). Through the telling of their stories, they gain insights into what they are doing and why they are doing it. The process provides critical “points of contact” for deepening the curriculum, improving the quality of adult-child interactions, expanding opportunities for play, and seeing more effective ways to observe children and use these reflections for increasing teacher knowledge.

### Narrative and inquiry—Four examples from the field

Teachers who research their classrooms are systematic and deliberate in their use of observation and reflection to make sense of what they see and experience. Reflection involves a teacher’s deliberate scrutiny of his or her own interpretive point of view, rooted in personal and formal theories, culturally learned ways of seeing, and personal core values. Teacher researchers learn about themselves as teachers as they try to understand student learning.

Vivian Paley, perhaps the consummate teacher researcher in early childhood, has written extensively on her remarkable experiences teaching and learning from young children in her classroom. She suggests that teachers who write about their experiences do so because something is going on in their classrooms that they feel compelled to “study closely and ponder grandly” (1997, viii). What goes on is usually something that puzzles and perplexes teachers, something they simply cannot get off their minds. Paley started writing about her classroom because she felt there was simply no other way to listen to herself think.

Teachers, then, are storytellers by virtue of their experiences in the classroom, and they share their stories with others who may benefit from them. As teachers relate their stories, they relive and understand their lives as a series of ongoing narratives, with conflicts, plots, characters, beginnings, middles, and endings. Paley states, “We may learn to simulate in writing the dilemmas, discoveries, and departures that no one else understands in the way we do, but are bidden to return the next day or the next year, stage center front, and try everything out again. The script is always ready to be rewritten, with a new cast of characters in place, and we ourselves are never the same” (1997, viii).







#### Example 4: Narrative as culture and world view

The second author of this essay is working with the director of a Tribal Head Start program who is engaged in narrative inquiry on the history of early childhood education in her tribal community. Among other inquiry methods, the director is using journal entries, autobiography (her personal historical narrative and early childhood philosophy), and orally told stories of elders and tribal leaders. Looking carefully at her notes and journal entries, interview transcripts, personal narrative, and oral stories, she has begun to construct the narrative using story conventions, such as scene and plot, that fit her cultural context.

#### Narrative and educational change

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Narrative enables teachers to tell and relive the stories of their personal and professional experiences. In the process, they can experience shifts and changes in their identities, shifts that create changes in the way they see themselves as teachers or see children as learners. Perhaps there is nothing more important than keeping track of the stories of who we are and of those who have influenced us along the way. In the Tribal Head Start director's project, the story she tells and retells as she continues to collect new data is both hers and the story of those who have lived and remembered what it was like to be educated in her tribe. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note, narrative inquiry produces a mutually constructed story out of the lives of both researcher and participants. It is through our shared stories that we become fully known to ourselves and others, and see new possibilities for educational change.

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