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Narrative Interviewing in Research on the Education of Talented Learners Based on the Own Previous Research

Abstract

The main goal of this article is to demonstrate the significant value of using narrative interviews in research on the education of talented learners. The authors decided to highlight the value of such research in the case of a specific group of learners. However, it might prove valuable to mention the special features of that method and some challenges that can appear in such research.

The authors investigate the importance of applying narrative inquiry, especially narrative interviewing, in research on talented individuals. As for the research approach, it is embedded in qualitative methods. The authors present a retrospective secondary analysis based on their previous research into talented people's experience of education, from an approach of both writer and reviewer.

The introduction contains an outline of the subject of the text. Then, a description of narrative interviews and of talented learners is presented. The research method is also characterized. The previous results regarding talented learners' experience of education are presented. Finally, the research results and recommendations for research practice are provided.

The narrative interview technique proved to be a suitable method for the social sciences. It is appropriate for research on talented learners and their experiences within the educational process. Thanks to narrative interviews, researchers can reveal many important matters, such as learners' intellectual talents and accomplishments, their relationships with themselves and other people, and some important common patterns of their functioning, such as perfectionism or non-conformism. Moreover, the research material can be very rich and researchers can interpret it in very interesting ways so that the readers (educators and parents) can understand this particular group of learners and provide them with a convenient, conducive educational environment. The final section consists of some possibilities for researchers who want to use narrative interviewing as a method of research. The authors suggest obtaining some psychological and interpretative skills and building good relationships with the narrators.

Keywords: narrative research, narrative interview, narrative, narrative researcher, narrator

Introduction

In the American, English, French, and Polish literature on the subject of the qualitative method, many authors address the theme of narrative inquiry (e.g., Wacheux, 1996; Elliott, 2005; Ward, 2003; Clandinin, 2006, 2007; Rubacha, 2008; Soroko, 2009; Norman & Lincoln, 2009; Bertaux, 2010; Kubinowski, 2010; Wertz et al., 2011; Kvale, 2012; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2016; Mertova & Webster, 2020; Caine et al., 2022). Moreover, the issues regarding talented learners are presented (Kamińska, 2021). However, using the narrative method in research on talented learners is a rather new perspective. This makes it useful and interesting, especially in terms of the social and emotional areas of some research. It is already known that the qualitative method, including narrative interviewing, is an integral part of the social sciences. The researchers who are also psychologists and pedagogues adjust the social sciences to reveal the deeper context of many matters of human beings, such as relationships, behavior, feelings,

self-awareness etc. The article constitutes a reflection on previous research. After about six months or so have passed, authors can take a fresh look at their research and can draw current, different, and advanced conclusions, from the perspective of both writer and reviewer. Such an approach might be effective and convenient for other authors who wish to use this method on a group of talented learners or other specific groups of learners.

Selected aspects of narrative interviewing

Narrative interviewing is one of the seven most popular strategies for research in the social sciences (along with phenomenology, ethnography, case research, grounded theory, research in action, and discourse analysis). Narration is a life experience that is verbally depicted, organized in the correct order, and which gives meaning to the events being described. It takes place at a given time and in a specific social situation. Thus, it is characterized by temporality and causality (Elliott, 2005). The biographical method is an analysis of the narrator's story about the events they have experienced. The researcher initiates the discourse. The narrator has complete freedom in interpreting the facts (Wacheux, 1996). This article focuses on a contemporary narrative interview. The authors emphasize the fact that a narrative is a joint effort between the narrator and the researcher. Narratives contain emotions, thoughts, and interpretations. They are very unique.

The more common use of narrative inquiries is associated with a philosophical change, including individuality, which nowadays is perceived as a value. By adjusting their narrative inquiry, researchers can deal with very complex human-centered matters. It is possible to show a broader and deeper context of tasks; a holistic point of view can be obtained. If the narrators are teachers, parents, or students, they can study matters connected to education. Its strengths and shortcomings can be revealed, which is very important for educators. From a broader perspective, narrative inquiries show the story of human consciousness and thoughts (Mertova & Webster, 2020).

Narration is both a method and a phenomenon. It can be helpful in understanding a person's individual behavior or social issues. The meeting of the researcher and the narrator is dynamic; it can bring about a change in their relationship, self-perception, and social outlook. A particular atmosphere is created during the meeting that is very unique and therefore allows one to produce unique research material (Clan-dinin, 2007).

Since the introduction of narrative interviewing into empirical research, the biographical approach has developed significantly. This refers to all studies in which a life history appears as a medium for studying individual paths of development or the achievements of the subjects under study. A life story is based on the narration of the subject when trying to give an account of their experiences. Through narration, each person builds their own identity, through which they want to be recognized. The idea is history, which is the whole life of the narrator, starting with their birth or perhaps even with the history of their parents, family traditions, and customs. It describes the inner life and actions of the individual, as well as the interpersonal and social context in which they find themselves (Bertaux, 2010). A person's narrative is rooted in the broader social context in which that person lives. Therefore, it is related to a certain philosophy chosen by that particular society and community. The teller is situated in a larger setting, which determines their choices and the way they tell their story (Caine et al., 2022).

People understand their lives through the prism of their story, binding individual events into a coherent plot. In the individual stories that are told, personal threads of other people, communities, and even societies are interwoven. Therefore, the narration is natural for the narrators. Also, it is a popular activity among researchers, one that is associated with the desire to understand someone's perspective on life. Narrative research is grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethnography, and literary analysis. It is symbolic and psychoanalytical. What distinguishes it from quantitative research is the fact that the research material is represented in words and that it is used for the benefit of understanding humankind's deep and complex nature (Wertz et al., 2011).

The narrative and the self-narrative have gained the name of narrative research (narrative inquiry) and are classified as a qualitative approach. A narrative is recognized as a product (narrative story), which is a configuration of events over time. It consists of three main parts (beginning, development, and ending). Events and actions are related temporally, intentionally, and through cause and effect; their configuration expresses the way that the author interprets the events. Self-narrative (e.g., one's life story or some aspect of it), as a product, is the narrator's story about themselves. Narration as a process, on the other hand, is the act of telling other people or oneself (internal dialogue) about events in order to give them meaning. The process of self-narration can be defined as integrating heterogeneous knowledge about oneself in a narrative way (Soroko, 2009).

The subject of a narrative interview can be the whole life of the narrator, in which case it is a biographical interview. The researcher can reconstruct the meanings that the subject gives to reality about different content, at different levels (cognitive, emotional, and moral), and due to diverse contexts. Biographical interviews are not conducted so as to reconstruct someone's biography, but to construct an answer to the question that guides the study. For this reason, a biographical or narrative interview provides much more extensive material than a researcher can use. However, the point is to see the variables under study from a broader perspective (Rubacha, 2008). Narrative research is an activity that places the observer in the world of the narrator. It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

A person's life experience can be understood thanks to a narrative. It gives the researcher insight into how the person constructs the world of their life and how they perceive what happens to them. Moreover, thanks to narrative discourse, the researcher can find something unique in the person's activity, not what is common and popular (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2016).

Narratives allow the researcher to investigate the motivations, attitudes, and aspirations of other people, as well as the elements that play an important role in the individual's life. It makes it possible to handle

consecutive events and provide information about how a given individual copes with the situation of social changes. The narrator, recalling their past, attempts to reconstruct their biography. It is also significant that the narration allows the researcher to understand all manifestations of human actions – from their individual and social conditions to individual and collective consequences – showing the relationship between the individual and their environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Moreover, narratives are perceived as a separate form of discourse because they are a retrospective construction of meanings. They can be valuable to the narrator because of their shape and they can organize past experiences. They can become a way of understanding one's own and others' actions (Kubinowski, 2010).

Narrative intelligence is described by the following five characteristics: equality, interdependence, community, participation, and integrity. Equality means that both the researcher and the narrator influence the course of the study. Interdependence means that both the researcher and the narrator can change their mind. Community is connected with the atmosphere of the meeting, which determines the bond between the participants and decides to a significant extent the course of the study and the quality of its results. The last category, integrity, relates to the fact that the participants of the dialogue involve many factors in it, such as their way of thinking, views, attitudes, and the world of values (Jacob, 2003).

Narrative interviews focus on the stories that are told by the narrators. These stories may appear spontaneously during an interview or they may be provoked by the researcher. Interview as a narrative is associated with an emphasis on its social and semantic formation. With knowledge of narrative structures, a researcher can also take care of the development of time sequences, focus on who is the hero of the story, and capture the main plot, the elements of tension, conflicts, and solutions (Kvale, 2007).

Narrative research has three dimensions. The first is the interpersonal dimension, which takes into account the interactions between the researcher and the narrator. The second is the temporal dimension, which is based on the continuity of the past, present, and future. The third is the

spatial dimension, which is related to the fact that each experience occurs in a specific place, environment, and context (Clandinin, 2006).

The important fact is that there is a close relationship resulting from the common subject of interest between pedagogy and biographical research. Educational and didactic activities always have a personal dimension. Education is a form of accompaniment in biography and thus constructs the biographies of individuals. In the life stories that are told, one can recognize the results of pedagogical processes and educational interactions; the activity of educators (parents and teachers) therefore also falls within the scope of interest. The paradoxes of pedagogical interventions, the differences between the official goals and education programs, and the individual experiences of learners are evident. All this means that working with autobiographical material which adopts the perspective of the participants in the educational process changes the perspective on pedagogical practice (Jacob, 2003).

Description of talented learners

From a psychological perspective, even though talented learners are eloquent, read extensively (possess and use rich vocabulary), and learn very quickly (faster than an average student their age), they sometimes cannot cope with their strong emotions. They are highly sensitive people. Some talented learners are perfectionists and many are non-conformists. They are imaginative and original. They obtain very good academic results and win competitions. Generally, they are recognized as top students and amazing people. They show their passion to learn a great deal. Some of them are great leaders, charismatic friends, and effective and assertive communicators. Some of them are shy and isolated. The teachers that are not prepared to work with them claim that they ask too many questions, are too independent, or are even rebellious. They can spend hours cultivating their interests and passions. To conclude, talented learners are different. They vary from other students and each other. However, there are some common characteristic patterns of their

functioning, such as the intrinsic motivation to learn, an ambition to be the best at school, and work (Kamińska, 2021).

Previous research on talented learners – Using secondary data

This study follows the interpretative paradigm and qualitative methods. It involves highly talented learners who passed the graduation exam with a nearly perfect score (98% or 99%). The narrative interviews were used to discover the educational experiences of talented learners. The subject of that inquiry is the narrative interview used in the case of the education of that specific group of learners (Kamińska, 2021). The experience was an occasion for deeper reflection on such research.

The research method

Qualitative methods are used in the article. A reflective analysis of the previous research of the authors on talented people's experience of education is presented, from the perspective of both a writer and a reviewer. The authors adjusted the second analysis of the data that is useful and appropriate for qualitative research and narrative inquiry (Zamawe, 2015).

The aim of the article is to show the value of using narrative interviewing in research on the education of talented learners. The main research question was "What are the values of narrative interviewing in research on the education of talented learners?" Other specific questions were also connected to the main question:

"Does narrative interviewing depict the intellectual capabilities and scholastic success of talented learners?"

"Does narrative interviewing show the social and emotional patterns (relationships and their emotions/feelings) of talented learners?"

"Does narrative interviewing reveal the specific, common psychological/pedagogical categories of the functioning of talented learners?"

“Is narrative interviewing useful to provide educators with a better understanding of such learners?”

“Does narrative interviewing allow researchers to individualize their research?”

The results and conclusions

To answer the main research question, the role of narrative interviewing in research on talented learners is significant. It proved to be a very effective qualitative method. Authors can receive valuable research material and be able to draw novel conclusions, including the outcomes for future research practice.

As for the specific questions, the authors found that the narratives fully revealed intellectual talents. The subjects talked about their school and academic success, such as their awards in competitions. They demonstrated their eloquence and rich vocabulary during the interviews.

The narrators revealed the main patterns of their relationships with themselves and with other people (siblings, parents, teachers, and friends). They showed their attitude toward their relatives and educators. They talked at length about their emotions and social situations that were sometimes challenging and stressful. They seemed to be quite aware of their feelings and emotional state. Some of them declared that they were able to cope with difficult emotions. A minority of them claimed that they had had a demanding life experience that changed their approach toward their priorities and values.

The research material obtained through the narrative interviews contained much essential information connected to narrative codes, such as perfectionism or non-conformism. Such crucial data could not have been obtained through quantitative methods. Thanks to this method, the readers (parents and educators) were able to identify the life stories of the talented learners and to accept their behavior. They were able to learn more about their special educational needs and to adjust the learning environment.

In the process of analysis, some important matters regarding narrative interviewing appeared in connection with the authors' previous research on the experience of education of talented learners. First of all, thanks to that method they obtained some unique, original, and outstanding research material that would not have been possible using a standardized survey (quantitative method), for example. The narrators revealed very interesting, personal details from their lives. The narratives were both personal and diverse. In the authors' research, there were nine narrators and the plot of each narrative was different.

Moreover, a researcher can perceive more significant elements of behavior, body language, and tone of voice. This leads to a better understanding of the narrators and a richer analysis. Using qualitative methods such as narrative interviewing, a researcher can make their own subjective interpretation; this is an advantage of this method. However, the researcher should not overinterpret the research material. The researcher becomes a narrator themselves. The narrator and the researcher are combined, immersed in a common story. They make that story up together and for a time they have a special relationship. In the case of two other people, this relationship would be different. The researcher initiates that meeting, relationship, and narrative. They invite the narrators to confide in them.

The narrative can be therapeutic, especially for the narrators. They can show their true feelings and emotions, reveal their opinions about important matters, and tell more about their lives. They do not have to hide these facts any longer. They get the attention of the researcher. The narrators from the previous research emphasized that the narratives helped them release some tension and understand themselves better. The narrative is a kind of inimitable performance.

As for the process of interpreting the research material, the researcher read some specific structures and terms of the subject to reach deeper levels of meaning. Moreover, they search for some peculiar, common narrative codes, symbols, and traces. These give the narratives a "common denominator" – situating them on common ground. However, one should not perceive this as a generalization.

The narrators are creative. No two narratives are the same. As for the process of narration, a narrator is asked a general question, for example, “How was your educational path?” Then, they weave their original story. It depends on them which threads they wish to build and which facts they decide to omit. Furthermore, the whole process of research using narrative interviewing is innovative. During the narration, both the researcher and the narrator are in a productive process of creation. The researcher should be aware that meeting with the narrator can be very influential. Through this dialogue, they might change their mind, opinions, and perception on the subject matter. The researcher also influences the narrator. To conclude, they can discover knowledge and find solutions.

Moreover, based on the data collected and analyzed, the researcher can construct new research questions establishing unexplored areas of study. The research of someone’s life story using narrative interviewing might go beyond the case of the narrator. Due to their individual history, the researcher can find an area that is much more universal.

Recommendations for future research

First of all, there are some significant steps of narrative interviewing: preparing for the research, finding narrators that are suitable for the research, building a relationship with the narrators, conducting the interviews, preparing the interpretation, and interpreting and weaving together the results. All of these steps are essential; they should occur in the given order. As for preparing for the research, the researcher has to study the literature on the subject so as to know it very well. It is not very easy to locate narrators, but it is possible. They should know the subject of the research before they agree to participate. They ought to be informed that the research is anonymous and helpful for educators. The researcher should hold the interview in a convenient and peaceful place. The narrators need time to develop their stories. Preparing for the interpretation is quite a long process, in which the researcher listens to the recordings of the interviews and then reads the transcripts. They determine the most meaningful plots

and try to find the “narratives codes,” or common patterns. The conclusions should be extensive, original, and significant.

At the beginning of such research, the researcher should realize how important their role in it is. Their awareness of their personal story, talents, boundaries, and difficulties is very important. The researcher faces the challenge of answering some significant questions concerning one’s perception of the world and the potentiality of its recognition.

One of the most relevant issues in narrative interviewing is a suitable relationship with the narrators. The more authentic, understanding, and patient the researcher is, the more effective the narrative becomes. The researcher should create a suitable environment and atmosphere during the interview. This is quite a demanding task, so they should have some specific psychological and pedagogical abilities.

Moreover, one should remember that certain questions can stir up difficult or even traumatic memories for the narrators, so they should be considerate and gentle. The researcher is obliged to know themselves very well and to control their reactions to difficult facts and tasks. They should be aware of any demanding situations from their own past. The researcher should be a good listener and should not ask too many additional questions. The main initial question is enough. This opens up a space for a particular story and the creativity of the narrators.

The researchers should be perceptive in order to trace specific narrative codes and to reveal new subject matter. First of all, they should possess profound knowledge about the subject of the research. They should be particularly interested in it. Furthermore, recognizing the uniqueness of the human psyche is a great advantage.

Some other tips for the researcher would be to remember that their role is complementary in the relationship with the narrator. The research is not closed. The best way to obtain research material is during a face-to-face meeting with a narrator (not online or over the telephone). The researcher ought to have an “observation diary” in which to write down details immediately after the meeting.

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