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## Narrative Analysis in the Development of Teachers' Reflective Skills

(pp. 211–227)

### Abstract

**Objectives of the research:** The aim of the theoretical research is to elicit the meaning of improving narrative competence, particularly narrative analysis for developing teachers' reflective skills.

**Research issues or problems:** The research question is posed as follows: Can a narrative, narrative analysis in particular, foster development of teachers' reflective skills, and if so, how?

**Research methods:** The method used in the research is hermeneutic analysis, which matches the field of content narrative analysis.

**A short description of the context of the issue:** The content analyzed in the text is descriptions of narrative, narrative competence, and narrative analysis, as well as reflective skills such as being, disclosing speaking, testing, and probing – according to concept of Joseph Raelin, to some extent. An important goal of the research is to show the significant meaning of narrative competence, especially narrative analysis, for developing reflective skills by teacher–practitioners. The relationships between narrative, narrative analysis, and improving these skills can induce the need to add another skill, such as an implicative one, that would be crucial for further personal and professional development towards achieving a higher level of self-identity.

**Process of argumentation:** The research began the selection of an appropriate scope of terms which match one another and can achieve the aim and answer the research question. The analysis of these terms led to building

the relationships between narrative, narrative competence, and reflective skills, followed by narrative analysis and reflective skills that are important for personal and professional teacher development. That resulted in some implications that may be useful in educating teachers and students and for education in general.

**Findings:** The results show the importance of the relationship between the aspects described above. Additionally, original, result occurred in creating a new reflective skill, such as the implicative one dedicated to further self-development.

**Conclusions and recommendations:** The hermeneutic analysis revealed a correlation between the development of a teacher's narrative competence, particularly narrative analysis, and practicing reflective skills. However, further research is needed to bring about changes in educating both teachers and students, which demands attention be paid to the authentic reflective/narrative approach in practice. This could be reflected in core curriculum subjects in university and secondary school education.

*Keywords:* narrative; narrative competence; narrative analysis; reflective skills; teacher

## Introduction

The issue of narratives attracts the attention of many researchers and educators from various disciplines and educational environments. They discover or rediscover its meaning for human development, which requires self-knowledge and narrative self-reflection of the individual's personal and professional identity, including teachers. Marta Krupska, aligning reflection with narratives, claims that self-knowledge can not only disclose personal identity with the use of narrative, but in a personal narrative, the human being can be responsible for the way they have developed as a person, and who they have become (Krupska; 2022; Van Manen, 1997; Van Manen, 2016). Thus, narratives can be seen as an important factor that impacts educational activity (Barone, 2007), which implies the need to improve the narrative competences at each level of education, starting with

elementary education. Thus, attention must be paid to developing teachers' narrative skills both academically and practically. The meaning of narratives in teachers' work seems to be significant, as narratives hold educational, pedagogical, and therapeutic meaning. This justifies the aim of the article, which is to elicit and better understand the correlation between the development of teachers' reflective skills through narrative analysis. It is assumed that the latter impacts the former, requiring that a narrative relationship be built between teachers and students and that they listen attentively, trust, are open to each other, and most of all have true commitment to matters emerging from oral or written narratives. Teachers can facilitate their students' mature identity, as they learn how to implement the principles of narratives and identity into their lives, which entails constructing a narrative about narratives (Bruner, 2004; Trzebiński, 2002; Czyż & Sobczak, 2022). This in turn requires that reflective skills are developed, such as being, disclosing, speaking, testing, and probing (Raelin, 2012; Szymańska, 2021) and that constructive implications are built, which can emerge from narrative analysis. These issues, analyzed from a theoretical/hermeneutic perspective, seem to be crucial in the research process and in answering the research question: Can narratives, particularly narrative analysis, foster the development of teachers' reflective skills, and if so, how? Understanding this can help in formulating implications for teacher education, remembering that "basic narratives can carry a load of ambiguity and therefore leave openings for negotiating meaning" (Czarniawska, 1998, p. 3) and can open space for creativity. Such research can help uncover the correlation between mastering narrative analysis skills and developing the teachers' reflective skills, as well.

### **Narrative and its Place in Developing Teachers' Reflective Skills**

Depicting the meaning and role of narrative analysis in developing teacher's reflective skills entails the need to analyze the narrative and its position. Thus, the characteristics of narrative analysis require some references to selected terms of "narrative" from different researchers dealing

with this issue. Amelia Krawczyk-Bocian (2019), who has overviewed the wide scope of this literature, sees a *narrative* as a peculiar meeting of the narrator with the Self; a meeting that takes place between the researcher and the narrator during the research process; an area for understanding an individual's life story; a retrospective journey into the world of experiences; something that gives meaning to experienced events through the perspective of time; and a platform for reconstructing a life and the ability to understand what happened. Another researcher worth mentioning is Leena Aarikka-Stenroos (2010), who thoroughly analyzes the concepts of narrative by Riessman (2002) and Elliott (2005), among others. She writes that "narrative crosses the usual disciplinary boundaries: it has been taken up as a useful analytic tool by researchers with very diverse backgrounds, such as psychology, history, sociology, philosophy, literacy research and linguistics, in which narratives have long tradition" (2010). Therefore,

the term "*narrative*" carries many meanings, and is used in a variety of ways by different disciplines, often synonymously with *story* ... the narrative scholar (pays) analytic attention to how the facts got assembled that way. For whom was this story constructed, how was it made and for what purpose? What cultural discourses does it draw on – take for granted? What does it accomplish? (Riessman & Speedy, 2007, pp. 428–429)

In light of the article's theme, it seems necessary to note that teachers become researchers in their own field of education, even if they are not clearly aware of it. While realizing that their way of thinking resembles a scientific, critical one, they face the challenge of changing their approach to the process of education, in which personal empowerment determines it. Thus, teachers who understand the meaning of narrative in the educational process may acknowledge that narratives are the source of knowledge about students, their needs, and developmental potential in the areas of emotions, feelings, mentality, and interpretative competences revealed in the process of understanding different events and with the use of



a particular, individual emotional/cognitive filter. It demands a reflective approach to the process of education, thanks to which they can help their students know themselves better and understand the creation of a life that fosters individual, narrative identity and in which the person simultaneously becomes the writer and the reader of their own story (Ricoeur, 1992, 1987; Czyż & Sobczak, 2022). This seems to justify the point of view presented by Aarikka-Stenroos (2010) that narrative, from an ontological perspective, can be seen not only as a life story, but as an essential human behavior and a specific mode of thinking that makes it possible to organize and transfer knowledge into a narrative structure with a concrete form. This point of view is found in the concepts of narrative by Jerome Bruner (1986), Roy Williams (2006), or Michael Bamberg (2012), who claims that

narratives are about people (*characters*), who act (*events*) in *space* and *time*, typically across a sequence of events (*temporality*). The narrative form (structure) is said to hold the content together (what the story is about – its plot) and sequentially arrange the story units (*orientation, complication, resolution, closure*) into a more or less *coherent whole*. (Bamberg, 2012, p. 203)

Therefore, it entails the need to structuralize the life story, or a part of it, considering such elements as “actors, actions, motives and scene which create characters and setting” (Aarikka-Stenroos, 2010), placed in a concrete time and an individual, social, and cultural context, which should comprise the plot of the story. The structure of the narrative should include six elements: an abstract (a short summary), the orientation (time, place, situations, and participants), a complicating action (what just happened), an evaluation of the action’s meaning and significance, the resolution (what finally occurred), and the coda (the ending and the exit). However, it can be looser, according to the given narrator’s concept (Elliott, 2005; Aarikka-Stenroos, 2010), although the teacher/researcher should monitor whether the narrative has a beginning, middle, and ending and whether the plot goes according to some basic assumptions. Furthermore, narrative features such as temporality, causality, subjectivity,

or spontaneity cannot be neglected by the teacher while working on the Self, particularly towards the development of such reflective skills as being, disclosing, speaking, testing, and probing through the narrative and narrative analysis, which will be analyzed more in depth below. In this context, regarding narrative as self-understanding appears crucial for opening up horizons and experience space for meetings between human beings, who express themselves through narrative in a dialogical, communicative way. That is why acquiring research and narrative competences becomes a challenge for researchers and teachers, as well (Krawczyk-Bocian, 2019). In this context, Krawczyk-Bocian (2019) directs her attention to the essence of human reflection, the ability to re-create experiences in an individual biography, and the interpretation of one's experiences. This can help foster narrative competences, which in turn improves reflective skills.

Anna Czyż and Marta Sobczak (2022) claim that narrative competence does not mean only the ability to create a characteristic story, to gain and construct knowledge about the world, but first of all, it can be discussed in terms of creating a place in the space of psychological and pedagogical assistance for confronting and experiencing events and understanding the mechanisms and consequences of the educational subjects' actions. They explain that the development of narrative competence is borrowed from the psychotherapeutic relationship, modified according to the school's needs, which comprise the psychological and pedagogical support given to students. Examining both the causes and consequences of events and the possibilities and meaning of solutions and their implications in the course of life requires that two different but complementary positions be acknowledged: the person telling the story and the person supporting the story. Supporting narrative competence is centered on the ability to build a description, i.e. moving from a sparse (poor) to a dense (rich) description, expanding and connecting threads, contextualizing the story (understanding the meaning and functions of given events in a specific reality and with various variables), and understanding the dynamics of the course. Czyż and Sobczak's general description of narrative competence matches Nicola Grove's (2022) point of view:

Personal narratives, as should be evident, are told not only to convey information logically and sequentially, but also as contributions to complex networks of social relationships, and the essence of the story is its meaning to the participants. Structural and linguistic skills are of course vitally important, but so too are collaborative, poetic, affective, and embodied narrative strategies. (p. 235)

Taking for granted that narrative ability, regardless of the type of story (big or small), can be regarded as “a key contributor to a sense of positive identity, empathetic friendship, community, and belonging” (Grove, 2022, p. 225), this can be revealed in both the content and structure of a narrative, even if it concerns fictional or real, big or small stories, which concern personal experiences (Grove, 2022; Bamberg & Georgapoulou, 2008). Grove (2020) – referring to Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps (2001), Dorien Van De Mieroop (2021), and Carol Westby and Barbara Cullatta (2016) – writes that

big stories focus on significant life events and are usually generated through interviews or biographical presentations. Small stories are defined as anecdotes told in passing, embedded in conversation and often co-narrated. These stories serve multiple functions including entertainment, empathizing, sense making, identity negotiation, and problem solving, and they are extremely common in everyday talk by both children and adults. (p. 225)

Being aware of the meaning of narratives and narrative skills in their educational relationship with students and other educational partners, teachers seem bound to develop narrative competences, first of all, in themselves, which in turn means mastering the reflective skills described above. This demands that a self-reflective approach be formed, shaped in the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transactional dimension with the use of narrative techniques, paying attention to the meaning of words treated as transmitters of content rimmed in a logical, clear structure

(Szymańska, 2021). The ability to tell small or big stories can be enhanced by developing these reflective skills, as well as reflective competences. The classification of reflective skills by Joseph Raelin (2012) fits with the classification of reflective thinking skills for teachers by Hamidreza Kashefi, Fariba Mirzaei, and Fatin Aliah Phang (2014), who describe them as “observation, communication, team working, judgment, and decision making” (p. 633). Working on these skills entails deploying reflective thinking tools such as recording, writing, drawing, photography, journalling, making portfolios, action research, collaborative participative inquiry, etc. (Mirzaei et al., 2014). Mirzaei et al. (2014) state that “using reflective thinking tools are an important way to support teachers’ reflective thinking skills. Teachers can use these reflective thinking tools during their teaching processes to develop their reflective thinking skills” (p. 636) and to enhance the narrative abilities and competences, which also indicates the meaning of narrative and reflective analysis for integral teacher development (Szymańska, 2018).

Considering the perspective of developing reflective skills in narratives, a teacher should also know how to construct their own reflective story, enabling them to analyze, interpret, draw conclusions, and formulate implications for further development, which are connected not only with narrative skills for developing the reflective ones, but also with improving narrative competences. They can be expressed in an oral (self-dialogical) or written form. They can be documented in a diary, personal journal, etc. for further self-supervision. First of all, according to Raelin (2012), narratives demand elaboration of the reflective skill *being* that “forces” the teacher in some way to ask themselves about their vocation and its fulfillment, both now (temporally) and over one’s whole life, and in the individual, situational, sociocultural field. The teacher can develop this skill by referring narratively to actors, interacting with the Self in events that are significant for the Self and occur in a concrete time. Deepening the search inside the Self within the development of this skill provides the teacher/researcher with valuable information that helps build the real and ideal image of the Self in various unpredicted dimensions. The teacher can pose personal questions to the Self regarding different

aspects of their work within the area of being. Making an attempt to answer them can help solve many problems, especially when they employ creative strategies. The second skill – *disclosing* – requires an attempt to give the meaning to one's thoughts, doubts, and the like. It takes place through deeply searching the essence of what appears while concentrating on objects of *being* outlined in multifaceted perceptive perspectives. Additionally, working on *disclosing* has a formative and therapeutic function. It induces the need for precisely, consciously defining and redefining the processes run inside the Self. Disclosing an approach to many aspects of personal and professional life using elements and principles of narrative analysis can help the teacher develop integrally and harmoniously, which requires a logical, methodological, scientific, and emotional commitment to work on the Self (Kunowski, 2000). Developing this skill determines the third reflective skill: *speaking* improvement. What, when, and how to share one's thoughts, experiences, and reflections demands wisdom, reasonability, and clarity to be understood by the Self and others. Here, practicing the parameters (content; quality, quantity, and frequency; the borders of mutuality and an assessment of benefits and costs; the interpersonal perception of partners; the grade of trust that each partner gives the relationship with others) while building relationships with others (Fontana, 2002) on the dialogical path can prove useful. They can foster the implementation of the intersubjectivity principle (Bruner, 1996) into fruitful bonds between educational subjects. A teacher with this mature skill applies the creative facility attitude to educational practice. Thus, the hypothesis can be posed that the development of a teacher's narrative competences enhances their reflective speaking skill. The teacher becomes a reflective practitioner in the aspect of speaking. They can actively focus on content structured in a logical, methodological, scientific way, and can depict it professionally to make a positive, transactional transfer of information widely perceived from a deposit of knowledge, experience, etc. Such internally exposed thoughts/feelings along with the use of creative/narrative strategies and methods can have an impact not only on the Self, revising what has been spoken and how, but also on other participants of the educational process, as well. This is tied with the fourth



reflective skill, called *testing*, aligned with self-assessment, which begins with development of the reflective speaking skill. *Testing* demands awareness and courage to face the truth about the Self in relation to oneself, others, God, and the world. The truth emerges from the relational and transactional Self while defining the existential content of being, overwhelming the borders upon truth while disclosing and speaking, which leads to improvement in the skill of *probing*, that deepens self-assessment in the inner space of forming a narrative identity. Narrative identity formation is accompanied by constant drama, as it takes place within harmony and temporal dissonance; real and fictional stories lived and told; a contrasting area of innovation and sedimentation; definition of the factual (neutral) state and the morally expected one expressing “what ought to be”; self-identity (*ipse*), supported by *idem* and self-maintenance; self-affirmation and self-rejection; and the author and the reader of the story (Laitinen, 2002).

To sum up, narratives (big or small ones), narrative abilities, and skills that enable good narrating can help develop reflective skills, which are important for mature growth supporting the human integral development oriented towards the inner and outer domain of the Self, who pursues the creation and construction of a narrative identity on the unique, significant path of achieving human maturity. This requires critical thinking that allows a person to face the truth about the Self, others, and the world. One of the factors determining this process of growth in maturity is the development of narrative analysis skills to be used in the development of reflective skills, that can reveal the truth of personal and social elements in the world. This way, the correlation between mastering both narrative competences – in particular, in the narrative analysis field – and reflective skills can indicate their role and meaning for forming a narrative, reflective teacher personality.



## **Narrative Analysis as a Tool that Enhances the Teacher's Reflective Skills**

Considering all the above, it appears obviously necessary to focus on narrative analysis, then on the relationship between it and the reflective skills described above. It is worth noting that although a narrative can provide the data gathered intentionally, it often happens that unexpected data emerge, enriching the results and exposing the active feature of narrative data, in contrast to passive research data (Aarikka-Stenroos, 2010; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). In this light, it can be implied that the competent teacher/researcher feature with creative openness leaves a space for students in a positive, relaxed atmosphere to foster their creative thinking. This activeness can support the development of the personal and social entity. Nevertheless, the researcher/teacher cannot ignore the fact that negative narratives appear to have a negative impact, not only on individual students but also on the whole surrounding community. Moreover, they cannot ignore “that ‘positive’ narratives can be a weapon – in arousing interest, developing the understanding of concepts and scientific processes, and in encouraging a person to participate in scientific processes” (Rostek, 2019, p. 43). The teacher decides what way of conveying a narrative suits them better; is appropriate for the educational goal; and matches their interest in the content (needing to concentrate on actual events and experiences) connected with categorial analysis, structure, form aligned with the analytical frame of narrative, and performance of the narrative that can be analyzed, for example, in an interactional or institutional context (Aarikka-Stenroos, 2010; Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2002; Leijon & Söderbom, 2008). The variety of teacher's and students' narrative interests seems to determine, to some extent, the trajectory of the educational process, where a particular kind of narrative analysis can prove useful in solving problems, particularly in the field of upbringing. Considering the meaning of narrative analysis for improving reflective skills, the focus on this issue is justified, especially in reference to Bamberg's assumption (2012) that “narrative analysis lays open, in the sense of making transparent, how narrators uses narrative means to give (narrative) form and thereby make

sense of events and experiences” (p. 92). This proves significant in the content/structural narrative approach that treats a narrative as a narrator’s specific/reflective meeting with the Self (Krawczyk-Bocian, 2019). Such an approach requires the competence of self-reflective narrative analysis of the big or small story told by the Self, designated by the order of reflective skills and the content documented or recorded in an appropriate time for the narrator. Thus, it can be assumed that the story comprises content that reveals the Self in an intrapersonal, interpersonal, and transactional dimension that refers to the chosen object of “formal” analysis, whose source can be any artifact or piece of literature matching the teacher’s interest. A story presented in a journal, diary, or essays, for example – in the sequence of reflection upon being, disclosing, speaking, testing, and probing – becomes a new source of the critical meta-knowledge about personal, pedagogical, and professional development. It indicates the need to introduce another reflective skill relating to narrative analysis, which can be the implicative one that is to help in managing the individual or collective program for further development. Such a narrative approach elicits the role and meaning of the narrative analysis in shaping and developing the reflective skill, for it comprises the following:

- existential and metaphysical aspects of self-being in the axiological/anthropological perspective of integral development (biological, psychological, sociological, cultural, and spiritual) while eliciting strong, weak, and natural sides of the Self;
- the way and level of disclosing the Self in-depth to the Self and others;
- obstacles and challenges important for maturing and experiencing “being” the Self;
- the scope and richness of figurative language, enabling the teacher to give an appropriate meaning to words conveyed as transmitters of the content disclosed to the Self and others;
- a “true” approach inquiry oriented towards self-assessment in the range of the content mentioned above;
- the quality of in-depth probing in all dimensions already analyzed, leading to conclusions and implications for further work on the Self

in intra-action and interaction with the surrounding environment and indicating the areas of the objects for reflective narrative content analysis.

Quality probing of the analyzed content can elicit the central points of analysis that could be re-analyzed as research categories placed on some research layers of the analysis. Thus, it appears crucial to point out that narrative coherence, its credibility, and its dialogic character contribute to another determinant of a good narrative: a narrative experience (Krawczyk-Bocian, 2019) that enriches the narrative analysis in correlation with the development of reflective skills. This can improve the narrative competences, as it demands careful observation, self-observation, and analysis: synthesis skills, logic, coherence, interpretation skills, building conclusions and implications, creative thinking, and management skills. A teacher who develops such competences can become a coach for the Self on the path of disclosing deeper and deeper dimensions of their own identities, especially the narrative one.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

All in all, producing a narrative and conducting narrative analysis with particular narrative methods or techniques requires that the teacher/researcher be reflective, open-minded, and creatively critical and to have an analytical/synthetical attitude in managing educational processes to foster personal and social development. However, proceeding in such development demands changes in the educational system, particularly in wisely selecting material for the core curricula, leaving space for reflective skill development aligned with improving narrative competences that support the educational subject's development. The aspects of narrative, narrative competence, and narrative analysis in reference to reflective skills seem to be crucial for constructing one's Self-identity. As Bamberg (2020), writes,

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identity is a second-order theoretical construct, implying that identities (plural – as first-order concepts) are constructed and continuously reconstructed in everyday interactive processes. The term *identities* is used to enable the empirical investigation of how people and organizations are able to gain a sense of self, and give answers to the who-am-I question – engaging interactively in identity work. (p. 262)

Answering this question, particularly for teachers, can deepen their self-knowledge of their sense of vocation, which requires a space for developing reflective skills through narratives that support the formation of a narrative identity. In this context, the meaning of narrative analysis that emerges cannot be ignored, as it is one of the narrative competences. That is why, at least, the workshops or seminars in this field seem to be inevitable for educators, who can include practice of reflective skills and narrative competences into the core curricula. They can support the process of wise, critical, creative, and transformative incorporation of declarative knowledge into pragmatic knowledge. Such an approach can elicit the meaning of narration, as Irmina Rostek (2019) claims: “the most important mission to be played by narration in the world of science is the one related to promoting the idea of ‘science for everyone’ – irrespective of gender, the environment from which the learner comes, regardless of his (or her) age” (p. 47).

All in all, the research material presented above in the hermeneutical analysis accents the need to elicit the role and meaning of mastering the narrative analysis skills or competences for developing the teacher’s reflective skills, which are significant for a teacher’s integral development perceived on a personal and professional level. That is why the research problem addressed herein “calls” for action to care for the future generations.

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