



# MENON

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Journal Of Educational Research

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Ἐχεις μοι  
εἰπεῖν, ὦ  
Σώκρατες, ἄρα  
διδάκτων ἢ  
ἀρετῆ; ἢ οὐ  
διδάκτων ἀλλ'  
ἀσκητόν; ἢ οὔτε  
ἀσκητόν οὔτε  
μαθητόν, ἀλλὰ  
φύσει  
παραγίγνεται  
τοῖς ἀνθρώποις  
ἢ ἀλλω τινὶ  
τρόπῳ

Florina, July 2012

Issue 1

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## From another('s) view point – narrative approaches in special educational research

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### Abstract

In the current debate about evidence based education comparisons between countries are in focus. Learning and teaching are influenced by a control oriented paradigm at a far distance from the persons concerned, e.g. pupils, students and teachers. In education other perspectives are called for in order to catch the complexity of educational processes. Nomothetic information about learners needs to be complemented by ideographic information.

The aim of the article is to argue for some alternative ways of knowledge contribution based on the voices of the individual in special educational settings in relation to the rights to education for all. Narrative approaches have a methodological potential of openness and participation where the researcher is engaged in a dialectic interaction between two subjects. Making room for the voice of the Other and finding a view different from one's own is suggested as a powerful knowledge contribution in educational research which only can be provided by the persons concerned.

One conclusion is that the narrative approaches advocated for here have a potential that is seldom given justice in the present era of documentation and measuring.

**Keywords:** evidence based education, narrative approaches, nomothetic and ideographic information, special educational research, the voice of the Other

### Introduction

Learning and teaching seem to be increasingly influenced by phenomena at further distances from the individual. Instead of the control of practice from national steering- and goal documents comparisons of results between countries seem to have decisive significance for practice. The aim of the article is to take this influence as a point of departure and argue for some alternative ways of knowledge contribution within the field of special education. On the whole it is a question about how in an era dominated by documentation research can make room for methods based on the voices of individuals.

### Background

Taking a point of departure in the themes discussed in the article we prefer to view special

education as a field within general education. Special education is rather viewed as a meeting point for dialogue and knowledge development about complicated or difficult learning situations, a hub in a system of relationships surrounding the learner. The theoretical and methodological perspectives that we want to propose define learning as a relational phenomenon dependent on context and dialogue (Svensson, 2004). Education and special education in particular, as a scientific discipline takes an interest in the right to education for all and processes where strivings for inclusion play a crucial part. To strengthen the rights of individuals with disabilities are pronounced goals in the international work that has been done during several decades. The right to read and write, to create and be creative, to understand one's own life world, to get access to educational resources and to develop individual and collective skills are expressively formulated (UNESCO 1990, 1994). Referring to the declaration by UNESCO (1990), Jarvis (1997) emphasises that these rights are concerned with learning to be in an existential sense as well as learning to be together with others. Jarvis also points out that education has become an instrumental commodity something which does not always mean progress.

In the present debate about educational research and practice the concept of evidence is often in focus. Evaldsson and Nilholm (2009) are discussing a salient feature in this debate when they are problematizing the relevance of educational research for practice. They see in the field of education a return to positivistic psychological research imitating medical research with an interest in whether a method has larger effect than another. In education other questions than from a strict utility perspective have to be formulated about the nature of knowledge, the tasks of research and who should be the one to decide about school practise.

Concerning the nature of knowledge and contributors of relevant knowledge we want to refer to the approach of this article formulated as viewing education from another('s) view point. Who then is the one to give us knowledge and whose perspective do we need as researchers? Biesta emphasises that “through narratives we can imagine the position of the other as a position where we could be” (Biesta, 2000:88, our translation). Referring to Hannah Arendt, Biesta writes (ibid: 88)

Visiting than, is *not* seeing through the eyes of another but *seeing with your own eyes* from a position that is not your own – or to be more precise, in a narrative that is not your own (our translation, italics in original).

To understand the complexity that characterises difficult learning situations it is necessary for the researcher to find ways to listen to the person concerned and ensure that ideographic information is provided as a complement to the law bound, nomothetic (Sjödahl, 2001). In nomothetic information on the one hand we include information gathered by methods following strictly standardised manuals and tests. The assumption here is that the one who is diagnosing using measure instruments in a supposed objective perspective and friendly neutral acting will get access to knowledge possible to generalise and of a universal character. Ideographic knowledge on the other hand is understood as knowledge or information that only the person concerned can give such as concrete descriptions of events and developmental processes. Through the narratives by the person concerned about situations and contexts a non-fragmentised and meaningful picture is mediated.

Narratives thus have a potential to broaden and deepen understandings in a number of themes within the educational field (e.g. Malm, 2003; Hagström, 2010; Svensson, 2011). The studies that the present article is built on are searching for knowledge about special

educational phenomena by listening to the seldom heard voice of the person concerned from a life world perspective (Bengtsson, 1999; Dahlberg, Drew & Nyström, 2001). Narratives might be understood as a knowledge contribution in a field of research where context specific circumstances make it difficult for the individual to make her/his voice heard. Such a knowledge contribution could e.g. consist of content in the narratives from pupils and students who are described as being in need of special support or children, young people or adults with disabilities. It could also focus special education teachers' narratives about learning contexts in education characterised as excluding. It is about voices that in some respect are difficult to assert in contrast to dominating pictures of learning and teaching.

### **Focus in Narrative Research**

In the article we regard narrative approach as a concept where analysis of narratives and narrative analysis may be seen as different directions. Further, we also touch upon how narratives could be used as elements in qualitative research.

Recognising narrative approaches and its time related and relational aspects we find it reasonable to assume that narratives make a valuable contribution about life, learning and education in a changeable era when it comes to documentation and rights. The interest of narrative research to study the change of values over time could be linked e.g. to the individual's experience of his or her own identity development and ideas about the relation to a changeable world. The interest is thus directed towards the narrative of the Other about herself or himself and the experiences of and relations to the surrounding world.

### **Holistic Points of Departure**

We take our starting point from a holistic perspective (Lindholm, 1990; Svensson, 2004) on how knowledge can be achieved about the individual as a learning being. This epistemological base leads to a special focus on context, meaning and interpretation. A holistic approach takes interest in how different events are interconnected, e.g. that a study situation cannot be separated from life as a whole (Lang & Ohlsson, 2009). It also calls for methods are that allow a dynamic interplay giving room for complexity and ambiguity in a multidimensional, non-linear and non-causal dimension. From a narrative approach Lang (2008) studied the voices of young people about responsibility and participation in the transition between upper secondary school and higher education. Ohlsson (2008) looked into adult educational encounters in difficult learning situations. Lansheim (2010) in turn has captured the understandings of special education teachers about their assignment from a perspective of working life history. The different studies share a common research interest to take part in people's narratives and to contribute in educational research by letting different voices be heard.

### **Time related Points of Departure**

Time dimensions have a special position in narratively directed research. The interest for time lines with a beginning, a process and an end could e.g. concern special educational phenomena in relation to studies and working life (Lansheim, 2010) or phenomena presenting itself in the transitions between different educational systems (Lang, 2008). Further, expressions of time related and delimited changes of interaction in educational encounters, so called shifts are of interest (Ohlsson, 2008). Narratives add knowledge

about people's experiences but also when contextualised, knowledge and understanding about the culture and the contemporary society where they are told.

### **Relational Points of Departure**

Searching for knowledge and understanding is a question of openness and participation, a dialectic way to knowledge that arises in encounters where the you involve your own self-understanding in an ever changing process between two subjects, an I and a Thou (Buber, 1994). The principle about openness means that what was before an object observed by us now instead becomes a subject appearing to us. Not individual, situation nor group are reduced to variables but are viewed as a whole. Making room for the voice of the Other about her or his life- and learning history can only take place in an encounter between an I and a Thou. Every encounter is unique and from this follows that the so called "results" are unique.

In the narrative it is possible for experiences to be reconstructed and new possible ways of telling about reality may be produced by the linguistic focus in the narrator's experiences of context and meaning (Hedegaard Hansen, 2011). In this respect the narrative expresses a creation of meaning that is not static but rather productively reshaping over time.

The primary aim of a narrative approach is thus to investigate how individuals or groups of people such as professionals or pupils and students understand and create meaning in their lives (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). The narrative approach is founded in openness for what people, individually or sometimes in groups have to tell from their interest for and trust in their stories. It approaches individuals and their experiences from what they themselves can and want to share.

### **The relation between researcher and approach**

Parts of the narrative approach are positioned in a social constructive frame of reference, where acting as well as constructive and creative processes are emphasised. Narratives here become a way to acquire knowledge about individual actions and experiences. The narrative is in itself viewed as an act with a purpose presented in what is told. (cf. Pérez Prieto, 2007).

Dahlberg, Drew and Nyström (2001) point out that narrative quality enhances an interview by adding to the substance in it. The researcher can facilitate in situations when the interviewee has difficulties finding words or formulating a thorough and multifaceted narrative.

Discussing the overall value of an Ego caring about the Other Jarvis (1997) is stressing that such a thing can only happen in and through human relationships. We find that although the narrator and the person receiving the narrative both are viewed as constructors, the emphasis is put on how things are experienced by the Other. In the context of this article it means how life, learning and education is conceptualised from another view point than the researcher's. This puts demands on the researcher to take the message of the Other seriously.

Referring to Dewey, Wahlström (2010) says that the ability of a person to experience has to be viewed as a whole in relation to the development of the individual, where (inter)subjectivity is formed in communication with others in processes of reflective learning. Wahlström is discussing Bildung in relation to the concept of acknowledgement

saying that it has a democratic potential as a challenge to encounter and acknowledge that which is not me, an encounter with the Other and with that which is unknown. Bildung viewed as a rich and complex concept has as its aim to create awareness and an experience that the only way we can live our lives is together with others (Biesta, 2002).

### **The Attitude of the Researcher**

The researcher has to relate to her or his own role during the whole process of research. Representatives for the narrative approach agree in large about the bearing qualities of the dialogue although different methodological concepts are used like interview, interview conversation, etc. What Svensson (2011) names “interview conversations” (our translation from Swedish) are conversations that are more or less open in character and taking place on the narrator’s conditions. The researcher is not the owner of what is told but the narrator is (Hydén, 1997). A narrative is however not a one-way story but is dialogic, taking place in an interplay between the narrator and the listener, in this case the researcher (Hänninen, 2004).

A number of aspects of the conversation are emphasised in relation to how involved and familiar the researcher is with the context of the narratives and how the researcher is positioning herself or himself by the questions asked in the conversation (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). It is, according to Ahlberg (2003), an advantage for the researcher to have knowledge about the field. However, the risk for colonisation of the narrative of the Other and for bias is greater than if the field is not very well known initially. One of the tasks of the researcher is to facilitate a narration with flow by being a supportive and careful listener (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Further, it is according to Heyman (1998) important that the researcher is true to the narratives that are analysed and to the meaning that they represent. The analytic work starts already in the conversation itself, proceeding during the transcription phase when the voices of the narrators are transformed into text.

Polkinghorne (1995) discerns two analytic paths within narrative approach, analysis of narratives on the one hand and narrative analysis on the other. Analysis of narratives can be compared to a more traditional understanding of analytic work presented as different categories. In the narrative analysis, the narrative construction is given a manifest intrigue where the researcher is arranging the different stories of what is told, now as contextualised and interpreted narratives of what has happened. Through the narrative configuration the researcher in the analysis allows the different parts to relate to the whole and vice versa. Finally, a coherent contextualised and interpreted story is crystallized which the researcher can present as a narrative with a distinct intrigue (ibid.). For instance different close up pictures or portraits may be created (Malm, 2003; Lansheim, 2010; Svensson, 2011). Another example is to restructure the data material into fictive portraits due to strict ethical aspects (Lang, 2008). Analysis within a narrative approach contributes to research by relating main traits in a single narrative to the content in other narratives.

Analysis and presentation of research data may, according to Riessman (1997), be accomplished by focussing on the thematic content, on patterns of communication and *how* something is told and *why*. The narratives often contain different thematic threads and among them some appear clearer than others. That, which is told more seldom appears as a chronological story but rather as fragments of memory when the narrator is looking back. To minimise the emphasis on how something is said and instead focus on *what* is said is another point of departure (Svensson, 2011).

The road to the end result of the research process, i.e. from the initial conversation, the feed-back in the transcription phase, the construction of themes and narrative configurations as well as in the continuous analysis might be accompanied by recurrent experiences of sharing the view point of another; “aha! – this is also a way to view things”. Narrative approaches thus have a potential of making it possible to relate the experience of the individual of herself or himself to the experiences of others, which in itself constitutes a knowledge contribution in research about education.

To summarise, we see the role of the researcher in narrative approaches as a dialectic way of knowing that happens between two subjects. Ethical considerations are present during the whole research process and analytic work should be given account for with enough clarity for the reader to judge its trustworthiness and reliability (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Randall & Phoenix, 2009).

### Final Reflections

The narrative approaches advocated for in the article have a potential that is not always given justice in the era of documentation that is a salient feature in international and national debates about evidence and education focussing measuring and products. In order to gain knowledge about educational processes in special educational contexts we mean that it is of central importance to take the point of departure in the ideographic information that only the persons concerned can give us, e. g. students and pupils who have been or are the objects of special educational measures or pedagogues working in the field.

Education in a perspective of rights is a question about inclusion. Inclusion is the very heart or essence of democracy in the sense that the one concerned has had a possibility to influence the processes (Biesta, 2011). A distanced control oriented paradigm and a close participation oriented paradigm respectively will lead understanding of processes of learning and education in different directions. Within a control oriented paradigm the understanding might lead to a practice and a rhetoric presenting a picture of the accomplishments of the Other based on nomothetic information. In a participation oriented paradigm on the other hand, the rights, participation and activity of the individual are put in the foreground taking the point of departure in ideographic information. We have in this article claimed that a narrative research approach opens possible roads to reach another('s) view point than one's own.

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