EMPOWERING TEACHERS OF ENGLISH TO UNDERSTAND THEIR TEACHING

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research study in which two experienced teachers of English in Karachi, Pakistan from two diverse contexts were empowered to understand their teaching through narrative inquiry, which rests on the teacher's "personal practical knowledge" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994, 1990, 1988). This paper enumerates the experiences of the teachers as research participants. Initially, the two teachers were very skeptical about the importance of their own teaching, but during the process they came to realise that they are knowledgeable and that their teaching matters. After the completion of the research study, they appreciated the research process because they realised the importance of looking into their own practices. This experience gave them insights into their teaching and they gained confidence to reflect on and understand their teaching. The findings show that engaging them in the research was a powerful means of giving them autonomy to study their own teaching because they were approached as individuals having their own knowledge of teaching, which they had developed as a result of their day-to-day experiences in their respective contexts (Beattie, 1995, 2001; Johnson, 1990; Mattice, 2002).

Teacher research in the form of action research has become a popular way of engaging teachers in research to generate knowledge about teaching students and teacher knowledge. This has been identified as research in the paradigm of teacher empowerment (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Besides, action research empowering teachers to engage in research has been done by many researchers in the west and in Pakistan using biographical perspective, for example, Bashiruddin (2003), Halai (2002), and Clandinin (1986). This perspective places importance on the subjective understanding of the teachers and looks at the development of their teaching as they experience and understand it within the contexts in which they live their lives. This perspective places teachers' biographies at the center of their teaching practices. It rests on the assumption made by Kelchermans (1993) that:

> The professional behaviour of the teacher is not only determined by the organisational context, but also by life history and related experiences. In other words, experiences from the past and expectations about future influence the perceptions of the present situation. (p.199)

There are a number of studies on native-speaking English as Second Language (ESL) teachers that employed a biographical approach to empower teachers of ESL to tell their stories of practice. Golombek (1998) used a narrative inquiry to examine how the personal and practical knowledge of Jenny and Sonya, two in-service ESL teachers personal practical knowledge influenced their classroom practices. Grossman (1987, 1989, 1990, 1991) examined the pedagogical content knowledge-the knowledge of how to teach a particular subject of secondary school teachers of English through in-depth interviews and classroom observations. Clift (1991) explored the initial two years' experience in learning to teach of Lesley, a teacher of English at a secondary school. The case study focussed on Lesley's experiences of the formal course work and field work, which added to the "understanding of the complex knowledge domains that teachers must develop" (p.358), which included "a broad ill-defined content that may include grammar, narrative writing; expository writing; literary genres; literature as an outgrowth of nationality, gender, ethnicity, lifestyle, or time period; reading in the content area; study skills; and test-taking strategies" (p.358). Gudmundsdottir (1991) interviewed and observed the teaching of Nancy, an experienced high-school teacher of English literature who was teaching college-preparatory English. This study focussed on her teaching of American literature to a junior grade. The study examined Nancy's pedagogical content knowledge, that is, her notion of subject matter, the course that she was teaching, the students attending the course, and her attempts at transforming her knowledge of subject matter into the teaching frame. I could identify only two studies conducted in Pakistan using narrative inquiry (Bashiruddin, 2003 & Naeem, 2004), which focus on the teachers and teaching of English.

This paper reports a research study in which I empowered two experienced English language teachers, Fatima and Khulood (pseudonyms) from Karachi, Pakistan working in two diverse contexts in order to understand their teaching through narrative inquiry. In this study, the teachers were empowered because an interpersonal level of trust was developed before the research began. Teacher empowerment is defined by

Spreitzer (1995) as a motivational construct, which appears in four cognitions namely: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Based on these motivational constructs, the teachers were made aware of the act that their understanding of learning and teaching is of great importance, so that they could value their work based on their own beliefs and standards. They were given freedom to talk about what they valued in their teaching and why, which also linked closely with the question that I was inquiring: How do teachers of English in Pakistan understand the development of their classroom practices? Both the teachers were involved not only in telling what was important to them as teachers and learners of English, but they were also given the opportunity to talk about what they cared in their jobs and what personal significance they got from their involvement in being participants in the research. As a researcher, through conversations and interviews I tried to enable them to make meaning and significance of what and how they taught, so that importance was given to their work and their individual roles as teachers of English in two diverse contexts (both teachers taught in different schools). As far as self-determination was concerned, the teachers were given a choice to choose the critical incidents from their life history and teach the way they wanted to teach, thus having autonomy in determining what was important in their teaching development stories. I helped and facilitated each one of them at individual level by asking further questions about their critical incidents as learners and teachers of English and by observing their classes and noting critical incidents of the way they taught in their classes. The impact of their stories and of their teaching could be seen in the difference that they were making in learner motivation and their school milieu.

Methodology

The research employed a narrative inquiry which rests on the teacher's personal and practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1990, 1994). It constructs teachers' narratives on the basis of their understanding of their daily teaching in which they make various decisions in their classrooms. Narrative inquiry has provided windows into teachers' lives and into the complex nature of teaching in particular contexts. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have extensively explored and argued the importance of narrative inquiry in education. They state:

> The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms, who individually and socially lead storied lives. The study of narrative; therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view

that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories. (p.2)

Narrative inquiry works on two dimensions in educational research: as a phenomenon and as a method (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Phenomena refer to the structured qualities of experience to be studied (lived stories) and method refers to the patterns of inquiry for the study (story telling). Narrative inquiry has an invitational quality because people generally like to read and tell stories. The main focus of such narrative inquiries is to explore how individual teachers understand local everyday events and make decisions in their classrooms as part of their narratives.

In my work, I explored Fatima's and Khulood's development of classroom practices from a narrative perspective. I used it both as phenomena and as a method. By inviting them to tell stories of their past, such as their stories of learning English and teaching English, and by observing the realities of their day-to-day teaching, I tried to understand the way these teachers made meaning of their stories, because narrative is a form of meaning making (Polkinghorne, 1988). I was able to work closely with them in their culture and in their daily life for a prolonged time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Jacob, 1987; Merriam, 1988).

Experiences of the Teachers as Research Participants

For both Fatima and Khulood, this was the first experience of participating in a research study. Initially, when I went to meet them and during my various conversations about the study and what was required of them, they seemed very skeptical about the importance of their own learning and teaching; therefore, it was important to build a strong trusting relationship. During the process, they came to realise that they were knowledgeable and that their teaching was valuable. According to them, they were able to recollect memories of how and why they taught the way they did which were hidden somewhere. Gradually, they started to acknowledge and realise that their stories had meanings for them and others who might read them. After the study, they appreciated the research process because they realised the importance of looking into their practices. They commented that this was the first time that they had ever talked, reflected, and made meaning of their own teaching. This experience had given them insights into their teaching and they had gained confidence to reflect and understand their teaching and thus developed professionally. Below, I detail the four stages of their being gradually empowered as research participants, which include: i) building trust and

relationship; ii) skepticism of the importance of their teaching and iii) realisation of the importance of their stories of learning and teaching; and iii) appreciation of the research study process.

Building Trust and Relationship

The quality of relationship between the participants and the researcher is critical to the process of narrative inquiry. The level of trust between participants and researchers greatly influences the quality of information shared in narrative research (Hollingsworth, 1992). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) stress the importance of mutual construction of the research relationship, which they describe as a "relationship in which both practitioners and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories'' (p. 4). Developing this kind of trusting relationship and conducting this kind of research takes time. However, research conducted in such an atmosphere of mutual trust yields richer and more compelling data.Therefore, the first step to empower Fatima and Khulood was to build trust "because it is a key antecedent of the willingness to cooperate voluntarily… [and] encourages behavior that facilitates productive social interaction" (Tyler, 2000, p. 287). This was important because the teachers were volunteering for the research study and were neither receiving monitory benefit nor a professional degree. Instead they had to put in extra hours for the oral life history interviews and post observation interviews.

Trust is important to have a positive environment in which both the participants and the researchers can develop honest and supportive relationships. This can enable open exchange of ideas and can have an impact on the quality and quantity of information exchange (Bartolme, 1989; Mishra, 1996). This can only happen if relationships of interdependence is developed which depends on trust, and are dependant on the premise that individual goals can only be reached in cooperation with others, and others can only reach their goals with the cooperation of the individual (Hardin, 2002; Loomis, 1959).

After I obtained entry into the schools, I visited the research participants a number of times to have introductory conversations with them. During these visits, I talked to them to get to know them as teachers in their contexts, to get the feel of the school environment, and to understand their routine: timetables, number of English classes that they were teaching, and the syllabus that they were following. This also familiarised them to me because they asked me several questions not only about my research study, but also about my personal and professional life. It is pointed out that "researchers who culturally affiliated with their research communities have advantage in field work because they share specific commonalities or experiences with the participants" (Subedi, 2007, p. 54). This was also true in my case because the teachers felt comfortable talking to me about the problems, challenges in the educational system and kept on saying that I must be familiar with all this because I was also educated here. These informal visits also familiarised me with the schools' context and culture. "When engaging in the activities of your field experiences within culture of schools and classrooms you are at the same time both a participant in the culture and an observer of that culture and its participants" (Cole & Knowles, 1994, p. 16).

Both Fatima and Khulood commented on my skills to develop a good relationship. Fatima commented:

"You are highly educated and an expert, but you make me feel so important. I am someone who is nothing."

Khulood talked about issues in government schools and kept on saying:

"You know about them because you are from here."

On the other hand, it was very difficult to convince them that though I knew about learning and teaching, I did not know what they as individuals did and this limited my understanding. However, these ongoing conversations developed our relationship of care and trust. Before we began interviews or I observed them in their classes, we took a few minutes to talk about our personal lives, such as inquiring about each other's health and family.

Importance of Their Teaching

Initially, the teachers were very skeptical about the importance of their own teaching. When in my first oral life history I asked them to tell me about their learning and teaching of English, Fatima laughed and said:

"What is important about my stories? You know how we teach in schools."

Khulood said that as a teacher and teacher educator, I would know what the issues in learning and teaching English in Urdu-medium schools were. They failed to understand why I was interested to know them again. Responding to this comment I remarked that I did not know how they taught, but only knew how generally people learn and teach English. I also told them that I would like to understand the way they understood their learning and teaching because only they knew their individual stories. In

the process, they started asking me questions about my learning and teaching. Though I knew that answering their questions would limit the time allocated for the interviews, yet I answered them so that they might be comfortable.

For narrative inquirers, oral life-history interviews are one of the most common ways of data collection, because they provide the main source of evidence (Polkinghorne, 1988). There are many strategies for obtaining an oral life-history from the participants, including a structured set of questions in which the researcher's intentions are uppermost (Thompson, 1978) or a semi-structured series of questions in which a person tells his or her own story in his or her own way (Anderson & Jack, 1991). My intention was to invite the participants' stories from their own perspectives. I scheduled six oral-life interviews with each participant over a period of three months.

Though Fatima and Khulood had gained some confidence in telling their stories, at times they reverted to the same question of why they were important for me. Because I was cognizant of the fact that research culture was not common in schools and this was the first time that the teachers were engaged in research, they would need time to accept themselves as knowledgeable. Gradually I started realising how extraordinary experience it was for me and for them. At times I was struck by the willingness of these two teachers, who were close-to-perfect strangers to share their stories with me. For the teachers to tell their stories, as mentioned earlier we had to develop an interpersonal relationship, because only this kind of a relationship makes sharing of stories possible. I had initiated the building of relationship which was gradually developing. But the process of interviewing itself fostered a sense of trust and respect as we listened to each other's stories as I probed to get more information. The bond between us grew to such an extent that they also started talking about their understanding of the lessons that I had not observed.

Since both of them were interested in reading, I gave them my article *Seasons of My Learning* in which I have written my stories of professional development (Bashiruddin, 2002). They took it home and read the stories. This also helped them to understand why I wanted to listen to their individual stories. I believe that my sharing of stories with the teachers fostered this openness. We talked in a relaxed manner and I shared my own experiences of learning and teaching English at the beginning of the interviews and later during the interviews. They also started developing an expectation that I would either be able to help them in their teaching or improve the educational system, which was not the intent of the study.

This to some extent made me self-conscious and I challenged my role as a researcher.

At the end of the six oral-life interviews, Fatima was still not very sure why her stories were important and it took her a lot of time to make meaning out of her stories. Khulood now felt quite comfortable and realised why her story telling, analysing, and making meaning out of them were important. She commented:

> "You have asked me to tell stories and it was so amazing that there was a flow of stories and then I also feel that some are important and some are not, but I have come to realise that these stories have meanings, they have morals from which we must learn"(OLHI[1]).

Realisation of the Importance of Their Stories of Teaching

During the process, the two teachers came to realise that they were knowledgeable and that their teaching mattered. According to them, they were able to recollect memories of how and why they taught the way they did, which were hidden somewhere. Gradually they started to acknowledge and realise that their stories have meanings for them and others who might read them.

Both Fatima and Khulood looked forward to our conversations, because they never had an opportunity to talk to their colleagues or to other researchers. Fatima said that she did not have the time to talk to her colleagues and it was a pleasure to have time granted by the school so that she could participate in this research. Khulood also pointed out that she did not have anyone to talk to about her experiences, as no one was interested. She had never thought of paying any attention to her teaching and learning and now she saw it as an open book.

Fatima felt that by talking to me she had recollected memories which were hidden somewhere; she had to make a lot of effort to dig them out. I as a researcher helped her gain insights into her teaching. She felt that she had wasted a lot of time as a result of reading my stories and talking about her experiences and complained that if she had had proper guidance, she would have achieved much more than what she had. She also felt that it was partly her fault that she did not make an effort to get guidance in order to learn more and partly because there was no encouragement by the school administration. As a result of our conversations, she was now planning to join the Society of Pakistan English Language Teachers

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[1] Oral- Life History Interview

(SPELT) and attend workshops, because she wanted to talk to other colleagues, gain knowledge, and learn new teaching techniques.

Some memories that Fatima had of her learning and teaching of English were sketchy and sparse, while others were dense with details. For example, she did not fully remember her childhood experiences in school, but she remembered the details of her experiences of teaching her own daughter, teaching at a school in Saudi Arabia, and in her present school. Khulood had many stories, which she narrated in great detail, both about her learning English and about teaching English in various schools.

The oral life-history interviews gave me stories of Fatima's and Khulood's experiences of learning and teaching English, but they did not provide me with the opportunity to see and talk about the various classroom practices that they used. As Rossman and Rallis (1998) point out, "Observation takes you inside the setting; it helps you to discover complexity in social settings by being there" (p.136). Classroom observations gave me an opportunity to see Fatima and Khulood in action in the complex social settings in which they were teaching English. The classroom observations also allowed me to develop first-hand knowledge of "how the actions of research participants correspond to their words; see patterns of behaviour; experience the unexpected, as well as the expected; and develop a quality of trust" (Glesne, 1999, p. 43) with them and the post interviews enabled me as a researcher to see how the teachers used certain teaching methods and organised their classrooms, as well as how students responded in their classrooms (Reed & Bergemann, 1992).

Khulood felt that telling about her past experiences of learning the language and learning to teach, renewed her enthusiasm for developing new techniques in her teaching practice. She realised that the techniques that she had been using all these years had become stagnant. She said that she understood new dimensions of her teaching as she talked about it, and by reading summaries of the interviews. Through reading these summaries several times, she emphasised:

> "I have not only travelled back in time, but I could also think of what I needed to do next. I felt that my development had stopped and that I needed to move on and see how I could develop new ways of teaching and effectively applying them. I could see what my faults were and how I could deal with them" (OLHI).

All this reminded her of her ways of teaching in the past and gave rise to new ideas of teaching. She said that she really enjoyed the research, feeling as if she had been on a tour that explored the past in depth. She further shared that she had benefitted immensely from our conversation.

She had never ever had an opportunity to talk to anyone in this way before. She said that she was very comfortable in voicing her stories of experiences because I listened to her with great interest. She said:

> "As a teacher, I had never looked into my life and had never been able to explore my own development. I had never looked into my past even though it could be very beneficial for our own learning and teaching" (OLHI).

Khulood also acknowledged that by telling her own stories, she had been able to look at her successes and failures. This, she emphasised was very important as one could always learn from experiences and then try to avoid any situations that may lead to any kind of failure. By talking about and reflecting on her past experiences, Khulood thought of various ways in which she could have taught the same things differently. Becoming a participant in the study had benefitted her in various ways. First, she said that all the experiences that she had talked about had become prominent and she had become alive. Second, she said that after reading my stories she had restarted the activities that she used to do a number of years ago, such as reading newspapers, watching films, watching the news, and learning new vocabulary. Third, she said that through this she had developed a clear picture of herself and could see the happenings from past to present to future in the mirror. All these discussions and exchanges showed how the teachers were gradually becoming more empowered and active and were constantly being transformed to research participants.

Appreciation of the Research Process

Fatima and Khulood appreciated the research process because they realised the importance of looking into their practices. They commented that this was the first time that they had ever talked, reflected, and made meaning of their own teaching. This experience had given them insights into their teaching and they had gained confidence to reflect and understand their teaching. The research process was significant for them because it empowered them to know what they know (Fenstermacher, 1994). By recalling and reflecting on their past and present practices and experiences of professional development, the participants developed a deeper understanding of their learning and development as teachers they are and as the teachers they could become. This process of inquiry, improvisation, and self-discovery itself had significance for the two teachers, because these processes are educative and connect the past, present and future in the teachers' development.

As classroom observations and post-observation interviews progressed, the participants took control of the way they wanted to talk about the lessons. They would give me background of their lessons, discuss other lessons that I could not observe, and tell stories of the ways they had developed their lessons. The interviews most of the time were governed by the participants themselves. By this time they had knowledge and understanding of what I required. I sometimes asked questions to either clarify or probe for more details.

Just before the research in the field was about to end, they both appreciated the research process and commented how it has helped them develop professionally. Fatima told me that she is already missing the interviews and conversations and is sad that the process is ending. She said that she has developed an understanding with me and would like to continue to be in touch in the future. Fatima commented:

> "This was the first time that someone has talked to me about my learning and teaching of English...all the time through out my career I was asked why I did not teach this or that, why did so and so fail, but no one ever helped me with my teaching or never asked me to reflect on my teaching as you have done...I used to feel that my teaching is nothing...now I feel important because I know what I have learnt and the way I have learnt and the way I teach...it was a great learning experience for me...I wish you could teach me how to teach better...I am ready for it" (OLHI).

Similarly Khulood in her last meeting with me asked if I could spare a couple of minutes for her. She had made note of some things that she wanted to say regarding the research process and its importance. She stated:

> "I would like to thank you (her voice was heavy with emotion) ... the process in the beginning seemed very difficult, telling stories, answering all sorts of questions especially 'why did you do this? How did you learn this? Why is it important?' and that too in English. When you allowed me to speak in Urdu and English it became a little easier. But then I took it as a challenge, I thought about my learning and teaching, you helped me in reflecting and it has become a habit. Now I know how to reflect and understand my teaching of English and I will continue to reflect. I feel sorry that this is ending. You gave me a lot of care, support, and confidence. You were patient and taught be to be patient. I will miss you, but I will continue to work towards my professional development" (OLHI).

The Findings and Conclusion

The four stages of Fatima and Khulood being gradually empowered as research participants show that engaging them in the research study was a powerful means of giving them autonomy to study their own teaching, because they were approached as individuals having their own knowledge of teaching, which they developed as a result of their day-to-day experiences in their respective contexts (Beattie, 2001; Johnson, 1990; Mattice, 2002).

The stories that they narrated about learning to teach and the many ways in which they came to understand these learning-to-teach experiences and then reflecting on their development was a way of professional development because "the stories we hear and the stories we tell shape the meaning and texture of our lives at every stage and juncture" (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 1). This professional development was evident in their reflection on their teaching and their zest to change their practices because they had realised how they could improve and make certain changes in their teaching. They also recognised the importance and meaning of their stories and were pleased that the study had acknowledged them as knowledgeable people, who had understood their practices and would represent the unheard voices of teachers' in the emerging world (Hargreaves, 1994). The narratives had empowered them as teachers and researchers because they could identify the critical incidents of learning and teaching English and their understanding of them.

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