

LISTENING TO PARENTS' VOICES: ON THE USE OF NARRATIVE ANALYSIS IN RESEARCH ON FOLLOW-UP AFTER CI

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss narrative inquiry as a method of knowledge construction in research on follow-up after CI. We argue that narrative inquiry contributes to the knowledge field of follow-up after CI through making the voices heard of the people involved, thus enhancing both epistemological issues and democratic values. The paper addresses the need to deliberate on whom the research is *for*, and what epistemological assumptions to bring to the understanding of what we want the research to achieve.

*The narratives of the world are without number
- Roland Barthes¹*

INTRODUCTION²

The question of 'what works' in education has become prominent in discourses in educational research, as well as what kind of epistemology is appropriate to inform professional practices. This has resulted in a 'gold standard' of randomized controlled field trials, which seems to have become the preferred methodology for educational research (Biesta, 2007). The idea of evidence-based educational practice raises many questions about how suitable the evidence-based approach actually is for the domains of education. Derived from the field of medicine, it is debatable to what degree evidence-based research is a neutral framework that simply can be applied to the field of (special) education (Biesta, 2007). It takes for granted that the epistemology at the base of medical practice validly can be transferred to realm of educational practice. The realm of learning, of meaning making and mind, exists in a different form than natural objects do: "It is an activity, not a thing. It cannot be picked up and held, nor measured by an impersonal instrument" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 7). Education is not reliably connected to processes of input and output: causal, instrumental mechanisms where certain interventions cause given effects (Biesta, 2007). Furthermore, there is the issue of *desirability*: even if we knew about the most effective way of achieving a particular result, we might still – on moral or ethical grounds - "decide not to act accordingly" (Biesta, 2007, p. 9). Whether the expectation that research can tell us 'what works' is warranted, depends on the epistemological assumptions one brings to the understanding of what research can achieve (Biesta, 2007). Consequently, the question arises what we *want* it to achieve. Evaldsson and Nilholm (2009) refer to the international debate about the relevance of educational research for practice, and critically point to the need of asking whom the research is *for*, and what we want it to do. Educational research,

¹ Roland Barthes (1966). *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*. Occasional Paper, Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies, University of Birmingham. In: Polkinghorne (1995, p. 14).

² Parts of this paper draw on "Negotiating Reassurance: Parents' Narratives on Follow-up after Cochlear Implantation" (Bruin & Ohna, empirical article currently submitted for peer review).

say Lang, Lansheim and Ohlsson (2012), leaves room for questions other than the narrow perspectives of effects and benefits, such as issues about the ontology of knowledge and the purpose of the research.

In research on follow-up after paediatric cochlear implantation, the focus on 'what works' is evident. CI is a surgical procedure, and from a historical perspective the research on language development after CI is inevitably influenced by values of traditional research set in the medical domain, characterized by recognized levels of evidence (Bruin, 2015). Furthermore, the demands made on the research have been that the implantation should prove its efficacy and justify its implementation (Thoutenhoofd et al., 2005). Certainly the fact that cochlear implantation has had to legitimize its existence has caused many studies to examine factors related to speech perception and speech production, measuring language development quantitatively. In this perspective, the child's language learning and development is conceptualized as an instrumental process (Bruin, 2015). How learning is understood has implications for where we recognize learning and how support for learning is designed (Wenger, 1998). From this follows that understandings of learning will be central to the design of parent support after CI, and that a hegemonic focus on 'what works' may convey messages to parents and professional practitioners that language learning after CI largely depends on therapy and structured, decontextualized training (Bruin, 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to present narrative inquiry as an alternate method to knowledge construction in the research on follow-up after CI. Considering the question whom the research is *for*, narrative inquiry challenges existing assumptions and hegemonic ways of thinking about which role research on follow-up after CI is to have. CIs are a technological innovation creating new opportunities for children who are deaf, and changing times require a rethinking of parent support. In developing support services that are able to meet the parents' changing needs, the parents' views are crucial; however, these are largely absent from the literature (Archbold & Wheeler, 2010). Narrative approaches have the potential to give a voice to perspectives that otherwise might be hard to maintain in relation to dominant perspectives in learning and education (Lang et al., 2012).

THE STUDY OF NARRATIVE MEANING

Human beings make sense of the world by using the narrative mode for construing reality. However, Bruner (1990) emphasises that autobiographical accounts are not just descriptions of one's life. Narratives typically evolve around experienced trouble or discontinuity in people's lives (Bruner, 1996; Riessman, 2008). Through narrative construction people tell themselves and others who they are and display as such personal identities (Riessman 2008). Furthermore, eventually 'we *become* the autobiographical narratives' (Bruner, 1987, p. 15, original emphasis). Narratives are told with a purpose; to someone, at a specific time and place, and with various consequences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). They are "multifaceted textual windows on the world [...] dressed up by storytellers for the viewing" (ibid, xv). The stories reveal "a strong rhetorical strand, as if justifying why it was necessary (not causally, but morally, socially, psychologically) that the life had gone in a particular way" (Bruner 1990, p. 121). The notion reflects what Bruner calls the narratives' justificatory function. A relevant question for analysis is what is being justified, for what purposes and for whom?

Narrative inquiry enables accessing meaning beyond the surface of a text, and therefore enables broader commentary (Riessman 2008). It combines features of thematic analysis, structural analysis, and dialogic/performance analysis, which enable different approaches: besides focussing on content, there can be attention to how stories are told, to

whom, and for what purposes. Through restorying experience, the narrative analytical framework enables reframing existing ways of thinking (Gubrium and Holstein 2009).

The narrative approach has a potential of bringing forward certain perspectives that have difficulty coming forward in research present in international debate about evidence and pedagogy, focused on measurement and productivity (Lang et al., 2012). The authors state that in order to develop knowledge about educational processes in special education, it is vital to include the lived information that only those, who are involved, are able to give. Narrative analysis is about a researcher's genuine interest to take part in - and to contribute with knowledge on - other people's stories, through making their voices heard. Instead of an object being observed, a subject emerges (Lang et al., 2012). A narrative analysis of parents' stories on follow-up will therefore make it possible to challenge and reframe current ways of thinking about parent support after CI. Following Young and Temple (2014),

Narrative analysis in its various forms is, therefore, fertile territory from which to understand a vast range of human experience; to explore, document, and appreciate that which is new or hidden; through which to identify factors relevant to specific intents; and as a result of which to challenge, protest and reconstruct. (Young & Temple, 2014, p. 107)

The field of narrative inquiry inhabits various approaches (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Polkinghorne (1995) makes a distinction between *analyzing narratives* and *narrative analysis*. A major difference between the two is that the first can be seen as a traditional, qualitative analysis of personal accounts, whereas the latter involves processes of hermeneutic interpretation, involving a shift in perspective turning from the descriptive to the interpretive. This enables accessing underlying narratives or stories from the interpretation of interview data through the way that people describe their worlds (Silverman, 2003), poignantly described by Riessman (2008, p. 13) as "a world behind the narrator (that is knowable)".

The next section in this paper will present an ongoing study on parents' views on follow-up after CI. Its narrative approach is based on Polkinghorne's aforementioned distinction of *narrative analysis* (1995). The study exemplifies how the narrative approach is able to access underlying stories, which otherwise may stay obscured from view. Thus, the narrative analysis constructs knowledge that may inform professional practices. It shows that narrative analysis is able to bring to the fore issues of moral nature: in the ongoing construction of parent support services, narrative analysis shows a valuable addition to studies discussing causal evidence about the effectiveness of intervention.

PARENTS' NARRATIVES ON FOLLOW-UP AFTER CI

An ongoing study by Bruin & Ohna explores the stories of parents of 14 children living in Norway, who use CIs. The parents were interviewed on their experiences with follow-up after CI. The narrative analysis explores how the parents respond to insecurity concerning their child's learning and development.

The study views storytelling as lived experience, viewing narration as "the practice of constructing meaningful selves, identities, and realities" with regard to "how narrators make sense of personal experience in relation to cultural discourses" (Chase 2011, p. 422). Hence, the framework takes on a constructionist perspective (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). The description of an experience or event is viewed as socially constructed and not as an objective blueprint of the actual event. The stories are understood as containing personal

meaning attributed by the participants to their experiences. Through identifying the parents' meaning making, narrative analysis enables the unravelling of stories hidden behind the narrator, about their experiences and about how they present themselves.

The narrative analysis identified two narrative presentations of self, each expressing a story in which the narrators place themselves (Silverman, 2011): the Parent-as-Learner and the Parent-as-Teacher. The Parent-as-Learner narrative is constructed through stories about learning how to support a child who uses CIs. It describes the parents' aims as learning how to support the child to use the implants, to develop listening skills and speech. The general understanding is that there is a lot that parents do not know, which they need to know. Therefore, parent support is regarded as highly important. For many, the most relevant knowledge is about language development. The parents' anxieties are described as not knowing things one should have known, and a possible threat to future educational outcomes. Because knowledge is considered reassuring, parents express anxieties about possibly not knowing. The Parent-as-Learner narrative is constructed through stories about the parents' responsibility to learn, because the child's future depends on it.

The Parent-as-Teacher narrative is constructed through stories about helping the child to learn. This involves structured and unstructured training sessions at home, consciously directed toward listening skills and speech. The Parent-as-Teacher narrative describes the parents' aims as working hard through actively using acquired methods, promoting the child's language development, reflecting a connection between 'input' and 'output'. Parents worry about the differences in outcomes from CI, emphasizing their responsibility. 'Working' with the child is a significant expression in the Parent-as-Teacher narrative, reflecting the parents' preoccupation with listening and speech. The parents' anxieties centre on not getting enough results, doing the 'wrong' things or not doing 'enough', burdening the parents with feelings of stress, guilt, and insecurity. The analysis shows that parents believe that how they 'work' with the child (or not), will affect future educational outcomes. The Parent-as-Teacher narrative is constructed through stories describing that having a child with CIs requires much more than usual. Parents describe processes that require much of their time and effort, and compare this with the needs of their other children. They express they find the responsibility frightening.

The Parent-as-Learner and Parent-as-Teacher narratives show how the parents construct and handle the 'trouble' of insecurity, and how they respond by searching for reassurance. The narrators place themselves in stories about working hard so that future educational outcomes may be ensured. By telling the interviewer, the parents tell themselves that, because they acquire knowledge and work hard with the child, the child is doing well. The purpose of the two narratives of self is to negotiate reassurance: because the parents believe future educational outcomes to depend on gaining knowledge and working with the child, the narratives justify this. Thus, participants take on the identity of responsible parent, holding themselves responsible for future outcomes.

The Learner/Teacher narratives express the parents' insecurity about educational outcomes, and how parents understand these as conditional. Holding themselves responsible leaves parents feeling worried, always vigilant, investing considerable time and effort. Parents express anxieties about doing the 'wrong' things, or not doing enough. The parents do not question the values of the language of instrumentality but rather take it for granted; they assert a self-evident validity to the knowledge they acquire. The instrumental language of rehabilitation thus merges with the family context, causing a burden of

responsibility. However, the parents do not speak explicitly of a *burden*; the burden remains implicit in the world behind the narrator. Following the self-evident validity of instrumentality, gaining knowledge and 'working' with the child is an obvious task, employed by the responsible parent. The study concludes that, while acknowledging the importance of parents' involvement for their child's learning and development, this should not reduce the relationship with their children to a pedagogical and functional one.

The contribution of the study is to bring into conversation how the language of instrumentality affects the parents and to address the need to rethink parent support. Through accessing the meanings the parents attribute to their stories, the narrative analysis is able to expose the burden of responsibility, hidden behind the narrators, and play this into the ongoing construction of parent support services.

CONCLUSION

To conclude with Lang et al. (2012), a narrative approach builds a road to a different person's panoramic view, or a viewpoint that is different than one's own. When knowledge development is based on participation of the involved, it will lead the understanding of learning- and teaching processes in a different direction. As showed in the aforementioned study, the narrative analysis enables viewing the world behind the narrator, exposing how the parents are affected by 'the language of instrumentality'. The parents' actions may very well be effective for the child's language development; from a moral and ethical viewpoint however, in concert with Biesta (2007), the question needs asking whether the consequences of the instrumental thinking are desirable. The narrative analysis brings to the fore a restorying of the parents' experiences, enabling to reframe and challenge existing ways of thinking.

In summary, we need to understand how research outcomes may affect educational practice in follow-up after CI. We need to think about how they affect parent support and the parents and children involved, and deliberate on what epistemological assumptions to bring to the understanding of what we want the research to achieve. In this paper, we have argued that narrative inquiry is a way of making heard the voices of the people involved, so that these may challenge and reconstruct existing ways of thinking about parent support.

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