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1. Introduction

This paper initially discusses a small-scale narrative inquiry and the interim findings of the research. The author will then proceed to explore 3 key issues (Clandinin 2013 p.35); their own personal justification of the narrative inquiry research; the reasons for and implications of using transformative research methods; and the scope for narrative inquiry to impact at a policy level. This discussion will be underpinned by an exploration of the ethical implications of the ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches of the researcher.

2. The research and interim findings

2.1. The research project

This research project seeks to understand the constructed meaning within the professional and personal lives of UK primary school Teaching Assistant practitioners in response to ‘critical events’ (Webster & Mertova 2007) during their work in a Nurture Group (Bennathan & Boxall 2003). The research uses a collaborative, transformative narrative inquiry (Webster & Mertova 2007) approach. The Nurture Group is a provision to address the needs of children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties (DfE 2015). As such, critical events may often be related to physically and emotionally challenging behaviours. The data is being collected from two Teaching Assistants working as Nurture Group practitioners, within a single Primary School in a small town in the Cotswolds. The data gathering is taking place in two phases which are repeated over an academic year. Phase 1 consists of a clinical supervision (Beddoe & Davys 2016, Noble, Gray & Johnston 2016) approach to provide a safe, supportive space to allow practitioners to reflect on their practice. This space provides a compassionate (Carroll 2007) and sympathetically aligned researcher, who personally and professionally validates and supports the practitioners, providing a space to explore and express distress related to their work experiences (Hawkins and Shohet 2012).

The supervision discussion is recorded and transcribed. Phase 2 begins with the practitioners receiving the transcripts from phase 1. Through collaborative negotiation, key critical events are identified. The practitioner is then invited to relate their own narrative following on from the critical event, with prompts to explore both professional and personal realms. These 2 phases are repeated 3 times over the academic year. At the time of writing a single cycle of a Phase 1 and Phase 2 session have taken place. The two practitioners chose pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Woolhouse, Dunne & Goddard (2009) explore the struggle to manage the professional, educational and personal demands of the role of Teaching Assistant. Data from their research emerged to show that the participants’ professional experiences impacted on their self-understanding, confidence and motivation. This was in the context of practitioners who had

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engaged in studying on a two-year Foundation Degree. As such one may expect the involvement in university-based study to stimulate the development of reflective thinking in the participants. This research recognises that, whilst it is unlikely that many Teaching Assistants will have the opportunity to engage in study at an undergraduate level, there may be other ways through which practitioners are empowered to engage in reflective thinking about the impact of their roles. In particular, this research makes use of a supervision approach (Noble, Gray & Johnston 2016) to explore its empowering nature (Chappell 1999) and to develop the practitioners’ reflective thinking.

2.2. Interim findings

Within early analysis of the data from the 2 data gathering events, 4 key elements of the narrative which illustrate challenges linked to the practitioners’ professional and personal lives have been identified. These elements are: Motivation; Physiological impact, Entering into personal life and relationships; and Empowerment.

A significant focus of the narrative was towards the impact of professional tensions, related to both timetabling, allocation of resources and pedagogical approaches, as well as the impact of the challenging behaviours of individual children. The impact has been grouped into the 4 elements below with data which exemplifies each of them:

Motivation

Lilly was clear in the sessions that her professional motivation was being negatively impacted, illustrated below:

“So just personally I was sort of saying I don’t want to go to work. For the first time in my life, I do not want to go.” (Lilly Narrative Session1)

And that this encroached upon her professional practice:

“I think it did affect my practice because I felt like I wasn’t giving all the children 100% what they needed So I think because I felt so frustrated I was almost at a point where I thought, actually, I’m not even going to do it anymore” (Lilly Narrative Session1)

For Kerry, the negative impact on motivation is expressed through expressions of a desire to walk away from the job:

“So yesterday I just went, “Well that’s fine if that’s what you want to do but you find someone else to run nurture because I’m not doing it.”
(Kerry Narrative Session1)

“I know both of us have been looking at other jobs too which is really bad” (Kerry Narrative Session1)

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Physiological impact

The practitioners explored the impact of a child being permanently excluded from the school through the simile of physical pain:

“I said, “I started to feel alright about him not being here and now it feels like the band aid has just been ripped off and I’ve started hurting all over again,”” (Kerry Supervision Session1)

In the preliminary research meeting, the emotional impact of this critical event was also expressed through the use of simile:

“When he left it felt like losing an arm” (Kerry Pre-Research Discussion)

Lilly also included the direct physiological impact of the frustration of relationships between practitioners:

“I just felt exhausted.” (Lilly Narrative Session1)
“I just felt tired. I just wasn’t functioning. I just felt tired, I just felt like I had nothing to... I don’t know, nothing to offer. I was just tired. (Lilly Narrative Session1)

And also her work with children with challenging behaviour:

“even though I was on my knees, I had nothing else to give at the end of the year and I was physically crying, it was my best year” (Lilly Supervision Session1)

Entering into personal life and relationships

The impact on the practitioners’ home life is illustrated, with further impact on personal outlook:

“Well just at home, just having just nothing left to give. Even at home I just... I was going home, I was just so tired, I didn’t want to do anything. And it just makes you negative about all aspects, at home and at school” (Lilly Narrative Session1)

And the impact on personal relationships outside their school:

“I go on dog walks with my husband, obviously I don’t tell him lots of things but I do sort of say to him, “Oh this happened and [rants] and I spend the whole time just talking at him.....” (Lilly Narrative Session1)

I felt tired most of the holiday, to be honest. I still did things with my son, we went out and did a few bits, but I was just... So I still spent a lot of time thinking about school. (Lilly Narrative Session1)

The impact on personal time:

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“I just used to sit and fall asleep most of the time. I didn’t really... Yes, I just had nothing. I was just absolutely exhausted. I was basically working, that was what I was doing. I wasn’t doing anything else. I was just going home and I was like, “I’m so tired.”” (Lilly Narrative Session1)

“Every day it never stops. If I’m honest, it never stops. It’s like it’s the first sort of thing you wake up with and you think, right, going to work, this is what I’ve got to do today, what am I going to do today, what if this happens...” (Kerry Narrative Session1)

And even impacting on sleep:

“I mean, I’ve even dreamt of it before, particularly when the lad that had been excluded over the six weeks holidays... I was worried about him the whole time thinking, oh my God, what’s happening to him at home and what’s he doing, is he okay, his whole routine is out. You know, that whole... And yes, even dreamt about being in this room.” (Kerry Narrative Session1)

Sense of empowerment

A further finding from the data was the impact of the opportunity to be heard (Rogers 1967) in the supervision sessions.

“And I feel happy and I just feel being able to talk and being able... I felt more confident after our chat actually and after reading through some things I said I thought, yes, I am going to say that, in a constructive way.” (Lilly Narrative Session1)

“It was almost like I spoke to you about it and then I gave myself a good talking to and I thought, no, don’t go along with things.” (Lilly Narrative Session1)

It might also be surmised, through reasoning that the narrative sessions have a similar structure and are conducted within the same relationship as the supervision sessions, that this impact may continue on through the narrative sessions.

Further elements are expected to emerge as the process of the research continues across this academic year.

3. The nature of the research project

3.1. Context of “me” as a researcher

If you don't acknowledge your influence, it is like holding a candle to the sun.
(Tempest 2016 after William Blake)

In this section of the paper the terms “I” and “me” will be used to refer to the author/researcher. This section clarifies the context of the researcher and my ‘own story of experience’ (Clandinin 2013 p.82), which leads into the discussion about the nature of narrative inquiry and transformative research and the transgression of traditional boundaries between the self and the role of educator and researcher (West 2010).

I was motivated to undertake this research having a background in primary education, including 7 years of running a Nurture Group. I recognised within myself professional and personal issues which profoundly affected my professional role, work-life balance, thoughts and ethical navigation linked to my own lifestyle decisions. Thoughts about the barriers and life experiences of the children I was working with did not leave my head with the end of a school day. During this period, I often compared the systemic and institutional frameworks within which professionals from health-based organisations work, where psychologically-based work related supervision with a therapeutic element (Hawkins and Shohet 2006) were part of their regular professional life. This was in contrast to my experience working in a local-authority maintained school, where friendships and staffroom chats were the only opportunities, within my professional context, available for me to process challenging experiences. This research is prompted by a desire to understand the experiences of those working within a similar context to that described above and seek to contribute to a knowledge bank which may influence policy makers through recognition of the profound professional and personal impacts of working with children with Social Emotional and Mental Health Issues (DfE 2015) in a Nurture Group context.

3.2. The methodological approach

3.2.1. Why narrative

The narrative inquiry approach was selected as the methodological approach in order to capture the qualitative elements of the practitioners’ experiences across a passage of time (Alleyne 2015), through a connection between the researcher and practitioners. The nature of the data within ‘an emotive or emotional and expressive register’ (Alleyne 2015 p.40) and the importance of the context of the data (Townsend & Elliott-Maher 2016) within the human experience of an educational setting (Webster & Mertova 2007) led to the methodological

choice which recognises the contextual, or social and interactive (Dewey 1958), importance of a learning situation. Furthermore, the ontological framework of the narrative construction of reality (Bruner 1991) and the epistemological underpinning of the approach of exploring personal narratives to interpret the impact of experienced events, link closely with a narrative inquiry approach.

3.2.2. The identity of the researcher within the research process

The epistemological positioning of a narrative inquiry approach challenges a normative view of knowledge and experience (Townsend & Elliott-Maher 2016) and demands that the research engages with the complexity and ambiguity of the data (Reissman 1993). This implies that settings and intentions are key to human conduct (Schutz 1973), that the researcher’s role is not that of a neutral listener and, as such, the identity and role of the researcher becomes an important and integral part of the research process (Hollway & Jefferson 2001).

Within this research, the affinity of the experience and pedagogic values of the researcher and practitioners, linked to working in a Nurture Group and the ‘6 principles of nurture’ (Lucas, Insley and Buckland 2006) was an important aspect of the research methodology. The researchers’ background and purpose, when shared with the practitioners, not only served to reduce the likelihood of a patronising relationship (Hollway & Jefferson 2001), but rather developed trust and shared purpose, as well as serving to provide recognition and affirmation of the practitioners’ role. This not only challenged some of the hegemonic assumptions about the practitioners’ professional role, which they encountered in their own, and other settings, but also to counter the hegemonic research paradigms and knowledge hierarchies (Anderson & McLachlan 2016) which they expected to underpin the research process. As a result of this, it is argued that a ‘bond’ (Webb 2006) was created which resulted in more open, honest and reflective narrative during the data gathering.

3.2.3. Co-created

The framing of the epistemological underpinnings of the research and the importance of the interaction between the researcher and the practitioners (Creswell & Creswell 2013) led strongly towards a collaborative approach (West 2010) to the research methodology. The relationship between the researcher and practitioners represents a meeting of lives (Clandinin 2013) based upon shared values and experiences, and as such notions of the practitioners being passive participants and giving minimal acknowledgment of their expertise (Webb 2006) is inappropriate within the context of the research. This understanding, where the

meeting between researcher and practitioner represents a space for co-composition (Clandinin 2013), then implicates the practitioners as participants or co-researchers (May 1997).

In this research, a recent implication of this co-construction is that the researcher has received a request for the supervision session in Phase 2 to be undertaken with both practitioners together.

3.2.4. Transformative

Further implications ensue from the paradigm discussed above, in particular the implications of the impact of the research process on both the practitioners and the researcher (May 1997). Through the valuing of the practitioners’ role and narrative within the research and the subsequent re-framing of their role as co-constructors, there are not only ethical implications, which are discussed below, but implications for lifelong learning (West 2010). As the researcher has an implicit learning role, through seeking new understanding of the situation, the implications are that the co-researchers also learn through the research process. As discussed above, the research relationship in this context is framed within the context of an inclusive and nurturing pedagogy, an approach which is underpinned by values of social justice. As such, the research itself carries within it aims of social justice and personal or social change (Chase 2011) for the researcher and practitioners, a stance which can be seen as one in opposition to the hegemony of the established notions of the research relationship as a result of an ethical approach defined in terms of human rights (Mertens, Sullivan & Stace 2011) moving towards a ‘solidarity research’ model (Brem-Wilson 2014).

3.3. An exploration of the ethics of the transformative approach

Within the context of an ethical approach to the research, which was underpinned by a social justice approach, further implications for the methodological design of the research were considered.

The importance of undertaking ‘good research’ (David and Sutton 2004 cited in Webb 2006) was foremost in the initial research design, with the focus being on identifying the extent to which practitioners’ lives are impacted and gathering rich examples to prompt deep understanding of the issue. However this notion carried with it implications for the usefulness to the practitioners of the research process itself and the question of whether the practitioners would feel it was worth participating (David and Sutton 2004 cited in Webb 2006). As access to practitioners and data gathering was being negotiated and planned, the setting asked for supervision to be offered to the practitioners by the researcher. These supervision sessions are shown above to have had a transformative effect on the practitioners and the ownership of the sessions are being negotiated further.

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Traditional notions of research ethics focus on protection of those involved and wider communities (Ransome 2013) through informed consent and the researcher protecting the participants from harm. However, in the case of this co-constructed research in which learning is mutual, the boundaries between the researcher and participants is less clear and the relationship between them could be regarded as intimate (Josselson 2007), as a result the ethical approach also needs reconsidering. Given the nature of the narrative dialogue, the ethical decisions need to be made in the process of the research and, as such, need to be principles-based rather than a collection of rules to follow (Webb 2006). In this research the ethics of social justice underpinned by empathy (Webb 2006) and trust (Bond 2004) have been applied. This ethical focus links closely with the principles underpinning the supervision approach used with the participants.

4. How might this narrative research transform and shape commonly held discourses?

The researcher has placed this research within the context of seeking to influence policy-making towards recognising the challenges faced by Nurture Group practitioners and implementing supportive approaches. Given that this research is on a small scale, with data from 2 practitioners, and within the narrative inquiry model, a significant question is that which asks why this research might act as a ‘lever of change’ (Ainscow 2015)?

With the social justice motivation of this research clearly in mind, it could be considered as a mistaken approach to conform with the dominant research paradigms, favoured by those involved in policy-making, of positivist normative approaches focussed on measuring impact (Townsend & Elliott-Maher 2016). Instead of acquiescing towards the hegemonic ‘one world thinking’ (Standing 2011) with its rejection of diversity, this research maintains the importance of the subjective meanings (West 1996) and their need to be heard.

There are, however, a number of factors which could be argued to support this approach and the potential of a small scale narrative research project to influence policy-making. The notion of ‘public sociology’ (Burawoy 2004) recognises that institutional change is not only influenced from above, but also operates within a ‘bottom-up’ model (Fitzgerald & Kay 2016). Following this model of policy influence, if compelling evidence influences practitioners and other stakeholders, this knowledge has the potential to be disseminated widely. This may begin within local networks and interest groups, which in turn will have the potential to influence national networks and interest groups, these being organisations which have clearer and more direct access to policy makers. The researcher is seeking to disseminate the final paper generated from this research through the national charity, The Nurture Group Network, which has a strong lobbying role with parliamentary organisations

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and therefore influence upon education policy. Positive changes to practice in individual schools in England have the potential to influence policy, through the model of Ofsted inspection reports and Ofsted special reports, which frequently seek out individual examples of practice as models to disseminate.

Within the context of a democratic and transformative model of research, the impact of this research should be considered from a Foucauldian perspective, with regard to the relationship between knowledge and power (Foucault 1982). The interim findings related to the practitioners reframing their self-view and changing their perception of how they might mediate their place in their school (Foucault 1990) gives evidence of increased power through enhanced voice and confidence within the workplace. The structures of education can be viewed as existing within layers of influence which mirror those of cultural knowledge (Barth 1994) and structures. As many examples of social movements and local struggle influencing policy change (Apple 2014) can be cited, it could be surmised that this research will be a factor in positive change at a Micro (Barth 1994) or local level and therefore also at wider national median and macro levels (Barth 1994). It may also be useful when considering the possibility of policy impact to refer to notions of Education for Sustainability and understanding the ‘bottom-up’ impact of ‘the transformation and development of local power and practice within educational settings’ (UNESCO 2014).

“Pick up the battle and make it a better world just where you are. It can be and it must be better” (Maya Angelou 2011)

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented the interim results of a small-scale narrative inquiry into constructed meaning within the professional and personal lives of Teaching Assistant practitioners in response to ‘critical events’(Webster & Mertova 2007) during their work in a Nurture Group (Bennathan & Boxall 2003). Initial analysis has seen the emergence of impact upon three key areas: motivation; physiological states and personal lives and relationships. Further evidence of the transformative impact of the research process has been identified with an empowering impact on the knowledge / power relationship within the work setting.

The paper has discussed methodological issues of: the role of the researcher and the relationship between those involved in the research process; the rationale for a co-constructed research approach; the implications of a transformative approach; and the implications for the ethical underpinnings of the research. The discussion has concluded with a justification of the view that this research may have the potential for impact on wider policy, informed by notions of social justice and Education for Sustainability.

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