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Narrative, meaning making and personal development: Teachers' storied experience in Montessori, Steiner and other primary classrooms

Gayle C. Ward  
*University of Notre Dame Australia*

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## Chapter II

### Identifying and Applying a Methodology

I began searching for an appropriate methodology to guide me in collecting and interpreting teachers' stories about using story. As demonstrated in Chapter I, the construction of narrative is an active process involving expressing a voice, interacting with an audience and interpreting experiences. Because none of these properties can be measured or directly observed, as is essential for quantitative research, I deduced that I was looking for a qualitative format. While exploring the history of the alternatives, it became apparent that the narratives of educational philosophies and methodologies are interwoven with the history of scientific research. In fact, quantitative and qualitative methodologies are clearly aligned with educational perspectives. Steiner and Montessori, both with scientific backgrounds, could be considered qualitative researchers, as can contemporary educators who have a constructivist view of education.

This research journey thus started with an historical view of these contrasting methodologies. This history provided a rationale for selecting qualitative methods to investigate narrative in primary classrooms representing different cultural milieus. The work of contemporary qualitative researchers led to the choice of in-depth interviewing as the most appropriate mode of data collection. This interview data was supported by observations. Data collection files and a data coding system provided facility in organising the interviewee responses to reveal emerging themes.

## Choosing Qualitative Research – A Historic Rationale

Scientific method in the sense of theorising from carefully documented observations and experiments is a Newtonian model dating back almost four hundred years (Helden, 1995). At that time, both education and science were pursuits available only to the elite classes. Although there were numerous significant scientific discoveries in the following two centuries, it was probably the scientific inventions leading to the industrial revolution and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century scientific investigations resulting from it that most influenced education in the Western world. It was then that two different scientific perspectives created a schism in educational doctrine. Frederick Taylor's time and motion studies published in the *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) were extremely influential in inspiring factory managers to find ways of making workers more productive. Educators were also influenced by Taylorism and sought ways to implement a more efficient educational system. One way to do this was to divide the academic from the vocational students. Educational psychologist, Thorndike (1913; Freedman, 1999) aided this classification process by devising testing instruments to isolate skills, aptitudes and interests of students that would supposedly correlate with job success. Educator, Dewey, reacted strongly against these mental tests and consequent placements, which he viewed as contributing to social class division and being undemocratic. He claimed that testing should be for the purpose of feedback to the learner to encourage new learning. He also argued against the curriculum advocated by Thorndike. Thorndike was a reductionist who tried to clarify "the discrete details of learning" but overlooked the overall aims (Freedman, 1999). Dewey counteracted by demanding that education focus on the whole student. "Democracy will not be democracy until education makes

its chief concern to release distinctive aptitudes in art, thought and companionship” (Dewey, 1922, p. 63; Freedman, 1999).

While Thorndike and Dewey were in opposition in America, Montessori and Steiner in Europe were designing their own unique educational systems. (Refer to Appendices A and B). Both were scientists and viewed their work as scientific. In fact, the original title of Montessori’s book, *The Montessori Method* (1912) was *The Method of Scientific Pedagogy as Applied to the Teaching of Children in the Children’s House* (Chattin-McNichols, 1992b, p. 15). Her view of science was certainly Newtonian in that she based her educational premises on careful observations of children’s development. She also viewed herself as a scientific researcher throughout her life in that she was constantly evaluating and modifying ideas.

My *experiments*,<sup>19</sup> conducted in many different countries, have now been going on for forty years, and as the children grew up parents kept asking me to extend my *methods* to later ages. (Montessori, 1949/1988a, p. 7)

However, her science was more aligned to Dewey than Thorndike. She too pleaded that education should not be “separated from biological and social life” (Montessori, 1949/1988a, p. 9). Likewise, Steiner criticised science that disallowed aspects of the human being that could not be measured.

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<sup>19</sup> Emphasis – used by the author to emphasise scientific terms.

Anthroposophy<sup>20</sup> points to the importance of the *scientific achievements* of the last three to four centuries and, above all, to those of the nineteenth century, all of which it fully recognises. At the same time, however, anthroposophy also has the task of observing how these great *scientific successes* affect the human soul...Having revealed more and more of outer nature, science has, at the same time, alienated human beings from themselves. (Steiner, 1923/1996, p. 8)

In fact, although it is Dewey's emphasis on problem-solving that most influenced modern American education, he concurred with Steiner that imagination and art are equally essential (Sloan, 1996). Thus, Steiner, like Montessori, would be considered a qualitative researcher today for acknowledging that there are important variables in education that cannot be measured or considered the truth out of context.

In our current intellectual age we are too preoccupied with whether or not something is correct, whether or not it is logically correct; but we have lost the habit of asking whether it conforms to actual real-life situations. (Steiner, 1923/1996, p. 11)

Despite the convincing arguments of Dewey, Montessori and Steiner among others, Taylorism and Thorndike's views continued to make inroads and this perspective dominated psychology, research and education during and after World War II. There was a high demand for quantitative research; anything that could not be observed objectively or measured was not worthy of consideration by the social disciplines. Behaviourism came to the fore and many applauded its efforts to explain all actions

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<sup>20</sup> Anthroposophy – “Anthroposophy was the term Rudolf Steiner used to characterise the approach to

through stimulus and response. Mass testing introduced in the USA for children was modelled after the testing of soldiers in the war (Polkinghorne, 1988). Children were viewed as milk bottles on an assembly line filled and measured in mass production. The seeds sown by educators such as Steiner and Montessori to heed individual uniqueness and to present curriculums in meaningful ways were cast to the wind or relegated to the fringe. Narrative, as a tool of cultural interpretation, was, for a time, ignored.

Bruner (1990, p. 4) points out that even the cognitive revolution, which set out to counterbalance behaviourism, became fragmented when it shifted its focus “from the construction of meaning to the processing of information.” “Intentional states – beliefs, desires, intentions, commitments” were dismissed by cognitive psychologists in an effort “to explain human action from a point of view that is outside human subjectivity” (Bruner, 1990, p. 14).

A perspective, a sense of wholeness and meaning, was lost; society became materialistic and schools dominated by a fragmented curriculum where behaviour was modified by an external token system of rewards and punishments rather than by cultural expectations communicated through narrative. Grades and competition replaced a cultural bonding and an emphasis on community. ‘See Spot Run’ replaced the “real texts” advocated by Maria Montessori. Positivism removed the context of experience from learning in the classroom. In addition, the means to communicate

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understanding the whole human being as body, soul, and spirit” (Sloan, 1996, p. xix).

that experience to others was severely compromised (Bowers and Flinders, 1990; Sandlos, 1998).

Fleury (1998) notes that Jean Piaget's work, which was fundamental in influencing the constructivist approach, was misrepresented by the positivists. There was wide support for the assimilation, accommodation, adaptation model by which knowledge is constructed by a cognising subject. However a second foundational principle was "largely ignored by most American followers of the Piagetian tradition, namely, that the function of cognition is to organize one's experiential world, not to discover an ontological reality" (pp. 157-158).

The child does not assimilate 'pure' objects defined by their physical parameters only. She assimilates the situations in which objects play a specific role. When the system of communication between the child and her social world becomes more complex and enriched, and particularly when language becomes the dominating means of communication, then what we might call direct experience of objects comes to be subordinated, in certain situations, to the system of interpretations attributed to it by the social environment. The problem for genetic epistemology here is how to explain in what way assimilation remains, in such cases, conditioned by a particular social system of meanings, and to what extent the interpretation of each particular experience depends on such meanings. (Piaget and Garcia, 1989, p. 247)

The fact that Montessori and Steiner education incorporated the experiential aspect of constructivism may in part explain their demise in popularity for a time in the Western World where there was support for the notion that knowledge existed as a universal body of truth that was not altered through individual interpretations.

## Qualitative Research – A Contemporary Choice

To some degree, the effects of the positivistic scientific surge so prevalent in the 50's, 60's and 70's are still evident. However, the call for acknowledging meaning – making in our classrooms and communities has in the last two decades become louder and more persuasive. Writing in *The Road Less Travelled*, Scott Peck (1978/1983) noted that we were beginning to escape “scientific tunnel vision”(p. 242). He implied that with the increasing sophistication of our information gathering and the increasing complexity of issues, the more acknowledgement there was that paradoxes do exist that can't be explained objectively or by scientific law. Thomas Berry also comments on the irony that our incredible exploration of science from an objective viewpoint led to “an externalisation of all things natural” (1988, p. 115). “We thought that we were elevating the human when in reality we were alienating ourselves from the only context in which human life has any satisfying meaning.” Bruner noted that, for a time, psychology endeavoured to be scientific by being culture-free; it was felt that this was the only way a set of “transcendent human universals” could be discovered. However, by being “culture-free”, psychology became “meaning-free” as “the very people that are its subject are governed by shared meanings and values” (1990, p. 20).

Polkinghorne (1988) provides a persuasive argument that we need to free ourselves from the bonds of positivistic research:

I find that our traditional research model, adopted from the natural sciences, is limited when applied to the study of human beings. I do not believe that the solutions of

human problems will come from developing even more sophisticated and creative applications of the natural science model, but rather by developing additional, complementary approaches that are especially sensitive to the unique characteristics of human existence. (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.x)

Concurring with Bruner (1990) and Polkinghorne (1988), Minichello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1995) emphatically state that “to understand people, we must discover the contents of their minds – their beliefs, wishes, feelings, desires, fears, intentions” (p. 22). Since the “symbolic systems that individuals use in constructing meaning...are deeply entrenched in culture and language” we must look to people’s stories to infer their intentional states and their interpretations of cultural experiences (Bruner, 1990, p.11).

It is indeed a paradox that human universals can only be discovered through the richness of individual narratives, the tool to mediate “between the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires and hopes” (Bruner, 1990, p. 52). By listening to these individual stories, one can find shared meanings and shared concepts (Bruner, 1990, p. 13). In other words, the commonalities of these narratives can help us to understand the worldviews of a culture.

Several psychologists recognise that there are two types of thinking and different methodologies are related to each type. Bruner calls these two types of thinking, the Logico-Scientific (or the Paradigmatic) contrasted with Narrative thinking.

According to Bruner, in the paradigmatic approach, imagination leads to good theory, analysis, proof and hypothesising or seeing formal connections before they can be put

away. In a narration, imagination leads to a good story, drama, believable (not necessarily true) historical accounts (1988, p. 100). Robinson and Hawpe (1986, p. 114) referred to these two types of thinking as Principle and Story. They contend that in both “cause and effect” and “relations” are factors. “Both are attempts to organise and give meaning to human experience, to explain and guide problem solving.” However, the product of scientific theorising is a principle or law. These principles are general, context-free, usually abstract, and testable only by further formal scientific activity. The product of narrative thought – story – is context-bound, concrete, and testable through ordinary interpersonal checking. Polkinghorne further clarifies the difference between historical narrative and formal science. He claims that formal science is “interested in explanation and prediction of future events” whereas historical narrative is an analysis of the “configuration of past events into a meaningful scheme” (1988, p. 116).

Analysing the language of people’s narratives requires different skills from measuring the physical data in quantitative research. In quantitative work, a hypothesis is put forth and variables isolated and acted upon to determine by measured consequence if a hypothesis is true or not. In qualitative work, the model is inductive in that it begins with a whole context and ends with a greater story. Reissman (1993, p. 13) uses the term “ meta–story” to describe this construction by a researcher – one built on the patterns and themes of the component stories. In other words, in qualitative research “the goal of analysis is to uncover the common themes or plots in the data. Analysis is carried out using hermeneutic techniques for noting underlying patterns across examples of stories” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 177). Some of the patterns that are

uncovered might reflect a “multiplicity of meanings” rather than the single “abstract rule” or “single proposition” of paradigmatic knowledge (Carter, 1993, p. 173).

Lancy (1999) notes that in quantitative research there “is a clear separation between the issue studied and the methodology used to conduct the study...By contrast, topic, theory and methodology are usually closely interrelated in qualitative research” (p. 3).

I wanted to learn about narrative through exploring teachers’ storied experiences using a methodology that equates with narrative thinking. A qualitative narrative inquiry views patterns and deviations revealed in discourse and highlights and sequences in a discovery process until a theory (or meta-story) emerges that endows the individual narratives with new meaning.

This idea of separation also holds true for the researcher and the interviewee or informer. In quantitative research, there is an assumption that the researcher holds more answers than the informer who is an object of a study of cause and effect . By contrast, in qualitative research, there is a “presumption that the informant has the required information which the researcher lacks” (Minichello et al, 1995, p. 133). There is no hierarchical separation in that the interviewer and interviewee are in conversation surrounding the focus issues. In contrast to quantitative data, the interaction is engaging because it is a dynamic process for both parties. The separation of role in this type of methodology is in the purpose of participation. The interviewee’s expressions become the data and new realisations may be made by this subject because of the nature of the questions. The thoughts of the interviewer respond to the expressions of the interviewee, making connections to previous experience and interviews and contributing to the construction of theory. The purpose

of the interview conversation for the researcher is thus to access another's experience (Riessman, 1993).

In summary, qualitative research was an appropriate methodology for this study because:

- I was concerned with narrative thinking rather than logico-scientific thinking.
- I was concerned with linguistic data rather than physical data.
- I was interested in uncovering thoughts, feelings and perceptions rather than counting and measuring units of data.
- I presumed that my interviewees had required information that I lacked which would be revealed through dialogue.
- My goal was to build a theory rather than to measure or test a hypothesis.

## Data Collection

### In-Depth Interviewing

Minichello et al (1995) define In-Depth Interviewing as “conversation with a specific purpose – a conversation between researcher and informant focusing on the informant’s perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words” (p. 60). I chose a method of in-depth interviewing because I believed that this method of dialogue would be the most effective means of encouraging primary school teachers to share their storied experiences about what they perceive is happening when they use narrative. In making sense of their stories, I believed a theory would emerge revealing how teachers use narrative to foster meaning-making and understanding in varied primary school settings. My chosen methodology thus reflects

the observation made by Lancy (1999, p. 3) that “topic, theory and methodology are usually closely interrelated in qualitative research.”

The structure of these interviews would most appropriately be viewed as semi-structured with a general interview guide approach (Patton, 1990) I had a set of carefully prepared questions with possible probes. The questions (without prompts) were sent to the interviewees so they could think about them in advance. (Refer to Appendix D.) This would characterise the *general interview guide approach* as described by Patton in that the interviewees were aware that there was some common information that I wanted to obtain from each person interviewed but I adopted “both the wording and the sequence of questions to specific respondents in the context of the actual interview” (Patton, 1990, p. 280). This semi-structured approach is in contrast to the *informal conversational interview* where questions are spontaneously generated and the *standardised open-ended interview*, which follows carefully worded questions in a specific order. The method selected encouraged some flexibility and spontaneity while still allowing the collection of subjects’ views on specific topics (Patton, 1990, p. 281).

### The Questions

The challenge was to construct interview questions that would evoke responses that when analysed could provide answers to the following research questions:

- What is the place of narrative in contemporary classroom teaching and learning? How do underlying philosophical traditions and beliefs influence the uses of narrative in different schools in Montessori, Steiner, Catholic and Government school settings?

- How is narrative used to support learning across the curriculum and in personal development in each setting?
- How do teachers describe and interpret effects on their own and children's learning?

My interview questions (with prompts) were as follows:

### **Interview Questions:<sup>ii</sup>**

#### **1. How do you use narrative in your classroom?**

- What subjects? (e.g. language, social studies, science, math, religion, health, other)
- How do you use narrative as part of an integrated language approach?
- How do you use story to introduce themes to the classroom?
- What are some of the activities that you associate with the use of story?
- What use do you make of 'told' stories and 'read' stories?
- What are your favourites to which you return? What do these stories lend to your own learning?
- Tell me about some stories that you have used that you felt really "worked" as a teaching tool and reflect on the processes at work!
- Are you conscious of balancing your choices of stories for use in your classroom to counter bias (e.g. gender, cultural, age, etc.)?
- *Are there opportunities for intergenerational story telling in your class or school?*<sup>21</sup>
- *Are there any modifications that you have made to the classroom to more effectively use story?*

#### **2. Tell me about the children's own narrative creations (samples appreciated)**

- How often do they write stories? How do they get their ideas?

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<sup>21</sup> Italics – Questions in italics were modified or added during the course of the interview process.

- How do the children construct and reconstruct oral narratives of their own?
- What commonalities do you notice in content or format that you associate with the developmental stage of the children you teach?
- If you have taught more than one grade level, do you notice differences in the content or format of their stories?
- What opportunities do the children have to share their own personal narratives?

**3. What do you believe is gained by using narrative (stories or poems) in the classroom?**

- What are the benefits or disadvantages? *Are there times when you don't think using narrative is appropriate?*
- How does it help make the subject more meaningful?
- How does it help to motivate the children?
- How does it aid recall?
- How does it help you to cater for multiple learning styles and intelligences?
- *How does it help children to focus on life issues?*

**4. How do you see story as related to your philosophy or to the philosophy or ethos of your school?**

- Have you been to workshops or training that has influenced how you use story in your classroom? (e.g. First Steps, ALEA, author workshops, creative-writing workshops, Montessori, Waldorf education?)
- How do you view your use of story in the class as being different from schools that adhere to other philosophies or ethos?
- How do you view your use of narrative in the class as being different from other classrooms in your school?
- *Tell me about when you first became interested in using narrative in teaching.*

**5. What opportunities do you have to explore your personal narrative in the school setting?**

- How do you make the opportunity to explore your own development in relation to the core values of the school and what would you like to see happen?
- How do you create opportunities to share what is happening in your practice of teaching and what would you like to do in this regard?
- How does your reflection on your classroom experiences with students contribute to your personal narrative?
- Where do you or might you go to find like-minded people who would support your personal narrative?
- *We always hope that the activities in the classroom support our beliefs about learning and teaching and yet all of us have times when some incident calls our beliefs or practices into question. Are there any critical incidents – incidents that occurred in the classroom that have made you alter how you teach? Have you been able to share these incidents with other teachers?*
- *Who were some of the teachers who influenced you as a child?*
- *What do you do for balance in your life?*

**6. What are some stories that are meaningful to you as an adult?**

- *Are there stories that you have revisited that you have found meaningful?*
- *Are there stories that were once favourites, but no longer hold the same meaning or stories that did not engage you at one time, that you now find meaningful?*
- *Are there stories that you have presented to children in different ways when you revisited them? Do you view this alteration as being related to your personal development?*

**7. Additional helpful information:**

- When and where did you do your training? What type of training?
- What have you drawn upon that you have found particularly beneficial? Reading? Resources? Models? Mentors? Workshops?

- In what school systems have you taught and what grades have you taught?
- How long have you been teaching?

**8. (Question for those who are teacher trainers) How do you or might you use narrative in teacher training?**

In what ways are trainee teachers given the opportunity to share their stories or to benefit from hearing the stories of other teachers?

What changes have you seen in teacher education in recent years that you feel are positive? Are there changes that cause you concern?

- *If you were in a position to make changes to teacher education, what would you suggest?*

**9. How did you find this interview process?**

Determining the interview questions.

I endeavoured to pose questions that would invite the teachers to share their storied experiences with me. Questions were trialled in a discussion format with primary teacher postgraduate students enrolled in a Research Methodology course at the University of Notre Dame Australia and individually with a primary teacher postgraduate student at Murdoch University. Thus I determined that Question 1, *How do you use narrative in your classroom?* and Question 2, *Tell me about the children's own narrative creations* would reveal the range of uses of narrative in the different settings. Data from Question 3, *What do you believe is gained by using narrative in the classroom?* and Question 4, *How do you see story as related to your own*

*philosophy or to the philosophy or ethos of your school?* asked for reflections that would link narrative use to the individual school traditions and beliefs. Responses to Questions 1-5 all contributed to data on curriculum links, themes and subject integration. The prompt to Question 3 *How does it help children to focus on life issues?* as well as Questions 5. *What opportunities do you have to explore your personal narrative in the school setting?* and Question 6, *What are some stories that are meaningful to you as an adult?* all unearthed storied experience relating to personal development. Question 3, *What do you believe is gained by using narrative in the classroom?* was included to encourage teachers to reflect on their own and the children's learning, but all of the initial six question responses elicited relevant data to address this. Prompt questions were also prepared as a guide to clarification, but were used only as necessary depending on the responses of the interviewees.

#### Posing the Questions.

Frequently I started with Question 7 on personal details if I felt supplying the demographic information first would help to make the interviewee more at ease. Question 1, a structural and descriptive question, was usually addressed next because it fittingly set the parameters for all additional questions, but, at the same time, it asked for some concrete responses. This question fulfilled Barbara and Robert Somner's (1991) suggestion to start with a general question. They state that one should begin with more general and interesting questions in order to engage the interviewee. Also, generality reduces the likelihood that the respondent can make judgements about what the researcher wants to hear. They also contend that in-depth interviewing should be structured so that a subject is explored at deeper and deeper levels and the order of questions should facilitate this process.

In posing these questions, I was very aware of asking some of them in such a way that the respondent would respond with a story. (Minichello et al, 1995, p. 86) For instance, the probe, *Tell me about stories that really “worked” for you* prompted interviewees to share stories about using story. In response, Sam described his students’ study of St. Francis and Lynne gave a detailed account of her mixed grade creation which was inspired by Mem Fox’s *Guess Who?* (1988).

Generalisations such as in Question 1, *How do you use narrative in your classroom?*, often lead to a story. “The major advantage of the story-telling process for both interviewer and informant is that it allows the informant greater latitude in answering questions ‘rather than having to mould his answers into a format which the question requires. (Askham, 1982, p. 572) Minichello et al refer to this generalisation as a specific example of funnelling. Asking the interviewee to provide such a storied example, is called “the story telling technique” (1995, p. 84).

### Modifications.<sup>ii</sup>

Modifications were later made to the original questions with additional questions added, based on my own interview experience and new avenues of exploration revealed by the initial interviews and the literature review.

My thesis supervisor and experienced interviewer, Dr. Ann Zubrick, interviewed me using my questions as a guide for two purposes: firstly, so that I could access my own storied experiences as part of the data; and secondly, so that I could ascertain if the interview questions effectively elicited storied responses relevant to my research

focus. As a result of my own reaction to the interview process, I was able to re-evaluate my questions and alter them to precipitate exploration of areas that I had not been successfully reaching. For example, I had initially included a question on classroom organisation, *Are there any modifications that you have made to the classroom to more effectively use story?* Moving this from a key question to a prompt for Question 1 seemed a good reorganisation. As a distinctly separate question, it seemed to be keeping interviewees on a functional level when I wanted them to reflect on what narrative means to them on a more personal level.

Some of my interviewees seemed to find my questions regarding catering for personal narrative in the school setting unclear. By adding the knowledge question, *Where do you or might you go to find like-minded people who would support your personal narrative?*, I endeavoured to clarify this key question and encourage more reflection. In addition, by inserting the question, *What are some stories that are meaningful to you as an adult?*, I hoped to gain more information on teachers' personal narratives by querying what stories were meaningful to them including adult stories and stories they used in the classroom. When asked this question by Dr. Zubrick, I found it achieved just what I was seeking – it made me revisit the seeds of literary narrative throughout my life and it moved me out of a superficial comfort zone discussing teaching techniques to a much deeper and more personal level of sharing. As a result of my own interview, I also added the prompt, *Tell me about when you first became interested in using narrative in teaching* to Question 4. Because this prompt was more open-ended than the other prompts and asked the interviewee to review their own teaching narrative, it invited more sharing of story.

Questions were also added to further probe and clarify narrative uses and issues that were revealed in the initial interviews. This spiralling effect is another aspect of qualitative research, which allows that each interview represents an experience from which the next interview can build. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 10) explain this spiralling phenomenon in noting that "because collaboration occurs from beginning to end in narrative inquiry, plot outlines are continually revised as consultation takes place over written materials and as further data are collected to develop points of importance in the revised story." Creswell (1994, p. 47) supports this view noting that "the continuous nature of qualitative interviewing means that the questioning is redesigned throughout the project." This is partially due to the fact that inductive analysis is occurring simultaneously with the gathering of data through the interview process.

Design in qualitative interviewing is iterative. That means that each time you repeat the basic process of gathering information, analysing it, winnowing it, and testing it, you come closer to a clear and convincing model of the phenomenon you are studying. In the early stages of the interviewing, the design emphasises more the gathering of many themes and ideas; toward the middle of the research, you concentrate more on winnowing to limit the number of themes that you explore. In the final stages, you emphasise more the analysis and testing of your understanding as you put them together, begin to form theories, and run them by your interviewees and critical readers in your field. (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 46)

As part of the spiralling effect of my research, questions were added to clarify issues or the effects of narrative use as they emerged. These new focus aspects included

recalling teachers who influenced interviewees as children, querying how they found balance in their lives, the use of intergenerational story telling, and the effects of critical incidents on one's life narrative.

I added the prompt, *Who were some of the teachers who influenced you as a child?* to elucidate teachers' experience of personal narrative. Ritchie and Wilson (2000) indicate that these experiences are pertinent to teacher narrative and, indeed, some of my early interviewees mentioned early mentors. The probe *What do you do for balance in your life?* was another late question emerging when the data began revealing a use of narrative for personal transformation.

Both Dan and I shared experiences of inviting grandparents into the school to talk to the students. Having read Vivien Paley's (1995) description of how powerful it was for parents to share their varied stories with her class, I decided to ask other interviewees if they used this narrative resource by adding the Question 1 prompt, *Are there opportunities for intergenerational story telling in your class or school?*

Through my reading on critical incidents and transformational learning (Carrigg, 1997; Mezirow, 1985a, 1985b) and as a result of my discussions with Dr. Zubrick, I came to the realisation that critical incidents can often add to the conflict in a narrative and the resolution can send one off on new and possibly creative paths.

Thus I added the following prompt to the question on personal narrative in the school setting: *We always hope that the activities in the classroom support our beliefs about learning and teaching and yet all of us have times when some incident calls our beliefs or practices into question. Are there any critical incidents – incidents that*

*occurred in the classroom that have made you alter how you teach? Have you been able to share these incidents with other teachers?*

During the time I was gathering data, I was also teaching a course in interpersonal communication to trainee and graduate teachers. Possibly because it was a class of varied experiences, the dialogue during our many collaborative problem solving and role-play situations was very rich and prompted extensive sharing. This caused me to reflect on how narrative might be used more broadly in training teachers. Since several of my interviewees were involved part-time in teacher training and supervision, I decided to ask them Question 8, (*Question for those who are teacher trainers*) *How do you or might you use narrative in teacher training?*

Personally, I found the interview process so energising from the point of view of interviewer as well as interviewee, that I felt it was important to ascertain how the interviewees viewed the process and the opportunity to share their stories. This information was elicited through Question 9, *How did you find the interview process?*

#### The Interview Process.

As the interviewing progressed, I became increasingly convinced that in-depth interviewing is dialogue, and that, by sharing some of my own experiences, my interviewees were more inclined to share their stories in response. I gained new insights from each of these sharing sessions. Instead of a survey, it became a joint exploration. My own experience mirrored what Dr. Zubrick voiced after she interviewed me:

Dr. Zubrick: The interesting thing for me was that it started off like an interview and it changed. It became much more like a dialogue. I thought about things I hadn't really reflected on and I got some really helpful insights for myself in the process. I think that's really critical in what you're doing. (Dr. Zubrick's interview with Gay: 414)

Minichello (1995) notes that the in-depth interview process is, in fact, talking, listening and reflecting which are the components of a dialogue (p. 101). Reissman (1993) notes that the purpose of the dialogue is to "make meaning together" (p. 55).

Being interviewed myself put me in a context to really understand my interviewees. I would suggest that an appreciation for the advantage of a shared dialogue between researcher and subject is a relatively recent evolution in qualitative research methodology. Platt (1981), for instance, clearly described the standard interview format of her time with the researcher being of a superior knowledge and class to the interviewee. She thus had to come to terms with some new dimensions when asked to interview her colleagues about assessment at a university. In Minichello et al's (1995) view this would be an ideal format for in-depth interviewing with interviewer and respondent exploring a situation together:

A primary focus of in-depth interviewing is to understand the significance of human experiences as described from the actor's perspective and interpreted by the researcher. This requires that the researcher has personal interaction with the individuals and their context so that he or she can hear people's language and observe behaviour in situ. (Minichello, 1995, p. 12)

Strauss and Corbin (1990) claim that professional experience can heighten ‘theoretical sensitivity’ (p. 42). As part of this sensitivity is derived from the background of the analyst, I felt it important to establish a reflective journal as part of my personal data file to note how my perspective was formed and evolved as a result of the in-depth interviews with others in my profession. My own interview formed a basis for the historic section of this file by outlining the experiences from which my interview questions originated and providing a basis for reflecting on emerging and changing concepts constructed as I interviewed others. In many ways, I have viewed my roles as both a participant and an observer as an advantage because my personal insight helped me to understand the meaning other teachers were ascribing to their experience. I was asking, “What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon intensely” (Patton, 1990, p. 71)? My own experiences were recorded in a historic personal file as well as being incorporated with those of my interviewees in an interview data transcript file. Theory construction involved making connections between these files. Although the reported experiences collected in the interview data file were varied and often very different from my own, my common professional background aided me in partially visualising the context from which my interviewees’ stories emerged.

### Research Participants

#### Sample.

Subjects were selected through purposeful sampling. What were considered to be information-rich cases (Patton, 1990; Neuman, 1997) from varied school milieus were

selected for in – depth studies. <sup>1</sup> My initial criterion for an ‘information-rich case’ was that each teacher was known to purposely use narrative in their classrooms. My approach for finding these subjects was snowball or reputational sampling as one often led to another (Neuman, 1997). Selection was also theoretically based (Patton, 1990) in that I wanted to have a representative sampling of male and female narrative-using teachers with varying lengths of experience in teaching. Also, at the sampling stage of the research, I wanted to ensure that varied school settings were sampled to explore the possibility that narrative use varied according to school ethos or milieu. Personal experience motivated me to want to interview teachers trained in Montessori and more traditional settings because I was aware that training guided the teachers to use narrative in different ways. Some of the Montessori teachers referred me to Steiner teachers due to their reputation as storytellers. I was also eager to interview these teachers after preliminary research revealed that Waldorf (Steiner) teacher trainers presented distinct views on using narrative in teaching. In addition, I followed up leads to narrative use in government and systemic Catholic schools. Since these teachers trained in the same tertiary institutions, I was interested in exploring teachers’ perceptions of the effects of subsequent teaching settings on narrative use. I was aware, however, that the diversity of large populations such as Government and systemic Catholic schools presented some difficulty in definitively categorizing findings. It is thus emphasized that when the term ‘Government school teacher’ or ‘Catholic school teacher’ is employed, it is not to generalize the observed narrative use to the whole population, but merely to identify the setting in which the teacher practises. Twelve primary teachers were ultimately interviewed - five (including the researcher) with experience primarily in Montessori schools, two from Steiner schools, two from government schools and three from Catholic schools

(although two of these three interviewees had extensive experience in both systemic Catholic<sup>22</sup> and government systems). Two of the Montessori teachers live in the USA; the other ten teachers are located in Western Australia. (Refer to Table 1.)

### Ethical Considerations.

Where appropriate, letters were sent to the school principal to seek permission to interview the teacher and to later observe in the classroom. (Refer to Appendix E.) A letter describing the research was given to the teacher (Refer to Appendix F.) as well as a permission form that could be used to gain permission from parents for a student's work to be shared with the researcher. (Refer to Appendix G.) Although it was originally intended that all interviewees be referred to by pseudonyms, some of the interviewees stated that they preferred to be referred to by their own names. In some instances, this prevented confusion due to their public persona of lecturing or writing in subjects related to the use of narrative in teaching. A form was thus devised for interviewees to indicate how they would like to be designated in the research presentations. (Refer to Appendix H.)

Subjects were interviewed in a quiet location of their choice. Questions were used to launch discussions, but in varied order and with varied prompts depending on the direction the dialogue took. Interviews were taped and later transcribed.

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<sup>22</sup> Catholic schools – refer to the systemic Catholic Schools. It is understood that there are other types of Catholic schools including Montessori Catholic schools, but no teachers were interviewed from any other types of Catholic schools outside the systemic Catholic schools in Western Australia.

Table 1

<u>Name/Pseudonym</u>	<i>School</i>	<u>Teaching Experience</u> <sup>23</sup>
Carol	USA Montessori	20 years
Shawn*	USA Montessori	20 years
Nigel*	Montessori	18 years
Ellen*	Montessori	9 years
Allison <sup>24</sup>	Montessori	13 years
Sam*	Steiner	13 years
Bernadette*	Steiner	17 years
Lynne*	Government	9 years
Dan	Government	18 years
Kate*	Catholic	5 years
Vicky*	Catholic (Gov) <sup>25</sup>	20+ years

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<sup>23</sup> Teaching experience – reflects time teaching primary age children or teachers of primary age children; although some teachers have taught in different types of schools, over 50% of their experience and their most recent experiences are in the type of school indicated.

<sup>24</sup> Allison – the designated pseudonym for the researcher as interviewee.

<sup>25</sup> Vicky and Fran – Both teachers have had extensive experience in Government and Catholic schools. Their primary school work was in Catholic schools at the time of the interview.

Fran	Catholic (Gov) <sup>viii</sup>	20+ years
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### Informed Others.

The spiralling effect that applied to the evolution of questions was also relevant to participants. When an issue arose that further questioning of interviewees couldn't clarify, then other expertise was sought. Thus when a literature review linked narrative in curriculum to the project approach of Reggio Emilia (Refer to Appendix C.), I visited two teachers who had been influenced by this approach – Jan Phillips of Penrhos and Barbara Bosich of Christ Church Grammar School. When I needed to understand the Catholic School religious education programme, I approached Elizabeth Peel of Mary MacKillop primary whom I knew had recently completed a religious education course and was enjoying interweaving R.E<sup>26</sup>. with other classroom subjects. When it became clear that the new Western Australian *Curriculum Framework* (1998) made provision for more integrated learning and 'value' education than previous curriculum documents, I visited Presbyterian Ladies' College, Perth, where the Framework had been implemented for some time. There I interviewed fourth grade teacher, Victoria Biggs and visited her classroom. Thus, four teachers who were not in the original sample were consulted in the latter stages of research. These interviews were not taped. However, notes from these interviews were coded and used alongside literature review notes to aid interpretation of results by clarifying the context of interviewees' perspectives.

### Observations

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<sup>26</sup> R.E. – used as an abbreviation for Religious Education.

Wherever possible, I spent a half/day visiting the classroom of the interviewee.<sup>27</sup> This served several purposes: firstly, it provided a type of triangulation, theoretically providing more data than one could obtain from a single source. On several occasions, I saw narrative being used in additional ways – not mentioned in the interview. Secondly, it enabled me to note any perceived discrepancies between what the interviewee had said and what I saw occurring in the classroom and to ask the interviewee for clarification (Lancy, 1999; Neuman, 1997; Patton, 1990). Thirdly, the visit afforded me an opportunity to reconnect with the interviewee, thus allowing them to share additional thoughts on the use of narrative in the classroom that had occurred to them since the interview meeting.

I devised an observation form to assist me in focusing on observable phenomenon in the classroom that might contribute to an understanding of how narrative was being used. (Refer to Appendix I.) On the form I noted classroom environment factors including displays that might indicate a theme or class focus (e.g. *Charlotte's Web* (White, 1952) in Kate's class), the nature of the classroom library (e.g. Folk tales and biography were particularly noticeable in Ellen's class library), and seating arrangements that were a possible indication of whole class or collaborative work preferences (e.g. Sam's class were organised in rows and Ellen's and Lynne's in small groups). Secondly, I noted details of any lessons I observed including the inclusion of any reference to narrative or theme. (e.g. While I was in Sam's class, he was telling stories of characters who represented math functions and in Nigel's class the children were investigating frogs and the narrative was on frogs, *Lester and Clyde* (Reece,

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<sup>27</sup> “\*” indicates classroom observation.

1976). I also noted the types of follow-on that children pursued after a lesson – if they worked individually or in groups and the types of activities. (e.g. In Kate’s class, the children created plays in small groups). I was particularly interested in noting if the activities involved a narrative or thematic catalyst and which learning domains were incorporated in the explorations. Finally, I noted other references to narrative in the class. (e.g. In both Kate and Bernadette’s classes, the children had written Aboriginal-like tales). I observed for at least two hours in each classroom and arranged for additional interview time with each teacher immediately following the visit.

#### Data Collection files

Minichello et al (1995, pp. 224-236) suggests that data files in qualitative research should comprise a transcript file, a personal file and an analytic file. Files for this research took the following form:

- *A transcript file*

My transcript file included the 12 interview taped transcripts, as well notes from interviews with informed others, literature review notes and the observation forms. Initially, a concept revealed in the transcripts was coded by setting and according to the categories revealed in Index Tree 1 devised after initial interviews. As coding progressed, the school-type branches became further differentiated. (Refer to Figure 1 and Figure 2 and Appendix J.) From each classroom observation, data was obtained for the sub file entitled *Samples and Examples*.. Entries were also allocated to a curriculum sub file if the observation added to the information provided in the teacher interview. Observations not related to the use of narrative in the classroom were excluded from the data file. Notes from interviews from informed others and literature review notes were also included in the initial coding branches if they helped to clarify the curriculums of varied methodologies. These notes were often recoded under branches formed to analyse data if information gained helped to clarify emerging concepts. (Refer to Figure 4.)

- *A personal file*  
My personal file was comprised of a reflective journal and a historic personal file. The reflective journal entries included reference to an ongoing literature review as well as comments and observations related to the interviews and observations conducted and descriptions of ideas emerging from the corresponding analysis of data. The historic personal file included observations and reflections from my own years teaching in primary schools. These experiences formed the basis for questions on narrative and contributed to the formation of a data coding system and later interpretation when the differences and similarities of my experiences, those of the interviewees and those accessed through a literature review were analysed. The interview in which I was a subject was included both in this file and in the transcript file.
- *An analytic file*  
My analytic file consisted of records of the coding conducted using NUD\*IST software<sup>28</sup> and corresponding memos and reports created through text searches. These memos and reports were organized into further coding categories comprising results and discussion if they contributed to an understanding of how narrative was being employed in primary schools.

### Data Coding

During preliminary readings of the transcripts, several “free nodes”<sup>29</sup> were devised to note ideas, concepts and terminology that was appearing in responses. Quite early in the coding process, I decided not to use the questions themselves as parent branches of the coding system. Due to the nature of the storied interviews, questions were used in various ways to elicit responses and stories emerging often served to relate to several questions. I thus decided to use the different types of schools as major branches with children codes used to organise the data from each interviewee into major concepts. Thus Montessori was Branch 1, Steiner was Branch 2, and

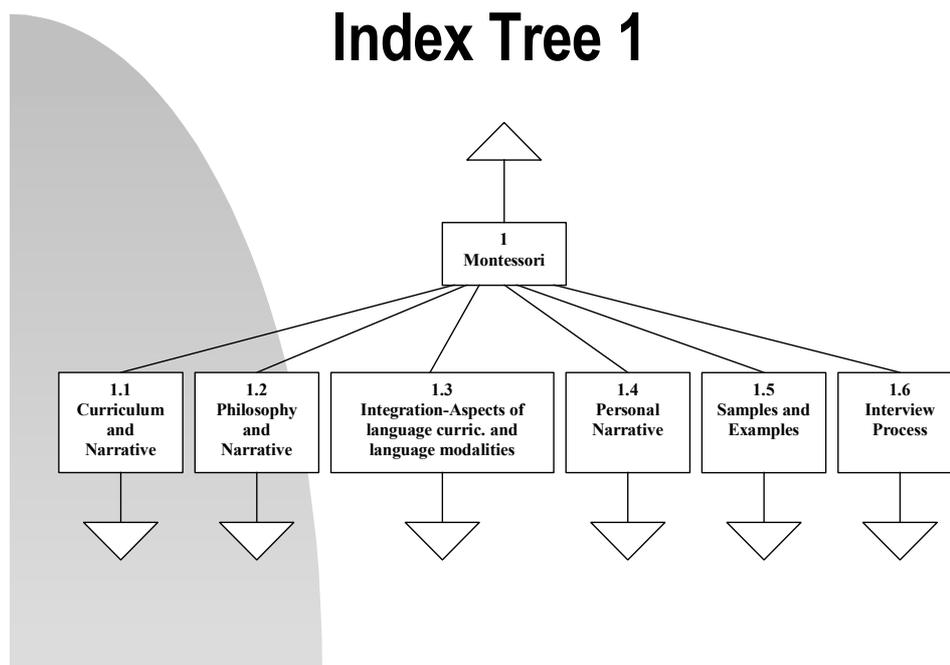
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<sup>28</sup> NUD\*IST – an acronym meaning Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching Theorising. It refers to a software package developed at La Trobe University, Melbourne, and placed under copyright by Q.S.R. (Qualitative Solutions and Research Pty. Ltd.) The version used as an analytical tool in this study was QSR NUD\*IST 4 (1997).

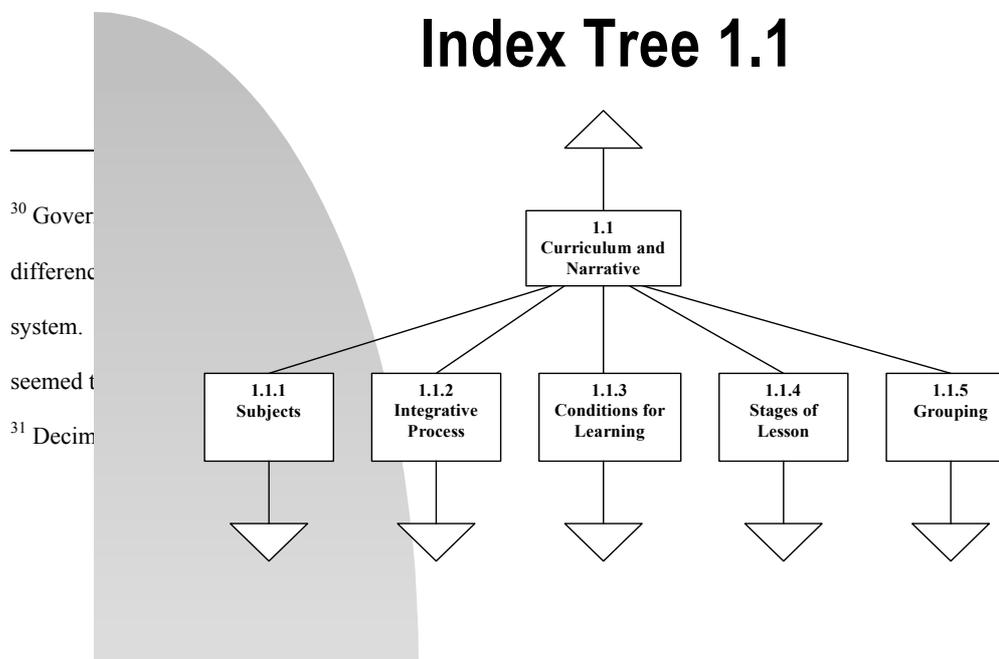
<sup>29</sup> Free node – an identified concept not yet in an identified pattern represented by a tree.

Government and Catholic schools were Branch 3.<sup>30</sup> Branch 4 was Base data of the Interviewees and Branch 5 was for observations and reflections on the interview process itself. Refer to Figure 1 for an example of the initial codes for a school-type branch.

Figure 1



Each of these Nodes had “children” nodes. For example, 1.1<sup>31</sup> had the following sub branches.

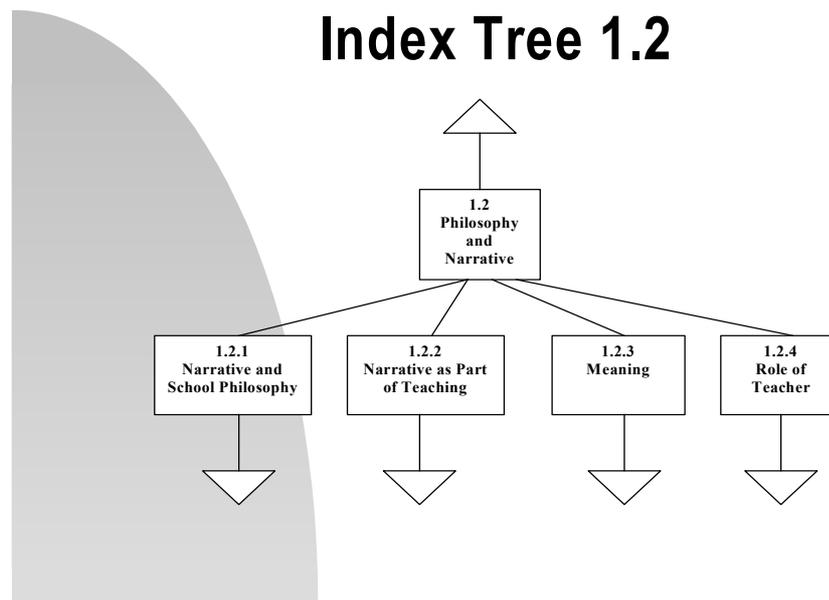


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Figure 2

1.2 had the following sub branches coded to organise the relevant interview data:

Figure 3



Refer to Appendix J for a sample list of nodes for Tree 1 partially portrayed in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

### Data Analysis Methodology

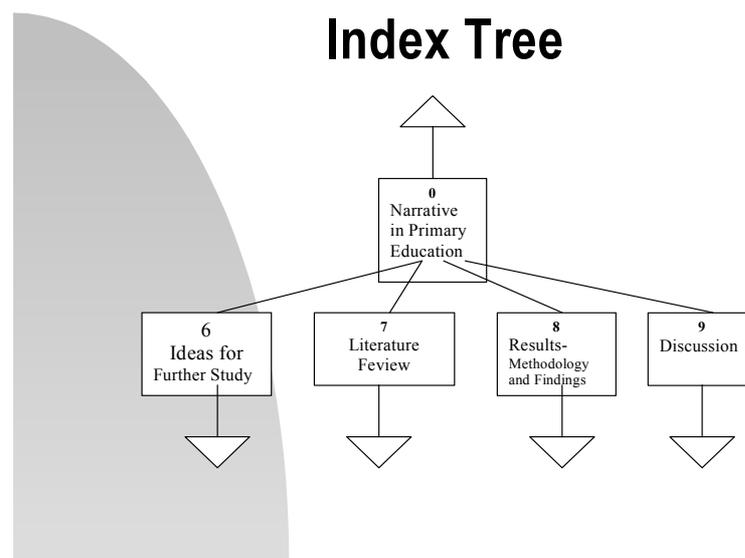
#### Coding for Analysis – Finding patterns

The NUD\*IST index system evolved during the analysis process. In an effort to refine the analytic process by having the coding mirror the emerging concepts, more

tree branches were created to organise the data in the personal and analytic files.

Additional branches are revealed in Figure 4.

Figure 4



Numerous text searches were conducted using union, intersection, collect and inherit properties of the NUD\*IST programme as well as extensive searches for significant words and phrases in the nine hundred twenty seven coded nodes in nine trees. In this manner, contexts were created in which, using inductive reasoning, patterns were explored and unique ideas identified. The results of these searches were recoded as patterns and concepts composing the branches displayed in Figure 4 including Further Study, Results and Discussion. The Result section was created by patterns that emerged and discussion was composed of reflection on these patterns. Literature Review (Branch 7) was used to clarify patterns that were revealed and recoded into

the Discussion. Further Studies (Branch 6) was used to store those codes of questions arising from Results.

One of the first patterns to emerge was the recognition amongst linguists, developmental and cognitive psychologists and primary school teachers of the importance of narrative as a context for language development and communication. Other patterns that emerged were the use of narrative to foster historical and cultural understandings, to provide role models, to explore personal development, to convey universal themes and values and to facilitate change or transformation. Implications for primary and trainee teacher curriculums were also revealed as patterns in the coding. These results will be described in more detail in the following chapters.

### Reliability and Validity of the Results revealed through Data Analysis

#### Reliability

Although it seems generally accepted that these are important concepts to be considered in research, they take a different format in qualitative than in quantitative research. Quantitatively, reliability refers to accuracy in measurement and the ability of the research to be replicated. In qualitative research, rather than repeating measures, one wants to identify a repetition of ideas or concepts that can lead to new discoveries (Minichello et al, 1995). “When we are measuring people’s views, this is translated as internal and external consistency. Internal consistency refers to whether the data are plausible given all that is known about a person and an event” (Neuman, 1997, p. 368). In part, I chose to ensure some internal consistency by interviewing teachers recommended by reputable sources. Because the interviewees were recommended, certain assumptions were made allowing their individual narratives to

be included as data to determine more generalized patterns. These assumptions that served to maximise the interpretative potential of each interview included:

(Minichello et al, 1995, pp. 32-36):

- Rationality: I assumed that the interviewees used narrative in the way they reported because they believed that this use reflected their pedagogy.
- Intentionality: I assumed that teacher interviewees intended the examples they gave of their programs and classroom activities to be representative of their teaching-learning environment and culture.
- Self-directedness: I assumed that the interviewees were presenting authentic views of their experiences in the classroom and their views on education.
- Truth-telling: I treated the report of the educators' experiences as a truthful portrayal of their background, classroom experiences and actions.

I also endeavoured to ensure some qualitative reliability by striving for external consistency. Referrals of teachers from reputable resources who viewed the interviewees as being representative of their school cultures seemed an appropriate starting point for ensuring that the parameters of my investigation were appropriate. Constructing a sampling that included more than one teacher from each type of school also contributed to reliability. When marked differences were viewed in terms of the use of narrative in classrooms of the same avowed pedagogy, then more interviews were sought. The wide variation in the use of narrative for language purposes in the Montessori school led to my interviewing more representatives of this methodology than others in order to identify patterns.

Contextual factors were also considered in an effort to achieve reliability.

Observations of several of the teacher's classrooms created a type of triangulation to ensure that the interview fit "into the overall context" (Neuman, 1997, p. 368). In addition, a literature review, which included narratives of teachers' experiences in the four types of schools represented, helped me to assure that the stories I was hearing were in context. In effect, the process was designed for "pattern matching", perhaps the qualitative version of replication (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986, p.124).

Minichello et al (1995) suggest that qualitative researchers make certain cultural assumptions in this pattern matching. To contribute to reliability, one assumes that there is an overlap between a person's beliefs, words, and ideals and his/her culture and that the subject's particular culture gives meaning to his/her behavior and actions. In the text and index searches of this study - terms, key words and concepts identified from literature about these cultures were identified in each of the interviews supporting the view that the interviewees were reliable representatives of their school cultures and that their beliefs overlapped with those of their culture. For instance, a discussion of *the great stories* was part of the discussion with all the Montessori teachers, while reference to *myths* appeared frequently in the Steiner literature and interviews. For the whole language teachers from the systemic Catholic and Government schools, *First Steps* was an important reference and school culture link. In narrative form, one might ask if the plot or theme was present and similarly treated in other texts by the same author? If so, one's conclusions about the author's writing style and content becomes more reliable.

## Validity

Validity in qualitative research is “confidence placed in a researcher’s analysis and data as accurately representing the social world in the field” (Neuman, 1997, p. 369). Validity was partially determined by inviting the six subjects who could be contacted 18 months after the initial data collection to read the findings of the research. In each case, the subjects reported that their views were accurately represented and that they felt reading the thesis gave them motivation to continue in their work within their school cultures as well as further ideas for using narrative in their work. This is a particular attribute of qualitative research. Subjects change as a result of their involvement in the study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), but if the study did not have validity it could be argued that this growth would not occur. It is anticipated that the remaining subjects will also have the opportunity to determine if the results are representative of their views and helpful in conceptualizing how they use narrative. Validity has also been determined by inviting other non-subject teachers to read this study and by reporting on the results and conclusions in a summary form to broader audiences representative of the four school cultures. This is an ongoing process, but preliminary feedback supports the premise that this study has validity in that audiences have found it accurately portrayed aspects of their particular methodologies. In a metaphorical sense, internal validity is the engagement of the research narrative. Do the reported stories represent the field in valid way so that the audience becomes involved in the unfolding story?

In contrast, external validity can be referred to as generalisability. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 7) propose that the criterion generalisability should be replaced in narrative inquiry by the term “transferability”. The methodology which has pursued

the qualitative inductive process of viewing the contextual wholes, finding patterns and creating theories then focuses on discovering if these transfer to a wide audience. Metaphorically, can the conflict and resolution of the story be applied to other stories – in this case, other school cultures? By hearing one unique story, can we gain insight into other stories in other settings? (Merriam, 1998) Considered in terms of this research, can a Montessori, a Steiner or a whole language Catholic or Government school teacher's experience using narrative alter how teachers in a different educational culture milieu use narrative? It is anticipated that the results of this research will find a wide application through teachers identifying with the commonalities in this record of storied experiences. The foundation for this was laid by interviewing subjects who worked in varied educational settings identifiable as Montessori, Steiner, Government or Catholic whole language classrooms. Following completion of the data collection, I began presenting the substance of all of these interviews to audiences representing each of these cultures. This process will continue, but initial results indicate that many of the uses of narrative associated with one of these studied pedagogies can be applied to other pedagogies. In other words, elements of the narrative of each educational milieu can be transferred to other school cultures.