Mutual interests of teacher educators:  
Collaborative research on professional development

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Abstract

One of the fascinating issues in the field of the narrative research is the formation of student teachers' professional identity by analysis of their life stories. The process of writing is grasped as a journey into deep layers of the self identity.  
The findings include a content analysis of three narratives: a journey journal, tales with morals and therapeutic writing. The analysis showed a connection between the genre of the stories and the chosen issue in each student's enquiry.  
The conclusion comprises a discussion of the potential contribution of this knowledge to teacher retraining program.

Key words: life stories, professional development, narrative, teacher education.

Theoretical background

The diversity in narrative research has become a major issue in the field of teacher education programs in the last two decades. One basic assumption in using narratives in educational context is the perception of the human being as a story-teller composing narratives about himself and others (Brunner, 1990). Narratives describe experiences and the meaning people attribute to them through: stories, autobiographies, diaries and letters (Silberstein, 2002). These different genres shape teachers' professional landscape and influences their professional lives. A fascinating issue in teacher education is the usage of life story analysis in the process of professional identity formation (Beijaard et al, 2004). The analysis includes inquiry of meaningful life events in an attempt to decode personal perceptions and practices through stories and other ways of expression.

According to Bruner (1986, 1990) people are natural born story tellers, they can turn each event into a story. Story telling elaborates the natural ability to improvise, when our narrative comes to a dead end: "We improvise in how we tell about ourselves to ourselves, improvise in the interest of keeping our investment in our balance from getting undone" (Bruner, 2003, p. 100). For this reason, stories help people to say certain things at certain times and in certain places, and likewise not to say them in others (Plummer, 1995 p.175 in: Stuart, 1998). They determine the meaning that people find in their life experience and the issues that are meaningful for them (White & Epston, 1990). More than that, people's lives and relationships develop according to the stories they build. Through storytelling they engage in narrative theorizing that contributes to the shaping process of their personal and professional identity (Bullough, 1997).

Professional identity is part of a personal identity which develops during interpersonal relationships of an individual and his environment, in a certain time and context (Erikson,
1968; McCornick & Pressley, 1997). Identity is not something one has, but something that develops during one's whole life (Beijaard et al, 2004). It is formed by what the person knows and by the way he describes himself as a human being and as a professional. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) refer to professional identity in terms of 'stories to live by', that provide a narrative thread which practitioners draw on, to make sense of themselves and their practice. These narratives describe personal experiences from the tellers' point of view, shaped by their own knowledge, values, feelings and purposes.

Enquiry into these life stories through the writing process vitalizes key events of student teachers' lives and promotes the formation their knowledge of the 'self' (Elbez-Luwisch, 2002; Conelly & Clandinin, 1999). The concept of 'self' is defined as an organized representation of ones' theories, attitudes and beliefs about oneself (McCornick & Pressley, 1997). Stuart describes the 'self' development as an on-going process that encounters challenge and offer individuals or groups either shame or esteem (Stuart, 1998). By telling and reflecting on stories that are based on experiences students shape their 'self'. Teachers' concepts of the 'self' strongly determine the way teachers teach, the way they develop as teachers, their attitudes towards educational changes – their professional identity (Beijaard et al, 2004).

Professional identity development occurs in an inter-subjective field and can be best characterized as an ongoing process of interpreting oneself as a certain kind of person, being recognized as such in a given context (Gee, 2001). Therefore the formation of a professional identity is a long process of combining individual and professional aspects (Goodson & Cole 1994). Teachers' professional landscape and what teachers themselves find important in their professional work and lives influence their practice and professional identity. This knowledge becomes a basis for student teachers' decision making in their future function in class (Hoban, 2004). Teachers are professionals whose lives and works influence each other becoming meaningful in school and out (Beijaard et al, 2004).

Examining personal stories and recalling occasions from the past inspire educators in function and problem solving in complicated present events during class. According to Elbaz-Luwich (2002) the practice of teaching is constructed, from a narrative perspective, through teachers imparting and living out particular stories. Cohen refers to Nietzsche and states that ones' philosophy is a part of his personal story: it grows out of it and is one of its dimensions. It is connected to our decision making process (Cohen, 2005, Hoban, 2004).

Writing narratives is not an accidental act. It comes out of a desire to communicate and a need to express one's self in all its complexities (Moskowitz, 1998). This process can arise only in a social setting as it creates a caring environment assisting people in dealing with their feelings concerning professional choices. These narratives are not only chosen and managed by their tellers, but are also expressions of cultural values, norms and structures passed on by these tellers (Rex et al., 2002). The rationale of this professional practice in teacher education programmers perceives these activities as an expression of teacher pedagogical leadership. Baijaard recommends that more attention be paid to the role of the context in professional identity formation and to what counts as professional in teachers' professional identity (Beijaard et al, 2004). This current paper tries to deal with these hidden issues in student teachers' lives.

**Methodology**
The context of the study is an academic retraining program for teacher-training in a major college located in the center of Israel. Although the study program is personally suited to each student according to his former education and degrees, there are some generic courses. One of these is the course 'Teachers Inquire Their Practices', in which students are introduced to teaching as a reflective practice and teachers as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1988). The goals of the course are to instruct students to:

- Inquire of their own practices, using qualitative research tools.
- Construct personal educational perceptions based on reflective experience.
- Form their professional identity, based on expanding knowledge of the 'self'.

At the end of the course, the students submitted a paper on the research they carried out during the year. Nine of them were based on life stories. The current study refers to the narratives of three female students: Danielle, Noy and Tal (pseudonyms). These narratives were analyzed according to the qualitative methodology, by the emic approach, focusing on the main issues presented in the stories and the writing patterns used.

**Analysis of the results**

The content analysis of the narratives showed a link between the genre of the story and the chosen issue of its inquiry. The findings include an analysis of three narratives according to the following classification: a journey journal, moral tales and therapeutic writing (Omer & Alon, 1997; Cohen, 2005). The issues chosen by the researchers were: formative experiences and meaningful figures in their lives.

**Danielle's journey journal:**

"North, south, east, west - Formative experiences of my professional identity"

The genre of Danielle’s narrative is embedded in its name. It is a journey journal, describing the beauty of the journey and its difficulties. A journal is a record of happenings, thoughts and feelings on a particular aspect of life or with a particular structure (Bolton, 2002). Danielle brings episodes and vignettes which occurred in different places during ten years of her adolescence. Every chapter of her journal has a subtitle: “Germany 1993”, "Pardes-Katz, 1997", “Lod, 2004” – on which the reader focuses on the place, the time, the lesson and the insight Danielle experienced. "I've chosen to focus on five key events, which affected me most". Danielle reconstructs reflectively different events in her journey, which brought her to meet significant people. The issue she is dealing with is a conscience process of forming her professional identity, as a part of her self inquiry: “These events were an empowerment for me and had a great impact on my personal and professional identity, the writing process will influence my future....” She phrases clearly the aim of the writing process: "The reflective process creates an opportunity to recreate my life story and exposes connections between events in my past and events in the present, in the hope that this writing will generate influential insights on the future".

The connection between the genre of Danielle’s story – the journey journal - and the main issue – forming a professional identity – is obvious, because of her previous occupation as a social worker. Her training as social worker equipped her with special abilities such as: systematic observation, attention given to details and awareness of the meanings in given situations. In this Danielle is unique in comparison to other students. She deeply analyzes her stories: "I experienced a continuous process of self analysis, self curing and liberation from frustrations and difficulties that I experienced during the years". Respectively, Danielle relates to the name she gave to her narrative: "The name I gave to my inquiry has a rational meaning to me: the physical place where I located my will and curiosity to meet people with special
needs. I believe that by my own self acceptance. I’ll be able to accept others and to go on with my doings during my specialization in special education”.

Role models: Danielle describes a gallery of meaningful figures from her past, engaging care professions: education, teaching and therapy - with a lot of affection. The first influential figure whom she presents in her writings is a teacher in Germany who impressed her by unique instruction methods: "She chose to teach Shakespeare through comics with a lot of creativity, facilitating her pupils by reducing their anxiety, including - mine…”. Danielle recites in detail her pedagogical creativity, which included: dividing the text into smaller sections, enduring role playing and activating pupils in creative ways.

In describing the second figure - a private English teacher, she emphasizes his qualities which she adjusted to herself: "Like Jimmy I am always on time, try to be consistent and keep a distance when needed…I also try to bring interesting content to class and make my pupils – laugh…").

The fourth figure is her English teacher in high school, who gave personal attention to each student and was unique due to her creative abilities: "I too, like her, show informal interest in my students and enjoy submitting the theme of my lessons in original ways".

Another figure was a social worker, who became a role model for her, in her special ability to contact kids at risk: "With equality, but at the same time with professional integrity".

Danielle chooses to adopt from each of her role models - qualities and behaviors suitling her personal and professional repertoire: "The encounter with each of these role models, left an impression on my work: keeping time on task in my lessons, respect towards my pupils and their creativity.”

Danielle encountered unconventional figures in her teachers. These experiences made her fall in love with them and with teaching as a profession: "The image of the teacher that is grasped as conventional, dull and juiceless turns to be challenging for me. Being different in so many ways is influential on me as a teacher and a person – until now".

Formative experiences: Danielle describes her first encounter with a multicultural society: different language, environment and people. She wanted to be like everybody else, but at the same time she wanted to be herself: "For the first time in my life, I felt like a stranger and met the difficulty in accepting the foreign…I dealt with labeling, stereotypes and feelings of hatred.”

Her encounters with the others, gave rise to deep questions about herself: "I've met with exceptionality while assisting my pupil with special needs, Gal. This experience causes me to meet my own exceptions and it fills me with a lot of empathy towards her. Deep inside I'm going through a process of introspection: Am I too critical or - accepting? Am I a good enough teacher?”.

By the end of two years of the retraining program, working with pupils with special needs, she describes confrontation with feelings of rejection and frustration: "I feel that I went through a long process of self inquiry, self-therapy, release of pressures and difficulties, by experiencing mercy and accepting the difference in me and in others” (McNiff, 1993).

Danielle summarizes the contribution of her reflective narrative: “When I went over the themes in my narrative, I realized how much the writing means to me. I’ve got insights into the connection between different events in my life. The act of constructing the time axis (since the age of 14) and placing meaningful events on it, set the choices that I've made for myself and has given them a special meaning. Before, all of them seemed to me as made by chance - meaningless".

Danielle's reflective practice journal is like a diary of a practice but in addition includes deliberative thought and analysis related to her present practice (Bolton, 2002): "In sum, the
different stories showed how much the personal and the professional are involved in teaching and give meaning to each other".

**Noy’s moral tales:**
"*Never say never*

The genre that Noy chose for her life story is a chain of moral tales. Noy combines Jewish and historical origins in her narrative. Her choice of this genre is conscious and relates to her knowledge of her 'self': “reflecting on the events and experiences in my life brought me to an exposure of what I have gone through, from my point of view. The narrative writing placed me in the center of the story and helped me to discover myself”. The issue of her tales is tracing after her Jewish origins in her national and professional identity, as she put the following question: “Are there evidences in my personal story to the process of professional growth?”. The name that she gave to her story “Never say never” indicates her professional determinism: “At the age of 16 I already knew that I wanted to be a teacher and I am fulfilling this destination, after 20 years of dreaming about it…”

Noy represents in her narrative the connection between the issue – meaningful events in her past in the Diaspora (where she was born) - and the genre that she chooses- tales with morals. Her narrative was built of short stories, each of them can stand by itself. Each story opens with a quotation from Jewish origins, that embodies a moral meaning and connected to professional choice that she made. Examples for stories titles: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil " – Jeremiah 13 (23); "His heart is as firm as a stone, yea as hard as a piece of the nether millstone" – Job 41 (24); "As clear as daylight "- Sanhedrin, Talmudic tractate 72; "Be ready"; "The soul must work… "; "Never say never".

**Meaningful figures:** The most important figure in Noy’s biography is her elementary school literature teacher, who taught her for 7 years: “She was the one and the only one who I remember till now, a figure that had an influence on me and is continuing to influence me... I remember her sayings, her name and her birthday date”. This teacher was a role model for Noy: “Her lessons were very interesting. They provided much food for thought. She used to finish them with a question mark and tried not to give ambiguous answers”. Additionally to her pedagogical qualifications she describes her unique personality: "She invested a lot of effort in personal conversations. She never shouted at us". This teachers' figure is the key for understanding Noy’s world, since she profoundly influenced her professional choice: "She conducted long dialogues with us and her language was spiced with proverbs and citations from poems”. So until today, Noy is still influenced and as she states in her current narrative: "One of her expressions influenced me extremely, she used to say: 'our soul must work hard, each day, each hour!' .

**Formative experiences:** The main formative experience of her life were her multicultural encounters: Noy immigrated to Israel from Baku Uzbekistan, studied in Tel Aviv University, was sent back to the Ukraine on an official mission of the Jewish Agency, returned to Israel and left again for another mission to Moscow on behalf of the Foreign Ministry of Israel: “The third time I came to Israel was in 2004 . This time it was easier, because I knew that I was to begin my studies in College. I live in peace with my decision to close this magic circle".

Noy recalls memories of meaningful episodes that she had experienced in her childhood, like: curiosity promoting courage, the ability to experience things totally and highly self-efficacy: "When I was in first grade, we were taken to a swimming pool…without thinking, I jumped into the cold water… Until now, I have been wondering 'why did I do it?'", I was aware of the
fact that I didn't know how to swim. After this memorable event I have jumped several times without thinking to the cold water without fear and hesitation. It became a part of my character". The ‘jump ‘ is a metaphor in Noy’s life representing her readiness for the unknown. Many years later at the age of 16, she told her family: "With you or without you, I am making ‘Alyia’ (immigrating to Israel)”. These powerful and vivid episodes reflect her strong personality features.

Describing her childhood experiences at school Noy reflects as an active student with a great need for social involvement and a high self-efficacy: “I was very active in school, I took part in a lot of informal activities, ceremonies and holidays: unfortunately – sometimes I was ill on the ceremony day, but I never gave in and have never canceled my attendance. I was a responsible pupil and never felt like a 'small nail’ in the system”. This saying is like a motto of her life story: "I'm convinced that I personally have an influence on procedures in History". She repeats it while telling about her varied missions as a representative abroad, over and over again.

During the analysis of her narrative, Noy has some important insights. First she reflects on the reconciliation process that she went through: “At the end of my narrative I wrote: ‘never say never’…my first intuition at the age of 16 on teaching was real". Twenty years later she fulfils this ambition. Secondly, Noy discusses the empowerment that she experienced during writing and analyzing her story: "A human being can do almost everything; it depends on his power of will, consistency. He'll always come back to his first love. I understand that I feel happy when I am with children”.

Tal's therapeutic writing:

"What would you like to be when you grow up?"

Tal’s narrative is characterized as a therapeutic story (White & Epston, 1990; Omer & Alon, 1997; Cohen, 1995). Through stories from her past Tal describes how she was influenced by authority figures in making her professional choices. The issue that is reflected in her story is a process of self-searching, recalling painful traumatic childhood memories and as a result of that - applying them to teacher education. The name she has given to her story: What would you like to be when you grow up?- points to her constant self-inquiry during different phases in her life: as a pupil in elementary school, as a soldier teacher in the army and as matron in a youth boarding school.

There is a close connection between the content of Tal’s narrative - self-searching, and the genre she has chosen for her story - therapy writing. Her willingness to meet herself in therapeutic narrative, telling it and decoding it, promotes her interests. Looking at her life from the outside enables her to examine it and is proof of her existence (Cohen, 1995). Tal says:”I have written memories and experiences ever since I was a pupil, later on as an adolescent girl, and when I become matron in the boarding school…this way of writing enabled me to put some order in it...”. "Thanks to this inquiry process I understand that life is more complicated than accidental events". This statement reflects Tal's insight into the bind between the writing process, her getting to know herself, and the choices she made linking her professional life

Meaningful figures: One of the influential characters on her, is her father. She refers to him as a kind parent supporting her dream to play being a teacher: "My dad outdid himself by preparing a huge green wooden board, which I used while teaching my girlfriends". She doesn't mention her mother in her narrative, except for in context with crisis situations in her family: "It was very difficult for me at home, my parents often quarreled and were always
talking about divorce". On the other hand she mentions her school teachers as "very meaningful figures for me during those days". Tal refers to them personally by mentioning their names and marking their unique contribution to her (using verbs): "They empowered me by treating me seriously and with honor, they gave me positive reinforcements, they put on me different roles and gave me adult responsibilities". Those relations were for her role models from significant educators. When she describes her job as matron in a boarding school she uses verbs with the same meanings: "my job is to direct, to guide, to escort, to support, to help in solving problems, to be a friend, to say 'no', to be angry, to smile and many other roles… It is a very empowering job with a lots of responsibilities and feeling of meaningfulness."

Reciting her experience as a pupil in a boarding school, she longs for the maternal figure of a matron and a mentor who continued the chain of educator-mothers whom she had at elementary school: "Mary the matron was like a mother for me…I'm in touch with her up to now." These detailed descriptions of kind-female figures, emphasize the absence of her mother, which indicate the therapeutic characteristic of her narrative. Tal is aware of it and states the following in her insights: "The same things I searched for in my teachers….warmth, care, love, willing to contribute, to be meaningful for somebody – all these qualities I try to give my pupils today."

Formative experiences: One early childhood memory concerns her wish to become a teacher: "In second grade, my teacher asked us what would you like to be when you grow up? And I answered: A teacher or a lawyer". Years later, through her teacher's requests, Tal used to perform adult tasks: "In the 7th grade I was asked by my teachers to check exams, prepare work-sheets and to assist young kids".

In the army Tal chose to be a soldier-teacher in the I.D.F. For her, the training course was good and interesting: "I enjoyed teaching children Hebrew, it was a successful experience for my professional development."

Tal’s Story is like a circle: she treats her pupils the way she was treated in her childhood at school. The therapeutic consequences that she experienced during her narrative inquiry, in view of the deficiency in a maternal relation in the past, influence her practice at present time. She expresses this conception in her unique way: "I’m going to be a certain teacher because I am what I am, and it is written in my narrative.” Writing the story is the process of giving meaning to her life and the way she’s getting to know herself (Cohen, 1995).

Conclusions
A life story is like a lance or a frame that combines, unites and sets in order different pictures into coherent meaning (Cohen. 1995). During the analysis of their written life stories, student teachers dealt with the potential contribution of this new knowledge to the formation of their professional identity, accordingly the teacher training program. The process of writing the narratives allowed them to revisit the formative experiences and meaningful figures in their lives and enabled them the opportunity to appreciate them. Writing things down by itself sharpens perspectives, breaks things down into clearer 'elements' and brings up further questions facilitating learning (Bolton, 2002). Systematic analysis of the narratives brought out a story line of the events in spite of the chaotic first impression of it. The process enabled student teachers to become emotional involved in their training process, in addition to the cognitive and the behavioral process that they were going through.

One of the most meaningful findings of the current study is the insight that teacher professional choices were not made by chance, but were the results of key events in their lives that are called in this study - formative experiences. The key events in the students' narratives
occurred at different stages of their lives and played different roles in the formation of their perceptions of practices in education (Carter, 1994). These formative experiences are called by Denzin (2001) 'epiphanies' and by Carter (1994) - 'event structured knowledge'. They were built through a retrospective observation on students' life stories and led them to new insights, as it was demonstrated in the findings of this study. These deep experiences are a significant layer in the continuing process of professional identity construction, a kind of integration between ‘the personal’ and ‘the professional' in the on-going process of becoming a teacher (Goodson & Cole, 1994). Kagan (1992) argues that teachers' class practices are inseparable from their personal identity and learning how to teach requires a journey into the deepest layers of the individual, with its failures, fears and hopes.

Another important finding of the current study is the presence of meaningful figures characterized by intellectual qualities, pedagogical abilities as well as kind and caring personalities. It corresponds to Noddings' (1992) concept of 'caring' expressing emotive attitudes, and reflecting in the identification, concern and caring of oneself and the other. These meaningful figures appear during different phases of the student teachers' lives. All of them were role models for their present practices. This conception is the crux in the approach that teaching is not a mechanical delivery of skills and knowledge. Learning comes alive because teachers make it so through their own personality teaching from their heart, as well as from their mind (Berry, 2001). A student teachers' relevant biography, such as: childhood experiences, role models, significant people, prior experiences and previous teaching experiences have an important role in the process of identity formation (Knowl's, 1992).

The third important finding of the current study is the inherent link between the genre of each story and the chosen issue of its inquiry. Three different narratives: a journey journal, moral tales and therapeutic writing – suited perfectly the main issues presented: liberation from frustrations and difficulties, tracing cultural origins and recalling painful childhoods. Different forms of writing were chosen from the right form for the right piece and included different genres of prose (Bolton, 2002). As it is clearly shown in the findings, professional identity is multifaceted: historical, sociological, psychological and cultural factors influencing teachers' sense of 'self' (Cooper & Olson, 1996). Although the variety of the three students' narratives, addressing the different genres and issues, share some common characteristics. One of them is writers' awareness: the students learned about themselves, identified key events in their lives and revealed hidden perceptions that led their practices. Through self-reflection student teachers' related to their knowledge, theories and feelings.

Narrative structures organize life experience and provide it with a meaning. Identity formation is a process of practical knowledge-building characterized by an ongoing integration of what is seen as relevant to teaching (Beijaard et al, 2004). One of the justifications for using personal narratives in teacher education is its' unique character: We found life experience richer than any academic discussion!

References


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