

## RESEARCH NOTE

### A Journey Into Narrative Analysis: A Methodology for Discovering Meanings

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Narrative analysis uses stories to describe human experience and action. Because people give meaning to their lives through the stories they tell, it seems appropriate for those who study human experience to use a research methodology that connects with how people construct the meanings of life experiences. Thus, if the interest is in telling the stories of physical education students, teachers, and classrooms, a methodology is needed that captures how people interpret the meanings of life experiences. Narrative analysis is such a methodology. This article begins with three fictionalized adolescents' stories. With the stories as an entry point, the power of narrative is examined, followed by an explanation of the different types of narrative inquiry. Next, the mechanics of configuring a narrative are discussed, and the article concludes with illustrations of the need for narrative analysis in physical education research.

*Stories go in circles. They don't go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in stories because there are stories inside stories and stories between stories and finding your way through them is as easy and hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is in the getting lost. [For] if you're lost, you really start to look around and listen. (Metzger, 1986, p. 104)*

Recently, I had the opportunity to spend time with some middle school physical education classes. I was "playing around," so to speak, with different research ideas. It was interesting to discover just how much I could learn about students and teachers by simply talking with them and listening. I tried all sorts of things with these students. I asked some students to write stories about why people their age liked to exercise or what they liked about physical education. I asked others to draw pictures and describe what it looks like to be in shape or to be healthy. And I spent time talking with others in small groups. What I learned about the needs, interests, and concerns of students through their written, visual, and oral stories was fascinating. I was amazed at just how easy it is to forget one of the underlying purposes of educational research, that is, to come to better understand students,

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teachers, and their complex learning environments in the hope of creating better teacher preparation and physical education programs.

For years, physical education research has been dominated by a variety of quantitative methods (Goldberger, Gerney, & Chamberlain, 1982; Salter & Graham, 1985; Silverman, 1985, 1990). These types of research provide partial examination of the complexities of students, teachers, and classrooms, but they have limitations. More recently, researchers have begun to gain a deeper understanding of life in physical education classes through qualitative methods. These studies have investigated the experiences of both students (Carlson, 1995; Hopple & Graham, 1995; Nugent & Faucette, 1995; Portman, 1995; Sanders & Graham, 1995; Walling & Martinek, 1995), and teachers (Napper-Owen & Phillips, 1995; Schempp, Sparkes, & Templin, 1993; Sparkes, 1996). Both have enhanced our understanding of teachers and students in physical education, providing an understanding that is useful for guiding teacher education programs.

One methodology of qualitative inquiry that is used throughout other domains of educational research, but that has yet to find its way into physical education research, is narrative analysis (Lyons, 1992). This type of analysis is a form of the more generic narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1995). More specifically, it is the configuration of a narrative (story), drawn from multiple data sources, that offers insights into how people construct the meanings of their experiences. Narrative analysis is a research methodology that may help better explain the lives of physical education students and teachers, as well as their complex environments. In addition, narrative analysis may help researchers connect with how many people, teachers, teacher educators, and researchers come to learn and understand themselves.

Narrative inquiry uses stories to describe human experience and action (Polkinghorne, 1995) and is an accepted mode of inquiry in many domains of anthropological, sociological, and educational research (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Nespor & Barber, 1995; Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Stories show whose voices are heard, and whose are silenced; whose histories are valued, and whose are devalued (Gilbert, 1991). The stories we hear and the stories we tell, whether personal or fictional, shape the meaning and quality of our lives at every stage and crossroad. Stories connect us with others, and with our own histories, through time, place, character, and advice on how we might live our lives (Witherell & Noddings, 1991). Thus, stories bring our past together with our present and offer vision of possible futures. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) state, "A person is at once engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories" (p. 4). Stories create images, myths, and metaphors that carry moral resonance and contribute to our knowing and being known. Stories offer a journey into the world of practical ethics, and join the worlds of thought and feeling (Coles, 1989).

Thus, because people give meaning to their lives through the stories they tell (Bruner, 1986; Johnson, 1993; Witherell & Noddings, 1991), it seems appropriate for those who study human experience to use a methodology that connects with how people interpret meanings from life experiences. As Connelly and Clandinin state, "Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study" (p. 2). For the sake of clarity, however, Connelly & Clandinin (1990) call the phenomenon "story" and the inquiry "narrative." That is, "People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. . . . Life narratives are the context for meaning making" (Connelly &

Clandinin, 1990, pp. 2-3). Thus, if the interest is in telling the stories of students, teachers, and classrooms (in math, science, art, or physical education), we need a methodology that captures how people interpret classroom experiences. Narrative analysis can help access and frame these stories (Bloom & Munro, 1995; Bruner, 1986; Greene, 1995), yet this methodology has often been overlooked in physical education scholarship.

I shall begin a journey into narrative analysis with three fictionalized adolescents' stories. The stories are composites of some of the stories from the students I visited in a middle school gymnasium. These are not narrative analysis examples; rather, they are examples of students' stories that could be used by researchers in constructing narratives. They are only small pieces of what would become a narrative, as a narrative analysis is constructed from multiple stories, interviews, observations, and field notes. These stories are used throughout the manuscript to help illustrate the power and process of narrative analysis. With these stories as an entry point, I continue the journey with a discussion of the power of narrative, followed by an explanation of the different types of narrative inquiry. Next, I outline the mechanics of configuring a narrative, and the journey ends with identifying the need for narrative analysis in physical education research.

I now share with you Amie, Diron, and Paula's stories. These stories are about why some 12, 13, and 14 year-old girls and boys like to exercise. First, here is Amie's story:

There is this girl, she loves to exercise. I think she's nothing but skin and bones. Well, one day I went up to her and asked her, "Why do you exercise so much." She answered back, "Well my whole family is overweight, and I don't want to end up like that. I think all that fat is disgusting." I guess I could understand that, I told myself. When I went home that evening I thought about my family. Most of the grown-ups in my family are overweight, and I'm getting there real fast. The next day, when it was time for gym, I noticed she was exercising. I went up and I told her, "I understand what you mean. My family is like that, and I'm getting close to where they are." Then she asked if I would exercise with her because it gets lonely exercising alone. After that, we did everything together, even being skin and bones.

Amie's story is about herself and her friend, yet Diron writes his story about a 14-year-old girl:

#### A 14 year-old girl who likes to exercise

The worst nightmare for all girls in the world is to be fat and out of shape. So this 14-year-old girl decided it wouldn't be her that is fat and out of shape. So one day she sat down and told herself that she is going to be dedicated to making her body look absolutely the best. You know, at this age and time girls are the apple of a young man's eye, and you shouldn't want yourself to look fat and sloppy. She does everything there is to do in exercising.

Paula, like Diron, writes about someone else. But she also writes about herself:

Amie loves to be fit. She always stays fit. She is probably skinny to the bone. She is so skinny that I wish I could be her size. Her favorite fitness thing probably is the mile, because she runs fast; plus, her nickname is Speedy. She has lots of friends because she is so skinny. I wish I could be her. Amie is so fit anybody would go out with her.

While we do not know if these stories were really played out, Coles (1989) suggests that stories are theories, and theories help explain and interpret phenomena. In this case, stories help explain and interpret our life experiences to ourselves and others. Heath (1994) takes it a step further as she writes, "then it is possible to say that the message of their stories is not 'Here is the world; take it or leave it,' but instead, 'Here is something to think about'" (p. 215). Stories of students and teachers provide teacher educators and researchers something to think about. With the words of Amie, Diron, and Paula lingering, I invite you to join me as this journey into narrative analysis continues.

### Power of Narrative

Many educators and theorists (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Bruner, 1994; Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Greene, 1995; Johnson, 1993; Witherell & Noddings, 1991) view stories as a way of understanding the meaning of experiences. Our stories, and the stories of others, are an invitation to come to know our world and our place in it. Witherell and Noddings (1991) state, "Whether narratives of history or the imagination, stories call us to consider what we know, how we know, and what and whom we care about" (p. 13). Knowledge is constructed and intimately connects the knower with the known (Belenky et al., 1986). And it is the meaning of our experiences, not the underlying ontological structure of objects, that constitutes the reality we respond to.

Although the view of many respected educators, researchers, and theorists is that the construction of our reality occurs through the stories we hear and tell, Bruner (1994) captures the essence as he writes, "A life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (p. 36). Life is a continuous narrative, stories woven together; therefore, in order to see, and thus understand, the orientation of our life, we must see our life in story (Greene, 1995). It is through stories that we can begin to understand human experience as lived, interpreted, and expressed, for the subject matter of narrative is human action. And as we come to better understand students' and teachers' stories, their interpretations of experiences, we may be able to better understand what we *need* or *ought* to do, and as teacher educators and researchers that *is* our moral obligation.

As a research methodology, narrative analysis is particularly powerful for understanding the fullness and uniqueness of human existence. The knowledge expressed through students' and teachers' stories describes uniquely human experiences whereby action and events contribute either positively or negatively to the achievement of goals or fulfilling purposes (Polkinghorne, 1995). Johnson (1993) states, "Narrative can illuminate purposes, plans, and goals which are the forms by which our lives have some direction, motivation, and significance for us" (pp. 170-171). Although this level of understanding differs from traditional Western science, which favors abstract rationality, Bruner (1986) reminds us that to ignore one mode of thought (e.g., narrative) or reduce it to another (e.g., the well-formed argument) is to fail to understand the diversity of thought and expression. If we hope to improve the quality of physical education in the public schools and universities, we need to further understand the experiences of students and teachers. Narrative analysis can help broaden our lens and provide a deeper level of understanding into the lives of students and teachers in physical education.

Narrative originates from what Bruner (1986) calls one of two modes of cognitive functioning, or ways of knowing, which provide two different ways of understanding peoples' stories. The other mode of cognitive functioning, the well-formed argument, is used more often by scientists. Yet both the well-formed argument and the good narrative have distinct ways of arranging experience or constructing reality. Both have fundamentally different criteria for "well-formedness" as well as procedures for verification. Though they can both be used to convince the other, what they convince one "of" is radically different. A well-formed argument convinces a person of truth by means of procedures of logical and empirical proof. A narrative convinces by means of lifelike-ness, or verisimilitude (Bruner, 1986). A good narrative rings true. A good narrative results in a compelling message for the reader, a message that may cause the reader to "nod in agreement, pause in reflection, or take action" (Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1996, p. 117).

The philosophical questions guiding these two ways of knowing are also distinctively different. Logical and empirical proof originates from the question of how we come to "know truth," whereas story originates from a question of how we come to "endow experience with meaning" (Richard Rorty, quoted in Bruner, 1986, p. 12). Students and teachers give meaning to experiences through the stories they tell. One way to understand their interpretations of experience is through their stories.

Narrative reasoning functions by attending to the diversity of people's behavior. Stories retain the complexity of a situation by unifying thought, feeling, and action. Dewey's notion of the unity of the self and its acts may help illuminate the power of narrative analysis as a research methodology. For Dewey (1932/1985), thoughts and feelings arise simultaneously in experience through action. This action can also take place in one's imagination. People who emphasize action without equally emphasizing the importance of thoughts and feelings destroy the unity of the experience. Thoughts and feelings are simply aspects of experience. Students' and teachers' experiences can be relived and understood through telling stories. Narrative analysis provides a way to keep experience and meaning unified, and thus allows for greater understanding of students' and teachers' lives. And according to Patton (1980), qualitative methods seek to understand phenomena, situations, or people as a whole.

When we hear a story of a person's experience, it can touch us and evoke emotions such as sympathy, anger, or gladness. The story provides us with an explanation for why the person acted as she or he did; it makes another's action, as well as our own action, understandable (Polkinghorne, 1995). The 14-year-old girl in Diron's story exercised so she would not be fat and sloppy and so her body would be its best. Each narrative holds its own unique feature, yet a varied and extensive collection of narrative experiences can provide the basis for understanding new actions and interpretations of experience by way of analogy (Polkinghorne, 1995). For some, however, narrative accounts can be unsettling because they require accepting the idea that the world has no fixed rules for giving meaning to behavior (Emihovich, 1995). In other words, narrative accounts invite multiple interpretations, and multiple interpretations create spaces for multiple possibilities. Take, for example, all the ways Amie, Diron, and Paula's stories could be interpreted and constructed into a narrative. From girls exercising to become "skin and bones" to oppressive gender construction in young boys, their stories invite us

to think and feel from their perspectives, in their words. Stories are an invitation to understand them better, and thus a subtle cry for us to provide learning opportunities that will help *better* their future.

Multiple experiences are represented by the writer of narrative as she or he begins constructing her or his own interpretation of the experience (Bruner, 1986). First, a story that covers some new terrain always begins on the basis of previous journeys or experiences. As the new journey takes on a meaning of its own, regardless of the initial borrowing from past experience, the interpretation becomes its own story. When this happens, the reader (or writer) can ask the crucial interpretive question, "What is it all about?" (Bruner, 1986, p. 37). The interpretation is not about certainties or standards; rather, it is about the multiplicity of perspectives and possibilities that can be constructed to make meanings of experience understandable. It is an expression of hope that we may become more understanding about the world. Thus, the power of narrative for educators does not lie in generalizations (which are not attempted) or truth (which is not sought); rather, the power of narrative stems from readers interpreting the stories based on their own needs or the needs of their students. The lifelikeness, the verisimilitude, of narrative allows for multiple interpretations, and multiple interpretations render multiple educational possibilities.

### Types of Narrative Inquiry

Polkinghorne (1995) discusses two types of narrative inquiry as an extension of Bruner's (1986) two ways of knowing (the paradigmatic and narrative modes). Polkinghorne labels these two forms of narrative inquiry *paradigmatic analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis*. Paradigmatic analysis of narrative requires that stories be collected as data and then analyzed by identifying aspects of the data as instances of paradigmatic categories. This process results in descriptions of themes that cut across the stories, characters, or settings, producing knowledge of abstract, general concepts. The process moves from stories to common elements, which can be accomplished in two ways. First, concepts derived from theory or other logical possibilities are applied to the data in order to determine the outcomes or concepts. For example, theorists claim that adolescence is a time when body image becomes very important. Applying this to the stories written by Amie, Diron, and Paula would help explain what they write about. The second form of narrative inquiry, more indicative of qualitative research, allows themes to emerge and concepts to develop from the stories. It is through this inductive analysis that researchers look for noted similarities in the data and from there create categories to organize the data as a collection of specific instances. Further, this process seeks to identify relationships among categories. For example, in both Amie and Diron's stories, girls exercised in part to avoid getting fat. Obviously, multiple stories from Amie, Diron, and Paula are needed to create categories, not merely the three I have used for illustrative purposes.

Most narrative inquiry in qualitative research is conducted by this paradigmatic analysis method, and some researchers have used this form of narrative inquiry within the field of physical education (Langley, 1995; Schempp, 1993). Although the strength of paradigmatic analysis lies in its capacity to develop general knowledge about the stories collected, paradigmatic analysis remains abstract and formal, it often misses the uniqueness of each story because it relies on the

researcher's preconceived categorization (Polkinghorne, 1995). If all we took from Amie, Diron, and Paula's stories were the common themes—using exercise to avoid being fat—we would miss all the other possible messages within their individual stories, and many exist.

The second type of narrative inquiry, narrative analysis, is different from paradigmatic analysis in that it uses a plot. Although the process of paradigmatic analysis of narrative moves from stories to common themes, the outcome of narrative analysis is a narrative. The plot that results ties together the individual experiences of the students or teachers, thus creating the context for understanding meaning (Polkinghorne, 1995). The researcher seeks students' or teachers' stories through interpretation of multiple forms of representation (e.g., individual or group interviews, journals, letters, personal stories, observations, field notes, images, drawings) that will be used to construct a narrative that displays the connection of elements as an unfolding temporal development whose end provides some explanation. In other words, the data are configured into a narrative, or set of narratives, through the use of a plot, which gives meaning to the experiences of the people involved. Amie, Diron, and Paula's individual stories each create the context for understanding their understanding of the reasons why people their age like to exercise. Simply knowing that Amie loves to exercise does not tell us as much as if we knew why she liked to exercise.

Just as their stories have mini plots that help us to better understand the "why" questions, narratives are also constructed through the use of a plot and can help us begin to better understand the bigger "why" questions. As Johnson (1993) reminds us, though certain aspects of human experience can be captured through concepts, models, metaphors, and paradigms, only narrative can encompass both temporality and purposeful organization on a general level, by which we pursue the overarching unity and meaning for our lives. Because human beings are storytellers who lead storied lives, the use of narrative allows researchers to study and reveal how humans experience their world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Both the paradigmatic analysis of narrative and narrative analysis rely on what Polkinghorne (1995) calls *diachronic data*. This is contrasted with *synchronic data*, which is obtained from most other forms of qualitative research. Synchronic data tends to be categorical answers to researchers' questions and provides information about present situations or beliefs of the person questioned. Diachronic data provides temporal information about the sequential relationship of events. Typically, there is a description of both the event and the subsequent outcomes of the event. Quite often this takes the form of autobiographical reports of personal episodes, including both when and why actions were taken, as well as the intended results of the actions. Amie's story included the when, the why, as well as the alleged action taken. Amie exercised with her friend in "gym class" because she did not want to get fat, and in the process became "skin and bones." Diachronic data contrasts with synchronic data, which lacks both the historical and developmental dimensions. Because humans are historically situated in cultural contexts, the meanings they give to their lives and experiences must allow for their histories and contexts to emerge and be maintained.

Thus, a narrative analysis is a retrospective synthesis of data from a bound study. A bound study has a specific context or time frame, and includes a beginning, a middle, and an end. A narrative links past events, or stories, together to explain how a final outcome might come about, or how meaning is given to certain aspects of their lives. Providing insight and understanding to the reader

about the people being studied is one purpose of narrative analysis. In what has become a famous preface, Joseph Conrad (1898/1967) wrote that it is the writer's task, "by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. If I succeed, you shall find . . . that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask" (pp. ix-x). As teachers, teacher educators, and researchers, we need to better *see* what to ask so that we may better *know* how to respond. Narratives invite us to better see students and teachers as human beings with needs, desires, and interests, and thus respond accordingly.

### Narrative Configuration

A narrative analysis is more than merely the amalgamation of events into a linear sequence. Such an analysis requires the researcher to discover or develop a plot by situating and finding relationships between events or happenings and actions (Polkinghorne, 1995). Thus, narrative analysis is a configuration of the data into a narrative, or narratives, that renders some explanation, gives meaning to some experience, or offers insight into the motivation and purpose behind a chain of events. Though the narrative can be described in its components (setting, characters, and plot), these components are inextricably interwoven and cannot be separated without losing the meaning of the narrative. Connelly and Clandinin, (1990) and Polkinghorne (1995) provide the criteria to guide a narrative analysis. This next section examines those criteria.

#### Setting

The setting is where the narrative, or the action, takes place. It is situated in the cultural context, a feature invisible to the casual observer. Within the setting, the characters take shape. A setting comprises three elements: the physical environment, sociocultural features, and temporal location. All three of these elements must work in harmony through their descriptions. The setting is constructed in the physical environment (e.g., a gymnasium or classroom) and is crucial to understanding the actions, perspectives, and feelings of the characters. In addition, the setting description needs to include the relationship between the participants and researcher, because relationships are an integral aspect of research as they are of life.

Within the physical environment are the artifacts of the environment. These artifacts are the things that embrace the daily actions and activities of the characters. Tools, documents, equipment, and other objects that are used in the events are essential elements in a narrative for they assist in telling the story of what happened, and why. Also important to the setting is the consideration of artifacts that are absent, as their absence may also contribute to the narratives' plot. For example, in a physical education class, the absence of quality equipment and lack of equipment may affect how the teacher can conduct the activities in the class. This lack of equipment is part of the description of the setting. How the researcher and participants structure where the research takes place is also part of the setting. It is important to know whether the researcher works with entire classes of students or with only a few students outside of the class, as this will help the reader understand the type of relationship between the researcher and participants.

The sociocultural features of a narrative include characteristics such as the values, beliefs, and social rules of the characters and their environments, as well as

the characters' race, social class, ethnicity, gender, and religion. These features are often difficult to capture, as these aspects of the setting are not often apparent. One of the features in Amie's story was that "fat" was considered "disgusting." Another example was Paula's comment that in order to have a lot of friends one must be "skinny to the bone." Both of these features could not have been seen through observation. However these characteristics serve to empower and disempower the characters, and provide special meanings to events in the plot because they indicate the larger social context from which the characters emerge. The sociocultural features must therefore be included in the development of the setting, for they will provide a deeper level of meaning to the story as the plot unfolds. For these characteristics to emerge, a certain level of trust must exist between researcher and participants. Again, the relationship developed between all participating in the study is crucial to the final description of the setting.

Finally, the temporal location is critical to the setting description. The temporal dimensions of the setting reflect the time-bound and pervading cultural norms that bear directly, but often implicitly, on the unfolding events. The temporal location places the narrative in its historical position. That is, the setting is the result of a chain of events, or interpretations of experiences, and therefore, it has a history. This history helps explain the rituals, customs, traditions, and modes of interaction. The temporal dimension of a setting also helps explain the shared meanings the characters give to the objects, activities, or people of the events. A feature I found particularly interesting while I was visiting the middle school was the importance of certain clothing styles. In a suburban city middle school, in 1996, Starter jackets and Nike footwear and clothing were important to these students. It was "in" to wear these things, and people were treated differently if they did not wear the "right" types of clothes. Many of the students' drawings included the Nike symbol, and many of the students wore Nike and Starter apparel. In another time, these symbols may have had little meaning, or perhaps may have been at odds with the pervading customs and values in that very same school. Again, these types of descriptions contribute to the setting as they help provide readers with a more comprehensive understanding of the characters, as well as the story being told.

### *Characters*

The characters represent the people who create or live the events of the narrative. The stories and actions of these individuals are used to construct and shape the narrative. The stories of Amie, Diron, and Paula all in some way deal with body shape, specifically, being skinny. Thus, one theme that would be developed within the plot, through character development, might be the importance of body shape. Each character has her or his own reason why body shape is important. Furthermore, characters bring their past experiences to bear on present actions, and thus they shape their own and others' futures. As they contribute to the narrative, characters must be seen both as individuals and as members of larger groups.

Being able to tell individual and group stories requires the researcher to understand both the private and public stories the characters tell or live. For many, private thoughts and feelings can contradict public values, and thus, individuals may keep certain stories private rather than risk being ostracized by their social community. If the researcher hopes to uncover some of the private, as well as the

public, stories the characters tell, a caring relationship based on trust must be established with the participants. Therefore, the researcher becomes one of the characters. A caring relation holds that "the self is formed and given meaning in the context of its relations with others" (Witherell & Noddings, 1991, p. 5). Thus, private and public stories will at times overlap and intertwine. Two types of characters are found within the narrative: main characters and supporting characters.

*Main Characters.* Main characters form the primary focus for the researcher, because it is in their words that the stories are told. The researcher, therefore, needs to describe the interaction between the main characters and the setting. Attention should be paid to understanding the actions and choices of the main characters, as well as the emotional and cognitive aspects or meanings attached to these actions and choices. In addition, an embodied description of the characters is crucial, as we experience our world through our bodies, including our thoughts and emotions. The full range of human dimensions must be revealed in the description of each main character, including perhaps the character's gender, age, body shape, race, intellectual proclivities, and motives.

Paula's being considered heavy by her culture, a culture that values thinness, contributed to how she shaped her identity as a middle school girl in 1996. This can be traced not only through the stories she tells, but also through what she wears, the activities she participates in or avoids, or the people with whom she associates. Through description of such details, the reader comes to better understand the web of relationships that exist between the intellectual, emotional, social, and physical lives of the characters. Thus, the narrative analysis can help the reader to better understand the importance of dress or types of activities in shaping characters' identities. Furthermore, the historical continuity of the main characters is an important dimension and demands the attention of the writer and reader, because past interpretations of experiences offer important clues regarding present and future possibilities.

*Supporting Characters.* Though important to the narrative, the supporting characters are not the main focus for a researcher or reader. The relationship between the supporting characters and the main characters needs to be described, however, because supporting characters influence the thinking, feelings, and actions of the main characters, both directly and indirectly. For example, if Amie were one of the main characters in the narrative, the friend with whom she exercised might be one of the supporting characters. These relationships are necessary to the development of the plot because Amie was directly influenced by her friend. The degree of influence is directly related to the level at which the supporting characters are written into the narrative. This will depend in part on how the researcher interprets the participants' multiple stories and actions. Diron's story provides another example of the importance of supporting characters. He describes a girl's worst nightmare as "to be fat and out of shape" and describes how girls are the "apple of a young man's eye and you shouldn't want yourself to look be fat and sloppy." These aspects of stories help develop the characters, as the relationship between the boys and the girls in the class will help tell the larger story.

### *Plot*

The centerpiece of the narrative analysis is the plot. It is the integration of various events, happenings, and actions of human life woven into a thematic whole. The plot thus provides meaning to the narrative; it is the structure through which

people understand and explain the relationship among the events and the choices of their lives (Polkinghorne, 1995). Time is crucial to the plot. A narrative analysis is bound by a temporal structure that requires a beginning, a middle, and an end. Within the plot, the central time structure is represented by past, present, and future events (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These events are configured into the beginning, the middle, and the end of the narrative to render some explanation otherwise not seen in the data.

While bound by the temporal structure, the plot's middle is where the unfolding of events and the development of the characters becomes most clear to readers. Within the plot, there may be a number of central themes or stories that, when woven together, provide a greater depth of understanding of the people being studied. Some stories may parallel one another, others may merge together to illuminate the complexity of the events and characters, others may overlap, and some may even clash. Because Paula is writing about Amie, their stories link characters and thus overlap. As Metzge (1979) reminds us, stories go in circles, and there are stories inside stories, stories between stories, and stories beside stories. The researcher's task is to configure the narrative so that the reader can see the multiple interpretations and meanings of the lives of the characters.

### *Constructing Narratives*

It is through interpretation of the multiple data sources (e.g., observations, written stories, drawings, images, letters, interviews, journal entries) that the narrative will be constructed. As the plot begins to take form, incidents crucial to the outcome of the narrative become apparent. For example, body shape was important in Amie, Diron, and Paula's stories. As this becomes salient for the researcher, she or he is better able to select the data items needed to tell the story. The final construction of the narrative must both fit the data and provide meaning that is not represented in the data alone (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995). In the process of constructing the narrative, as Alvermann et al. (1996) remind us, the researcher's stories contribute to how the respondents' stories are interpreted. Alvermann et al. (1996) state,

Like it or not, the interpreting I do as a writer tells as much about me as it does about the others' whose stories are being told. . . . I can never separate my own experiences from the experiences of those I write about. (p. 117)

And thus positionality becomes important (Lincoln, 1996). That is, the researcher must display him- or herself as honest and authentic within the text. Any claim of detachment or objectivity by the researcher is a barrier to quality. In addition, Lincoln (1996) reminds us that texts are always only partial representations; any claim made that texts represent whole or complete truth are "specious, inauthentic, and misleading. . . . [O]nly texts which display their own contextual grounds for argumentation would be eligible for appellations of quality and rigor" (p. 10).

### **The Need for Narrative Analysis in Physical Education Scholarship**

Eisner, in his address to the American Educational Research Association in 1993, urged educators to look toward multiple forms of representation, as each

form, through its difference, represents different kinds of experiences, and thereby allows for different types of meanings. Similarly, different forms and ways of presenting and conducting research allow for different levels of understanding. Narrative accounts can broaden our understanding of students and teachers, and thus expand physical education scholarship, as narrative ways of knowing create spaces that allow for multiple perspectives, possibilities, and connection with others (Greene, 1995; Helle, 1991). Through narrative accounts, we can begin to imagine the different ways students and teachers experience, interpret, and understand their worlds through the stories they hear, the stories they tell, and the stories they hope for. Narratives allow us to engage our imagination (Greene, 1995) about what is possible and what is preferred.

Through the use of imagination, we may begin to see students and teachers in a broader, more holistic light, because imagination, more than all other cognitive capacities, allows us to give credence to alternative realities (Greene, 1995). To see things or people "big" requires not the remote detachment and value neutrality of the uninvolved spectator but rather an ability to see and feel as a participant in the midst of what is taking place, what concerns are held, and what initiatives are being taken from others perspectives. Greene (1995) writes, "All we can do, I believe, is cultivate multiple ways of seeing and multiple dialogues in a world where nothing stays the same" (p. 16).

If we can begin to better understand how students and teachers construct the multiple meanings of their physical education experiences, perhaps we can begin to create learning opportunities that liberate and empower both students and teachers. Sanders (1996) believes that the better we understand children's interpretations of their physical education experiences, the better we will understand the consequences of our pedagogical actions in the gymnasium. The views of the world that children and teens have are different from those of adults; therefore, what adults think is happening in physical education may differ radically from what young people think is happening. Narrative analysis is one way to better understand and document how students interpret their physical education experiences. Narrative accounts help us to reveal the tensions and contradictions between professional ethos and student or teacher culture. For example, in a physical education class, the teacher may use activities such as jumping rope double-Dutch and running as ways to develop student's cardiovascular endurance levels, and the teacher may view both activities as acceptable. However, students may view double-Dutch as play and running as punishment or as a boring and meaningless task.

Yet students are not alone in these complex learning environments. Physical education teachers' interpretations are also valuable, as they experience things differently than do teacher educators and researchers. As teacher educators we can only imagine the life of a physical education teacher through the stories they tell of their day to day routines, the hundreds of students that need their immediate attention and care, or the bureaucratic frustrations they face. Again, narrative analysis can help access and frame these stories so that we may be better able to prepare future teachers.

Part of the need for narrative accounts of students and teachers also stems from the possibilities created by narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry is a collaborative methodology, that is, a methodology where both the researcher and the participants seek to understand and reveal some phenomenon together (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Thus a caring relationship between researcher and participants

is crucial to the outcome. It is through the development of caring relationships that trust is established, thereby creating spaces that allow for deeper levels of understanding into the lives of students and teachers (Lincoln, 1996; Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

Yet the researcher has a moral obligation to the participants, because caring relationships are not unidirectional, but are reciprocal (Lincoln, 1996). This essence, so often omitted from research, is eloquently captured by Nespore and Barber (1995):

Composing *with* the people who are part of your research—seeing them as co-authors and part of the audience for the text—is different than writing about them for other audiences. . . . Writing with and for people extends and complicates our connections to them; writing about them encapsulates and closes off relationship. (p. 50)

Narrative inquiry has the potential to be an empowering research methodology. Empowering research is defined as “research on, for, and with” participants (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1994). Participants give to the researcher by working with her or him to understand the phenomenon of interest; therefore, the researcher has a moral obligation not only to give back to the participants (research for) but also to allow for the participants’ agendas (research with) to enter the conversation or even become the crux of the conversation. Lincoln (1996) suggests that reciprocity is one criterion to determine quality in interpretive research.

Part of giving back to the participants is helping them develop their own voices (Lincoln, 1996). Narrative inquiry, through its form, helps participants develop their own voices. This can be done in several ways, but one example is that the researcher continues to ask participants to think about and articulate the meanings of their experiences. By using the multiple methods that the researcher employs, participants begin to better articulate their thoughts and feelings. As this happens, they further develop their voices through naming the meanings of their experiences. It is only after we can name the meanings of our experiences that we can begin to become more critical and imagine alternative possibilities, better possibilities (Greene, 1995). Thus, as researchers we have the potential for our research to be transformative (Benmayor, 1991; Greene, 1995), or “for” participants (Cameron et al., 1994).

The need for narrative accounts is not only about empowerment or coming to better understand but also about creating multiple stories and possible worlds. Yes, we need to better understand the students and teachers within our classrooms and universities. And certainly, within physical education scholarship, many insights into understanding students and teachers have been recorded. However, although understanding is necessary, it is not sufficient. We have the power as researchers to give value to and construct knowledge, and the types of knowledge we construct depend on how we conduct and represent our research. Until we broaden our lens and create both multiple ways of knowing and sharing knowledge and understanding (ways that invite a larger, inclusive audience), we will continue to close off the conversation. Research should strive to create spaces, illuminate multiple possibilities, and open the doors for multiple voices. Narrative analysis gives access to these stories and voices; thus, we can begin to see ourselves through the eyes of our students.

Cynics may read this research and find it frivolous or say that the students, teachers, or researchers are wrong. But the morally perceptive reader will see that the world of the gym is layered in multiple truths. The more perspectives we can see, name, and understand, the greater the potential for improving both physical education and physical education teacher education. Physical education scholarship needs narratives that touch the hearts and minds of readers, and that create the desire from within to provide the best possible environments for the students we teach.

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### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Paul Schempp for his insightful and supportive feedback in the preparation of this manuscript, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their nurturing reviews and helpful comments and suggestions.

### STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF THE JOURNAL OF TEACHING IN PHYSICAL EDUCATION (ISSN 0273-5024):

The *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* (ISSN 0273-5024) is published 4 times a year (quarterly). Subscription fees are \$40 per year for individuals and \$100 for institutions.

The owner of the *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* is Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc., whose office is at 1607 North Market St., Champaign, IL 61820-2200. The editors are N. Faucette, School of PE, Wellness, and Sport Studies, PED 214, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620-8600, and P. Dodds, PE Teacher Education Program, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003. The publisher is Rainer Martens, P.O. Box 5076, Champaign, IL 61825-5076. There are no bondholders, mortgagees, or other security holders.

Average number of copies printed per issue (net press run) during the preceding 12 months—1653; number of copies nearest to filing date—1710. Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months distributed after mass mailing to subscribers—0; number of copies nearest to filing date—0. Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months distributed in mass mailing to subscribers—1099; number of copies nearest to filing date—1163. Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months distributed free—211; number of copies nearest to filing date—131.