

# RECONCEPTUALISING THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

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## ABSTRACT

There has been a major 'turn' towards narrative, biographical and life history approaches in the academy over the last 30 years. But whereas some significant narrative research has been carried out in the West, such approaches are in their infancy on the African continent. This article explores narrative at three levels from the influence of Western meta narratives to the national and more personal narratives of teachers and students. Drawing on two periods of narrative field work in Ghana and South Africa, the article concludes with a discussion of three important lessons to be learnt from the field: that the relationship between 'grand' hegemonic narratives and individual life histories needs to be re-thought; that context and culture provide the hermeneutic 'glue' that provides meaning to the field narratives; and that narrative research can provide alternative sources of evidence for policymakers.

Keywords: narrative, life history, international education, sub-Saharan Africa, Ghana, South Africa

## INTRODUCTION

The European in Africa sees only part of it, usually only the continent's exterior coating, the frequently not very interesting and perhaps least important part of it. His vision glides over the surface, penetrating no depths and refusing to imagine that below everything a mystery may be hidden, and within as well. But European culture has ill prepared us for these excursions into the depths, into the spring of other worlds and other cultures – or our own, for that matter (Ryszard Kapuscinski 2001).

The aim of this article is two-fold: first, to take a theoretical excursion into reconceptualising the role of narrative in generating knowledge of Africa's educational and development landscape; and second, to reflect upon the experience of using narrative and biographical approaches to education research in two sub-Saharan African national settings.

Prepositions are important. In discussing narrative in, rather than of, education, this article will argue that narrative operates in a number of ways and at a number of levels. Narrative has been defined as

the relationship between what is being told i.e. its content, how it is being narrated i.e. its form; for whom it is intended i.e. its audience; and where it is occurring i.e. its context, bearing in mind the context may shift from the original location of the generation of the narrative to a new location where it is being read or heard (Stephens and Trahar 2012: 59–60).

Grounded in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology, narrative research has been defined as ‘an umbrella term that covers a large and diverse range of approaches, the result of a rapid expansion of the area of inquiry over the past dozen years’ (Mischler 1999: xv). Broadly speaking, it is a form of qualitative research that involves the gathering of narratives – written, verbal, oral, and visual – focusing on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences, seeking to provide ‘insight that befits the complexity of human lives’ (Josselson 2006: 4). Narrative is therefore composed of a dialectical relationship between knowledge, or possibly what Bruner (1996) calls knowing, audience and context.

Narrative also occurs at three different epistemological and theoretical levels: first at the meta or ‘grand’ level in which fields or traditions of enquiry are defined and legitimated; second at the meso or intermediate level in which national or regional narratives are espoused and again legitimated; and finally at the micro or personal level in which individuals give a narrative account of their lives. Let us examine the three levels, first with a brief discussion of the meta hegemonic narratives that have shaped much that has occurred in African education and development over the past fifty years.

## WESTERN ‘GRAND’ NARRATIVES IN AFRICAN EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

In 1979 the concept of the ‘grand narrative’ was coined by the father of postmodernism, Francois Lyotard. For Lyotard, these narratives are characterised as ‘totalising’ or explanatory narratives purporting to embody ‘universal essential truths’. Because of their suggested universality they also tend to delink or decontextualise knowledge and knowledge production from context or culture. These are ‘grand’ in that they seek not only to describe and explain the world but also to legitimate it. These narratives, Lyotard argues, are not ideologically neutral, but rather, as Odora Hoppers and Edward Said, suggest problematic and complex competing knowledge systems established and constantly nourished by Western hegemony.

In his thought-provoking yet controversial *Culture and imperialism* (1993), Edward Said traces the roots of imperialism in European culture to the popular literature of the 19th Century, arguing that Conrad’s *Heart of darkness* and T.E. Lawrence’s *Seven pillars of wisdom*, for example, did much to cement the idea of Africa not only as the ‘other’ in terms of Western colonial development, but also to deny it a voice in the generation and legitimation of alternative narratives and discourses.

The twin economic and educational development narratives of Africa since the Second World War can be characterised as ‘grand’ in that they not only reflect the ‘totalising’ explanations of what constitutes education or development but are also legitimated as sole narratives, brooking few if any counter-discourses. As Tiffin (1995: 98) notes:

Post-colonial counter-discourse strategies involve a mapping of the dominant discourse, a reading and exposing of its underlying assumptions from the cross-cultural standpoint of its imperially subjectified local.

Field narratives, which are ‘local’ and ‘subjective’ when analysed in relation to national and meta narratives, can, therefore, contribute to the construction and legitimation of counter development and educational discourses.

The economic development meta narrative was established shortly after the Second World War as a default reflection of the powerful nations who had emerged victorious from the conflict, convinced that global reconstruction – and what would come to be called ‘development’ – would best serve the interests of all, not least the West who would foot the bill. By presenting ‘development’ as a set of technical measures outside the realm of political debate (utilization of scientific knowledge, growth of productivity, expansion of international trade) it became possible for a liberal – and from the mid-1980s – neoliberal agenda to be advanced as the ‘only story in town’. It articulated, in other words, a set of politically neutral, technical goals to be achieved for a deserving poor. The discourse within the story: victims, modernity, the role of private capital, and a sense of linearity, espoused by Walt Rostow in *The stages of economic growth: A non-communist manifesto* (1961), is a powerful account and ‘grand’ in its claims of universality and neutrality, though it can be argued that some effort was made to provide a counter narrative at the time by African leaders such as Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah.

Vincent Tucker (1999) goes further and argues that ‘development’ has moved from being regarded as neutral and technical to a western ideology, meta narrative that has gained the status of myth. For him, the myth of development is a central myth of Western society.

Drawing upon the ideas of Gilbert Rist (1990), he says:

“Development” is not a natural process, although it has been accorded such a status in the mythology of Western beliefs. Regarded as natural it is accepted without question because it bears its own legitimization. It is rather, a set of practices and beliefs that has been woven into the fabric of Western culture and is specific to it. “Development” is not a trans-cultural concept that can claim universal validity (Tucker 1990: 2).

For Rist, despite the transfer of goods, gadgets, capital, technology, hospitals and roads, the economic policies and socioeconomic accomplishments of the West cannot

be replicated in the global South because whereas from the material point of view, everything is set to go, the ‘symbolic engine is missing’ (Rist 1990: 18). Interestingly while researching the interplay between Western modernity and traditional education in northern Nigeria in the late 1970s, I discovered a significant body of indigenous radical opinion (which I termed the young Turks) arguing for a return to a ‘pure’ form of Islam as a counter-discourse to what they saw as the ‘empty materialism’ of Western development. It is no surprise to find the emergence of groups such as Boko Haram that reject dominant development discourses but can only offer alternatives that are inarticulate and nihilistic. In many ways the education narrative is predicated on neo-liberal models of schooling, which in turn echo the familiar discourse and practices of a western-educated urban elite: instruction in a global second language, no room for indigenous knowledge, the introduction of ‘user’ fees, increased privatisation, and a distrust of state-owned public services. The flight from state to private in education has also been hastened by a toxic mix of inefficient state management, government underfunding and outdated models of schooling (Bloch 2009; Harber 2009).

Within the education narrative is nested another, the epistemological. Here it is possible to identify two distinct ways of viewing the generation of knowledge – paradigmatic and narrative knowing, each reflecting the larger meta narratives.

Paradigmatic knowing is rooted in scientific modes of thought, and represents the world through abstract propositional knowledge. Narrative knowing, by contrast, is organised through the stories that people recount about their experiences. For Bruner (1996) although both ways of knowing are essential facets of the human capacity to make sense of the world, relatively little is understood about the narrative mode (McLeod 1997). This matters because educationists and development economists in particular, in attempting to be scientific, have focused almost entirely on the generation of paradigmatic knowledge, and have, ‘dismissed narrative knowing as irrational, vague, irrelevant, and somehow not legitimate’ (McLeod 1997:26). In an earlier book (Stephens 2007), I reflected on the fact that culture and a cultural approach to education and development are treated in very much the same way because of the hegemony of positivist science, and I would suggest economics, over the disciplines in question.

But an opportunity also exists for narrative – with its universal strengths and recognition as a ‘different’ way to generate knowledge or knowing – to provide a bridge between individual stories of experience and the social meanings and ‘spring of other worlds and cultures’.

Before looking at these micro or personal narratives drawn from two sub-Saharan research settings, let us briefly survey narrative research in education at the meso or national level in Africa and discuss the role context plays in embedding those narratives.

## NARRATIVE RESEARCH IN EDUCATION IN AFRICA: THE STORY SO FAR

Considering the potential narrative research has for generating new knowledge about many of the enduring problems facing education across the continent, it is surprising to find only a handful of studies adopting a narrative approach. The 700-page *Routledge handbook of narrative theory* (2005), for example, includes just two pages on ‘African narratives’, and although one or two journals (for example, *Compare* 38(3) June 2008) have devoted a special issue to narrative research in international and comparative education, it is still very much in its infancy.

There are, however, a few examples of African narrative and biographical research in education. Most are small-scale studies often exploring issues of teacher identity and agency. Cross (1996) investigated the life histories of three African postgraduate students studying at her UK university; Osler (1997) has researched the career biographies of Kenyan teacher advisers; and Barratt (2006) carried out research in Tanzania that used teacher narratives to re-position her respondents as ‘thinking, feeling and doing’ human beings rather than people on the receiving end of policy or victims of a difficult environment (Barratt 2006: 123). Baxen (2008) utilised teacher narrative data to develop a hermeneutic understanding of HIV/AIDS in South Africa; and teacher identity was explored in two other South African studies, Smit and Fritz (2008) taking a symbolical interactionist perspective in their analysis of two African teacher life histories, and Graven (2012) re-examining notions of teacher identity by asking respondents to ‘re-author’ their professional life histories to allow for greater personal empowerment and agency. An exception to this body of work on teacher narratives is Robert Serpell’s (1993) anthropological study of pupil ‘life journeys’ drawn from his extensive involvement in one Zambian village. Serpell used the micro narratives of village children to critique the Western meta narratives of Piagetian psychology and Western models of development. As he says in his conclusion:

The extent to which the project of the Enlightenment is appropriated by Africans for the promotion of a genuinely developmental form of education (developmental both for the individuals and for society as a whole) will depend in large part on the extent to which the bicultural graduates of a largely alien curriculum are willing to share their critical understanding of Western culture with those of their fellow citizens (be they grandparents, parents, contemporaries or children) who have not had the opportunity to sample it in depth. Out of such a sharing could arise a radical redefinition of what constitutes a modern education, incorporating the best of both cultures, a synthesis born of egalitarian discourse (Serpell 1993: 278).

Serpell’s contribution was to provide an analysis that weaves together local and national stories with a critique of ‘grand’ narratives that have shaped development, education, and in the case of his study traditional explanations of child development.

The relationship between culture and context plays an important role in providing the hermeneutic ‘glue’ that gives wider meaning to the individual life stories. Let us look for a moment at this relationship.

To understand the important role narrative knowing can play in generating narrative knowing, it is important initially to make a conceptual distinction between a story and a narrative.

Polkinghorne (1998) suggests that narratives are ‘stories with a plot’, while my colleague, Ivor Goodson (2010), further elaborates by stating that:

Narratives are stories with an organising principle by which the contextual meaning of individual events can be displayed and articulated ... plot is important for providing the narrator with a criterion for the selection and organisation of life events Goodson (2010: 11).

When a story is told it becomes a narrative when it draws upon its context and culture for its significance both for the narrator and listener; which is one of the reasons why the life narratives of teachers and students discussed later in this article can only be meaningfully understood when analysed in relation to both the immediate context of the teacher or student and the broader contexts that are regional, national and global.

In a recent book (Stephens 2009), I have argued that despite the advances in qualitative research methodology there is still a tendency to view ‘context’ as a backdrop or background to the research enquiry, and that this background needs to be fore-grounded for any narratives to be meaningful.

Narrative meaning is to be found in the interpretations brought to the narrative both by the researcher and the researched, an interpretation that is grounded in what Dilley (1998) calls the ‘problem of context’. As he says, context is about making connections and, by implication, dis-connections that are construed as relevant to someone, to something or to a particular problem, this process, ‘yielding an explanation, a sense, an interpretation for the object so connected’ (Dilley 1998).

Paraphrasing the great philosopher, Wittgenstein, he suggests we focus less on what context ‘means’ and more on how it is ‘used’. Context can indeed be used to help frame the research problem. It can also be used in theory as well as in practice, connecting (or disconnecting) us to ideas and concepts across a range of academic and professional disciplines. Perhaps we can apply the same approach to narrative research? I would go even further and suggest that building connections in a constructivist sense between the constituent parts of the narrative is actually more useful than establishing a research question and then looking for an answer. This construction draws heavily upon hermeneutics.

The relationship of the part to the whole – or the ‘hermeneutic circle’ – is central to an understanding of the relationship of context, interpretation and narrative. Or rather what matters is that the process of interpretation occurs in context: research findings or ‘new knowledge’ being initially interpreted in the context from which they derive; the

findings then allowing for a subsequent re-interpretation of that context in the light of the analysis of the data. Interpretation and context are key players in the dramatic story unfolding during the research project. They shape not only the content of the research but, I would argue, the methodological tools used in the research process. For example, Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2011: 24), in writing about how they ‘teach’ narrative inquiry to students from all over the world, highlight how conventional Aristotelian notions of narrative genres, such as tragedy and comedy, get disturbed by participants with quite different canonical story genres. Western ideas about the centrality of self-narratives to individual lives are put in question by participants from the global South, in particular for whom more collectively framed narratives are often much more important in their research.

## STUDYING TEACHER AND STUDENT LIVES IN TWO AFRICAN CONTEXTS: REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

What follows is a discussion of two extensive periods of research fieldwork carried out in Ghana (1975–1976) and South Africa (2012) in which individual micro narratives and life histories of students and teachers were analysed in relation to the larger meta and meso narratives discussed earlier.

The two studies can be summarised thus:

### Girls and basic education: A cultural enquiry (1994–95)

(Published as Stephens, D. 1998. *Research monograph No.43*. London: Department for International Development: London)

Research was carried out in two locations in northern and southern Ghana with a view to examining the issues and experiences of 89 women teachers, head teachers, and girls in and out of school. The northern context can be characterised as mainly rural, economically poor, largely Islamic, and patrilineal; the southern richer, largely Christian, economically more prosperous, and matrilineal.

Three ‘background’ contextual domains were foregrounded: the economic, the school and the home, domains of enquiry establishing interrelated contexts within which the life stories of the female teachers and students could be meaningfully be analysed. Life stories became life histories, what Goodson calls ‘genealogies in context’ (Goodson 2013), personal accounts of ‘what happens to people’ embedded in local, national and global contexts.

Of importance too was Ghana’s national development narrative characterised by a growing export-led economy, World Bank structural adjustment policies, political stability, and efforts by the government and donor partners to improve the quality of basic education, particularly with regards to improving the access and retention rates of girls throughout the education system. The experiences revealed by the female teachers

and students were significant in a number of ways, not least the interplay between the home, school and economic domains and the larger national and global narratives.

In the domain of the home, for example, the life histories of successful women teachers and drop-out girl students revealed kinship, descent (patrilineal or matrilineal) and the extended family to be deciding factors in whether school was worthwhile. The narrative for many girls was framed around not only the ‘drawing of water and the hewing of wood’, but also critical turning points when a father offered financial or moral support or a particular female teacher took a young girl under her wing.

The economic domain provided the strongest evidence for the impact of structural adjustment and fiscal reform upon some of the poorest sectors of society. Reasons for dropping out included, ‘I needed just my exam fee of 40 pence’, ‘I was sent home for paying no school fees, so my mother said stay and help me’ and a belief that ‘being poor’ was the fault of the individual child or family.

In school it was the perennial issues of poor quality pedagogy, an outmoded curriculum little changed since colonial times and a teaching profession under-resourced and no longer respected.

An important purpose of this research, however, was not just to present the experiences of women teachers and students but to analyse the experiences for policy implications. We shall return to this relationship between narrative research and policy in discussion of the lessons to be learnt from the two research projects.

## Life-histories of two generations of teachers in the Eastern Cape, South Africa (2012)

(Published as Stephens, D. 2014. *International education and development: A narrative approach*. Routledge: London.)

This research was conducted in the spring of 2012, while the researcher was a senior visiting research fellow at Rhodes University in Grahamstown in South Africa’s Eastern Cape. The aim of the research was different from the Ghanaian study in that, rather than focus upon an education policy issue such as girl drop-outs or the quality of teaching and learning, the focus was more broadly concerned with the experiences of two generations of teachers, the older who had directly experienced teaching during the apartheid years and the younger who had been schooling since 1994 and were about to enter the teaching profession.

Twenty five in-depth life history narratives were collected from both generations of teachers with participants drawn from the white, black and coloured communities. In terms of fore-grounded contexts, it soon became clear from previous research, the local newspaper archives, and from the participants themselves that geo-political and historical contexts shaped and continued to shape the experiences revealed through the life histories.

The experiences of these two groups of teachers were similar in many ways to the Ghanaian participants in the recounting of positive and negative experiences of early



family life, successes and setbacks at school – especially for black students – and the struggles and critical decisions taken in pursuing a teaching career. A characteristic of many of the life histories was the importance of a mentor, often a teacher or a colleague; a sense of determination to succeed, which was evident across all the racial groups; and for the white teachers working during the apartheid years, a slow realisation of what was actually happening across the country outside the traditional enclaves of white South African communities. For the younger teachers, schooled since 1994, the narrative on the one hand is more optimistic, with references to the ‘rainbow nation’ but becoming more hesitant when considering life in post-Mandela South Africa. Disillusionment with politics in general and the African National Congress (ANC) in particular is also a feature of the life histories of both generations.

The two approaches to narrative analysis discussed above, that is, a dissection of the field data and re-assembled thematically for policy purposes in the Ghana study, as opposed to a more holistic treatment of the evidence in the South African research, remind us of the importance of audience and purpose in the design and analysis of narrative research.

There are three major lessons to be learnt from carrying out narrative and biographical research in education in Africa.

## RECONCEPTUALISING NARRATIVE RESEARCH: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

- Re-thinking the relationship between ‘grand’ meta narratives and individual life stories

Education is about what happens to people, how they learn, and significantly how they respond to the large challenges we all face. What is striking about the education development story is the continuous predominance of a ‘grand’ narrative that seems to take little account of this, preoccupied by a macro-economic discourse in which children can still be referred to as ‘human resources’ and the justification for improvements in schooling being phrased in terms of cost-benefit analysis or economic returns on investment. Recent research into the contribution of indigenous knowledge (Breidlid 2012) and the failure of traditional development models to solve some of Africa’s enduring educational problems has, however, provided some liminal space for the development of counter-discourses.

The generation of narrative knowing through individual life histories also reveals the impact of structural forces, which are hegemonic in character, upon individuals and communities, particularly the economically poorer ones.

This impact creates deeply ethical and ideological issues around researcher positioning, interpretation and selection of evidence, power inequalities between researcher and researched (particularly if the researcher originates from the economically richer West) and the question of the authority and valorising of the narrator’s voice (Fox

2008). This raises challenges not only in the design and carrying out of narrative research in Africa but where and how the research is funded, disseminated and published.

- Fore-grounding culture and context in analyses of education in Africa

If education research is about ‘what’ happens to people it is also concerned with ‘where’ that happens in terms of place, setting and context. The life history research reported in this article is grounded in two broad sets of contexts: first the geo-cultural intersections between home, school, and the economy; and the broader ideological and political contexts that shape international education and development. These historical, global and hegemonic contexts not only impact on the development of education policy but in the case of apartheid in South Africa or structural adjustment in Ghana, for example, the day-to-day lives of teachers and students.

In fore-grounding context and culture in the research process, we are doing more than just asking for setting be given greater prominence, rather we are proposing that the kind of disaggregated positivistic research found in much of the grey literature of the development and government agencies be complemented by studies that are literally grounded in African time and place.

- Providing an alternative approach to policy-driven research

The two pieces of research discussed in this article reflect two contrasting approaches to the generation of narrative evidence. In the first – the Ghanaian study – the purpose of the study was to use life history data to provide policy directions for an enduring educational problem, namely reasons why girls did not attend or when they did, dropped out of school. The policy-driven nature of this research lent credibility to an approach that paid less attention to the analysis of holistic life histories and more to what the individual voices said about the problems and solutions for improving schooling. This was achieved by ‘pouring’ the narrative data into three inter-related domains of enquiry that seemed to frame the problem under investigation. This approach, although innovative in its use of life history as a research method, was more traditional in its focus on generating policy useful knowledge.

In the South African study, on the other hand, a decision was taken to place the individual life narratives rather than the research problem centre stage. Here narrative was approached from a methodological stance with an attempt made to generate a sense of individual and community knowing through the vehicle of individual life histories. Such knowing, I would argue, can contribute fresh understandings of how education and development is experienced and lived by two generations of people residing in a particular cultural and contextual landscape, but divided by time, ‘race’, traditions and gender. Such evidence, rich in voice and experience, particularly of the marginalised, offers policy makers an opportunity to engage with teachers and students in the search for stronger connections between decision making and schooling-as-experienced.

## CONCLUSIONS

In 2011 a number of my colleagues at the University of Brighton organised an international symposium to explore new directions in narrative research (Goodson, Loveless and Stephens 2012). At the conference a Bristol colleague and I presented a paper titled 'Just because I'm from Africa, they think I'll want to do narrative'. In the paper we articulated a number of concerns about narrative research in education, among them the possibility that narrative or life history might join the long list of research approaches and tools exported uncritically from the West to the global South. Learning from our experience of carrying out narrative research in Africa and in encouraging students from Africa to consider such approaches, we concluded that by acting ethically and mindfully, it is possible – and necessary – to create liminal spaces in which advances in research can be deliberated and the put to good use by all researchers working in education and development in Africa.

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