Lifelong learning and narrative: the reconstruction of life histories as a tool for researchers and teachers

Almudena Ocaña / University of Granada / Spain

Paper presented at the 39th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 7-9 July 2009, University of Cambridge

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show the utility of the biographical –narrative approach and, in particular, the reconstruction of life histories as a tool for researchers and teachers. This type of methodology has been used in a recent research about Identity and Cycles of Professional Development of Music Teachers in Primary School (Ocaña, 2006).

If we consider, as Huberman, Thompson and Weiland (2000) concluded, that a personal teaching history is a series of highs and lows that take the form of moments of satisfaction, commitment and competency, our knowledge of a professional career will allow us, as researchers, to identify and connect with the teachers, not only in their present situation, but also in regards to their professional career to improve the lifelong learning process.

By reconstructing their life histories, the teachers share with us their own explanations about their teaching practice and the difficulties they faced. This allowed us to evaluate the impact of the different life experiences that have occurred throughout the teaching process have had on their beliefs and teaching skills.

In the educative context, where most of the time the policy makers change the curriculum, the rules and laws around education without the opinion of the teachers, it seems we need to consider that greater prominence must be given to the teachers’ own voices. Instead of speaking for them it’s necessary to attribute more importance to their professional and life experiences, supported by the conviction that educational reform will in turn lead to an improvement in the teachers’ competence and commitment throughout their careers. Thus, through this narrative discussion, we can encourage the teachers to reflect critically upon their own practices, which will subsequently be transformed, and detect their training needs in order to propose future training that is better suited to their needs. Doubtless, the drive for this change must derive from the teachers’ own
knowledge, from an understanding of their professional reality, their beliefs, attitudes and strategies.

Furthermore, I would like to point out that, throughout this research, I was able to corroborate the learning role of this methodological approach. The process of reconstructing life histories is an efficient tool for the research. However, another interesting aspect of this strategy is its training dimension that benefits the teachers themselves and it can be the first step to carrying out a research process in the classroom. Thus, we can see the relation between research and practice and the utility of this type of methodology approach.

In this paper I explain how the reconstruction process of life histories has very important implications for the research and the teachers’ professional development helping them to understand their practice in the classroom and discover the issues that they can improve on.

**Life histories as a tool for researchers**

Firstly, I am going to explain how the life histories can be able to use as important tool for researchers who work about identity and professional development. Thus, I will present the methodological process in my research about Identity and Cycles of Professional Development of Music Teachers in Primary School (Ocaña, 2006).

The main objective of this research was ‘describe and understand, using a biographic narrative method, the most significant elements of the personal and professional histories of a group of Music Education teachers, including how these have influenced the construction of the understanding of their profession and the constitution of their professional identity, and thus identify development cycles in their teaching careers’.

In relation to this general objective I proposed the following question in my research:

- What are the significant influences that affect Music Education teachers throughout the teaching process and how do these condition the development and constitution of their professional identity?
- What are the similar and divergent characteristics in the professional careers of this group of teachers?
- Which characteristics define the identity of these professionals?
- How are the classroom practices of these teachers dependent upon the characteristics that define their identity?
- What are the mechanisms for interaction that occur in the work environment and that determine the teaching culture within the work environment?
- What are the needs and demands of the specialist Music Education teachers in terms of their daily classroom experience?
Defining Professional identity

Professional identity combines different perspectives, which operate in a complementary manner. According to Knowles (2004:149), the teacher's identity refers to how the individuals think of themselves as teachers, to the image they have of themselves as teachers. On the other hand, this concept of identity implies a closed view of the subject, comprising all the characteristics that constitute a person and that do not alter with time. Thus, in order to define the identity, we must look in depth at the beliefs, attitudes, assessments, expectations, skills, etc. of the teacher at a certain moment in their career and which determine their classroom practice. However, according to Dubar (2000), we should not only take into account the identity itself, but also the identity that society attributes to the teachers, and thus it would also be important to investigate the teachers' perceptions of the identity that others attribute to them.

But we continue to consider this a reductionist view as it excludes other essential aspects, since, according to Devis and Sparkes (2004), the identity is built and rebuilt each day as part of the teaching process, a process that takes place within three main spheres: a) Primary environment that corresponds to the family, which provides the individual with an education from a general perspective, and the school, which is the first introduction to the work environment for the future teachers, b) A second sphere that corresponds to the initial professional training and is when the future teacher acquires the technical knowledge associated with the epistemological and didactic aspects of their profession, c) A third sphere that corresponds to the working environment and lifelong learning process which are a constant source of knowledge and experiences that influence the constitution of the identity.

Methodological process of the study

Taking into account the concept of identity that I have assumed in this investigation, the approach to the problem under study must be made from a dynamic perspective, in which the identity is not a closed dimension, but rather a process in continual construction. The fact that the teaching process takes place within a determined context obliges us to consider the use of a contextual approach to the problem being studied. Furthermore, it is important to consider that these contextual relations are not limited to the working environment and therefore the approach must be integral, paying attention not only to the teacher’s training and professional career, but also to the events in their private life, the development of the educational institution itself and the socio-cultural context in which the teachers participate. Lastly, and taking into consideration that according to Ricoeur (1996) the identity may be understood as a story, with all the elements of a narrative (argumental plot, time sequence, characters and location), the method must be carried out from a narrative perspective that provides us with an understanding of the subjective interpretation of these professionals' careers.
The need to approach the professional identity from both a synchronic and diachronic viewpoint, paying attention to the characteristics of the context and personal life, and not just professional life, of the teacher, justifies the use of the biographic-narrative approach, since, as Butt, Raymond, McCue and Yamagashi, (2004) points out, this will allow us come close to the nature, origin and evolution of these teachers’ beliefs in regards to their profession.

From the various existing methods for a biographic-narrative investigation, I have chosen to use the life histories. The life histories consist of an autobiographical narrative motivated by an external agent and obtained through successive interviews, personal documents, etc. (López Barajas, 1996).

**Phases in the process of reconstructing the life histories**

The phases in the process of reconstructing the life histories according various authors (Pujadas, 1992 and Smith, 1994) are: a) Initial or preparatory phase; b) Phase for collection of information or holding of the biographical interview; c) Phase of analysis and interpretation of the information; d) Phase of presentation of the life histories.

In the initial or preparatory phase and once I had identified the problem under study and chosen the methodological strategy to be used, the following step was to determine who will participate in the study. For this, I carried out a systematic and intentional selection process, in which I set different criteria according to the objectives of the study. These criteria were: a) Chronological age and the years of teaching experience; b) Different routes to access the specialisation in Music Education; c) The type of education centre and teachers’ work situations; d) Environment work; f) Type of musical training; g) Gender.

Another task I carried out in this phase of the process was to construct the instruments for collecting information: guide for biographical interview and three complementary instruments (personal identification file, academic-training curriculum and a professional curriculum).

Based on a review of the dimensions to take into account in the study of the professional identity and development (Kelchtermnas, 1993; Pozo, 2001; Gohier et al., 2001; Bolívar, 2004; Knowles, 2004) and without losing sight of the objectives of my research, I established flexible interviewing guidelines, based on five blocks that correspond to the five biographical stages of professional development: I. Childhood and school stage; II. Choice of career and initial professional training; III. Induction to the teaching profession and work experience prior to specialising in Music Education; IV. Access to the specialisation in Music Education and subsequent work path; V. Current position and consolidation as a Music Education specialist.
Thus, in the guidelines I included the possible questions to ask each of the interviewees, being aware, as Stake (1998:64) points out, that this does not concern a closed protocol, as each interviewee has unique experiences and special histories to tell, for which reason, as the different interview sessions take place, some questions will be included and others omitted, depending on each case.

After contacting each of the interviewees and following one of the ethical questions to take into consideration in this type of research, I informed the participating teachers of the nature of the work. I also assured them of the confidential and anonymous nature of their participation, as I would use pseudonyms and avoid the location of the places where the events they told us about had occurred. Once I had obtained the informed consent of each of the participants, I began the cycle of biographical interviews that took place in three sessions, lasting approximately one hour each.

I want to point out that, at the end of each session of the interview cycle and before starting the next, I provided the interviewees with the transcription of that session, so they could read it and make any corrections they considered appropriate, enabling us to progress further in the process of collecting information based on truthful information, constituting one of the quality procedures of the investigation.

The phase for analysis and interpretation of the information was not set for a determined stage of the investigation, but rather, it was carried out throughout the whole process via continual comparisons and reviews of the information. The analysis process had already begun with the reading of the specialist bibliography, which enabled me to better understand the dimensions I should take into account when I came to approach the problem under study, draft the interview protocol and design an initial system of categories for analysis. Then, as I have previously mentioned, the review of the transcription of each of the interview sessions optimised the information collection process. Nevertheless, in this point I will describe the process of analysing the gathered material, following the Miles and Hubermann model (1984).

Using a deductive process, I configured an initial system of categories, taking into account, as McMillian and Schumacher (2005) pointed out, the revision of the specialised bibliography, the questions of the research, the guiding themes of the interview and my experience from a previous job. Taking this system as a departing point, I started the information analysis and identified new themes that gave rise to the main categories. Thus, using the analytical technique referred to as constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I compared and contrasted each theme and category in order to determine their distinctive characteristics and to identify those that finally went on to form a part of the system I used to perform the final analysis.
Following the vertical analysis of each career path I started the phase for creating or reconstructing the life histories. These documents are: the life story or biographical summary; identification files and academic and professional curricula; summary-table of the most relevant aspects of the biography; biogram and summary of the professional career in order to define the cycles of professional development.

I will explain deeply in my presentation the reconstruction of the life story, which was organised around different biographical stages and taking in account a model which is one of the original contributions of our study.

After examining each and every one of the trajectories of the Music Education teachers taking part in this study and learning first hand how their lived experiences in different contexts were determining factors in the construction of their professional identity and their way of understanding classroom practice, it becomes necessary, once I have reached this point, to provide an overall response to some of the questions formulated at the start of the research.

Thus, once each of the individual case studies has been drafted and presented, I carried out a comparison work of each of the histories in order to identify patterns and regularities in the teaching processes and the construction of professional identity experienced by each of the interviewees.

Using a transversal analysis of the information contained in each of the life stories, I produced two separate reports: one in which I worked on the group of experienced teachers and another in which the new teachers were the protagonists. These partial reports contribute information about the process of constructing the professional identity and the description of the components that currently define it, as well as an approach to the characteristics that define the professional careers of these teachers. I will present some of these conclusions in my lecture.

**Life histories as a tool for teachers**

Another interesting aspect of this strategy is its training dimension. The life history not only is an efficient tool for the researcher in approaching the problem under study, but also can be able to use by teacher to promote their professional development in the life long learning process.

Throughout the research, I have corroborated the learning role of this methodological approach for the teachers because during the biographical interview they could think critically about their identity and professional development. Thus, according Medina Rivilla (1996) this type of tools help them to know the principles of their practice and can be the first step when it comes to carrying out an investigation-action process in the classroom.
In order to know how the participation in this research was important for these teachers I asked about this at the end of the process. I obtained different perspectives and reflections in relation to this topic. For some of them this process was a good and enjoyable exercise to remember their life:

‘I don’t think I expected to do much more than exercise my memory and remember some things that I had “stored up”, but not much more’
(Comments on Gerardo’s participation in the research)

However, for another teachers the process to build their life history was a good moment to reflect about their professional lives.

‘Having read your work, I’ve realised how stressed I was when you interviewed me. Seeing myself through your eyes has produced a deep sentiment in me that I don’t know how to define, but which has made me reflect upon the emotional weight I’ve been bearing for many years and that I was not at all conscious of’
(Comments on Carmen’s participation in the research)

‘This has enabled me to take a pause in my path: to take a look backwards in order to analyse many years of dedication to something that forms a very important, and not only professional, part of my life’
(Comments on Carlos’s participation in the research)

Conclusions
Thanks to this research, it has highlighted the importance of life experiences in the family sphere, as well as the training and professional spheres, in the process of constituting the professional identity. Thus, I see how, throughout their lives, family, friends, partners and children play a huge role, together with the training processes, which start at school and experiences in the work environment. And so, it appears we must take all these aspects into consideration when it comes to deciding what is this group’s identity and how this influences teaching practice, in order to design training activities, based on this, that truly respond to these teachers’ needs.

Furthermore, reconstruction process of life histories has very important implications for the research and the teachers’ professional development helping them to understand their practice in the classroom and discover the issues that they can improve on.

References


Handbook of Qualitative Research, California, Sage.

This document was added to the Education-Line database on 23 June 2009