

Story Circles: A New Method of Narrative Research

Philippa Parks¹

Université de Sherbrooke, Canada

ABSTRACT

Narrative research collects and tells stories about people's lives. It is a recognized methodology for exploring identity development in educational research. This article describes the Story Circle method, an innovation in narrative research data collection and analysis that was used in a project looking at identity construction in pre-service teachers. In the Story Circle method, the researcher uses a focus group type setting to gather large quantities of narrative data generated from several participants to explore commonalities in the data. The narrative data generated by the Story Circles method in this project was rich in both quantity and quality, with over two hundred anecdotes generated over six one-hour sessions. The paper describes the approaches and protocols of data collection and analysis of this method and discusses some of the benefits of using this approach, especially for researchers interested in incorporating narrative research in mixed methods.

KEYWORDS: Focus groups, narrative inquiry, narrative research methods, teacher identity.

Narrative research appeals to those interested in “constructivist-oriented, qualitative research that examines people’s experiences from their perspectives” (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021, p.2). It is deeply concerned with personal and individual life experiences and events (Bell, 2002; Barkhuizen, 2017). It is intimately connected to how we conceive of and understand identity (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Swain et al., 2015). In the field of education, narrative research is often used to explore the ways that teachers construct their professional identity (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Coldron & Smith, 1999; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2013), especially during early teaching experiences and pre-service teaching (Kostoulas & Lämmerer, 2020; Nunan & Choi, 2010; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

Despite the strong appeals of narrative research, scholars such as Andrews et al. (2008) have pointed to a need for more clarity in the literature on how to *do* narrative research. Unlike other areas of qualitative research, narrative research is not often defined by clear or transparent procedures (Andrews, 2021). While Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) point to the very “ubiquity of narrative and the looseness with which its features are defined and practised” (p. 2). as a potential strength, the paucity of descriptions and examples of narrative research methods make it a “notoriously murky field” (Andrews, 2021, p. 363).

When I began my doctoral research into pre-service teachers’ experiences during their practicum, I experienced precisely the kind of murkiness that Andrews (2021) described. Although narrative research aligned beautifully with my theoretical frameworks, research goals, and epistemology, I was unsure about how one went about *doing* narrative research. I began by reading all the seminal works from the field (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 1999;

¹ Corresponding Author: Philippa Assistant professor, Faculté d'Éducation, Université de Sherbrooke, 2500 Boul. De l'université, Sherbrooke, QC, Canada, E-Mail: Philippa.parks@usherbrooke.ca

Polkinghorne, 1988) that were suggested to me by my supervisor. While I found many discussions on the “narrative turn” and its place in research (e.g., Riessman, 2008), how narrative inquiry fits into theoretical frameworks (e.g., Swain et al., 2015), or validity issues in narrative research (e.g., Polkinghorne, 2007), what was missing were clear examples of how narrative analysis is done. This paper’s objective, therefore, is to add to the work by Berhuizen and Consoli (2021), Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2022), and others and to provide a clear description of one kind of narrative method as an example for other researchers. To illustrate this method—called Story Circles—more clearly, I draw upon an example of the method used in a larger mixed-methods project looking into pre-service teacher efficacy and identity development.

Varieties of Narrative Research

Before describing the Story Circles method protocols, it would be helpful to determine where this method falls in the ever-expanding variety of narrative research methods available. Narrative research is a broad term for a qualitative methodology encompassing different research approaches, all of which draw upon stories to collect and understand participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Narrative research has been described and categorized in several ways, including (a) according to data collected and analysis done (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Polkinghorne, 2007), (b) according to whether the narratives are concerned with events or experiences (Andrews et al., 2008), and (c) by the size and type of the narratives themselves (e.g., “big” or “small” stories; Georgakopoulou, (2006).

Analysis of Narratives vs. Narrative Analysis

One of the ways narrative research has been classified is according to the kinds of data collected and the analysis done. Polkinghorne (2007) and Creswell and Poth (2016), for example, use this approach to separate narrative research into two overarching categories (as illustrated in Figure 1 below). These are:

- a) an analysis of narratives, that is, studies whose data consists of narratives or stories but whose analysis produces typologies or paradigmatic categories; and
- b) narrative analysis, that is, studies whose data consist of actions, events, and happenings but whose analysis produces stories (e.g., biographies, histories, case studies) (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 5).

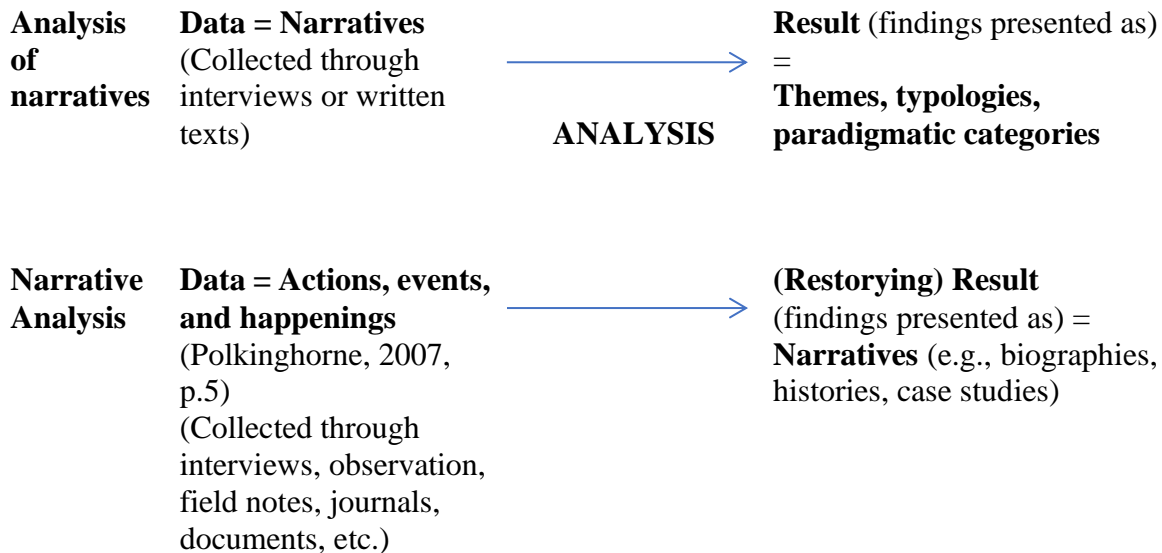
In the first category, an analysis of narratives, the researcher collects narrative data (i.e., stories told by the participants), and the analysis results in categories or themes. Cortazzi’s (1993) work collecting hundreds of stories told by primary school teachers and analyzing them for overarching themes is a good example of an analysis of narratives. In the second category, narrative analysis, data is most often collected through interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). However, it can be collected from various sources, including field notes of shared experience, journal notes, autobiographical writing, and other sources (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). The researcher uses the data collected about the participant’s experiences and combines it with their understanding of the events in a meaning-making process that Connelly and Clandinin (1999) call “restorying” (p. 9). Work by Connelly and Clandinin (1999) exemplifies this approach.

Events or Experiences? Another way of classifying narrative research is to consider whether it concerns events or experiences. Narrative research that is considered event-based is most concerned with how a narrator recalls and recounts past events from their life through stories (Andrews et al., 2008). One of the critical figures of event-focused narrative research

was Labov (1972), whose Evaluation Model of Narrative set out a clear system for identifying, parsing, and analyzing stories of past events.

Figure 1

Analysis of Narratives vs. Narrative Analysis



Andrews et al. (2008) contrast event-focused narrative research with experience-centered work, which focuses on stories of various lengths, “that may be about general or imagined phenomena, things that happened to the narrator or distant matters they’ve only heard about...that encompass various media” (p. 5). In other words, while the event-focused narrative is interested in a particular incident in the past and how the narrator understands it, experience-centered narrative research gathers many stories and other data from participants to produce a global understanding of the participant’s experience.

Socially Oriented Narratives. Andrews et al. (2008) identify another form of narrative research that focuses neither on events nor experience but is more interested in how narratives can be co-constructed in social interactions. In this kind of narrative research, stories that occur in group settings are mined to see how social patterns emerge and what the function of narratives is in these settings.

Big vs. Small Stories. Rather than classifying narrative research by event, experience, individual or social orientation, Georgakopoulou (2007) classifies her narrative research by the magnitude of the stories gathered. As she explains, in contrast to the “longstanding tradition of *big stories* [emphasis added]” (p. 404), she is interested in what she calls small stories or

...tellings of ongoing events, future, or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell...these tellings are typically small when compared to the pages and pages of transcript of interview narratives (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p. 404).

More traditional narrative research collects large volumes of data about individuals’ experiences with the goal of restorying their experiences into a larger narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Small stories, in contrast, aim to capture “the everyday, small narrative phenomena that occur ‘naturally’ between people” (Andrews et al., 2008, p. 2). While the emphasis on small stories tends to be event-focused and socially oriented, research on small stories often

transcends these categories, extending the understanding of 'event' to include specific past events and the experience of the event from the point of view of the participant. Small stories are examined for intimate microsocial interactions and how these interactions resonate with more extensive cultural trends (Andrews et al., 2008).

Considering the categories of narrative research described above, I classify the Story Circle method as an analysis of narratives. The data collected are stories, and the analysis results in paradigmatic categories (Polkinghorne, 2007). These narratives are small stories told between peers about events that occurred in the past. Given the group setting of Story Circles, this approach is also strongly socially oriented. All these characteristics lead me to consider the method an analysis of small, co-constructed, narratives.

Research Context

I live and work in Quebec, Canada. Like many other countries, Canada is experiencing severe shortages of teachers. Of these, teachers of second languages are in the highest demand and are among the most vulnerable to attrition (French & Collin, 2011). In French-speaking Quebec, the shortage of second-language teachers means that there are more positions for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers than teachers. As a former ESL teacher and educator in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programs, I was motivated to understand what experiences pre-service teachers had during the practicum that helped them become more resilient in the classroom. The overarching question under investigation in my project was: What experiences do pre-service English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers have during their placement that strengthen (or erode) their professional identity, efficacy, and resilience?

While my mixed-method research design used surveys to quantitatively measure the participants' self-efficacy before and after the practicum experience, it also used qualitative methods to understand changes in the participants' self-efficacy and teacher identity. Narrative research has been extensively used by researchers (e.g., Clarke et al., 2014; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011) to explore how teacher identity responds to tension and transformation in the practicum experience (Atay, 2007; Badia & Clarke, 2021; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Teng, 2019). I was, therefore, immediately drawn to narrative research as a method for this project. As a course lecturer in teacher education, I had noticed that the pre-service teachers I was working with naturally—almost compulsively—formed groups during debriefing sessions and shared what Georgakopoulou (2006) has called “breaking news” (p. 6) while they were on practicum. These shared stories became the cornerstone of our classes. We drew on them extensively as a group to help us make sense of the practicum experience. When I began researching pre-service teacher identity, I wanted a narrative method that would draw on this natural impulse. I was looking for a socially oriented narrative method that gathered the small stories Georgakopoulou (2007) shared between peers during these sessions. I designed the Story Circles method to gather these stories of transformation and to explore how the pre-service teachers used these stories to explain their emerging professional identities to themselves and their peers. A description of the protocols used and some of the data collected in the Story Circles method follows.

Story Circles Research Protocols

Creating an Interview Guide

The Story Circles method aimed to elicit stories from the participants about their experiences leading to teacher identity development. Since this research project was grounded in theories of Teacher Self Efficacy (Bandura, 1997), teacher professional identity development

(Danielewicz, 2014; Pennington & Richards, 2016), and attrition and resilience (Bradford, 2016; Bradford & Braaten, 2018; Fives et al., 2007; Hong, 2010) I began by writing out broad categories for questions that were linked to these frameworks, including development of teacher self-efficacy, professional identity development, and experiences that influenced attrition or resilience including demoralization. After creating these broad categories, I began to write questions I hoped would elicit responses linked to each of these aspects. As I wrote the interview protocol, I was careful to write the question in a way that would provoke the telling of an anecdote or narrative, such as, “Tell us about a time when...?” or “Can you recall a moment when...?” to generate as much narrative data as possible.

Once I had written the questions, I reviewed the themes and put a code at the start of each question to remind myself what theoretical framework was being addressed for each question. The questions often touched on more than one framework and were given several codes. For example, the question, “Tell us about a time when you (or your cooperating teacher?) tried to teach something new, and things didn’t go as planned. How did you think things were going to unfold? What happened? How did you react? How did it make you feel? What did you learn from the experience?” were coded to indicate that these questions were about enactive mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, physiological and affective states, and instructional strategies (Bandura, 1997). The interview guide was carefully constructed to create enough space for participants to share their narratives while ensuring the stories were framed around the researcher’s interests (Morgan, 1997).

Participants

The fifteen participants in the example study were all enrolled in their third year of a four-year Bachelor of Education degree in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) at one of two large universities in an urban center in Quebec, Canada. Per ethical guidelines, the participants (n = 28) were recruited by a third party for the first phase of the project, an online survey. Following the survey, participants were asked if they were interested in participating in follow-up interviews; all participants (n=15) who indicated they were interested were invited to participate in the Story Circles. Thirteen (n = 13) participants remained for all three-Story Circle sessions. One participant was present for only the first round, and one was present for the first and second rounds. The participants’ ages ranged from 21 to 42. Eight participants identified as female and seven as male. Table 1 below summarizes participants’ demographic information according to pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participant pseudonym	Age	Gender
Addie	21	Female
Beatrice	22	Female
Cassy ¹	21	Female
Finnegan	26	Male
Fouki	33	Male
Izak Zela	21	Male
Johnny Green	22	Male
Keez ²	21	Female
Kobi	23	Male
Lessya	42	Female
Merida	21	Female
Nick	21	Male
Olivia	38	Female
Ro	27	Female
Subject S	26	Male

Note. Gender was **determined** by self-identification. ¹ This participant was present only for round 1. ² This participant was present only for rounds 1 and 2.

Scheduling

The Story Circle sessions took place for each group in three separate meetings, once before the participants' practicum experience at the beginning of September, once during practicum, roughly six weeks later, and again immediately following the practicum mid-December. The goal of scheduling the sessions at three different moments was to capture some of the experiences participants had at different stages in their practicum and to see how their understanding of themselves and these experiences were incorporated into their professional identity. These discussions took place before or after the participants' university seminar classes to maximize convenience for the participants. Each session lasted between 55 and 75 minutes.

Procedure

The participants were divided into groups of 4-5 for each session. The group size was explicitly set to allow each participant enough time to be heard while ensuring the group was large enough to ensure a diverse range of opinions and experiences (Morgan, 1997).

At the start of each session, participants were invited into a room, provided with refreshments, and given a list of questions from the interview guide. They were asked to take turns reading questions out loud and sharing stories of their experiences in response to the questions. The researcher then left the room and remained outside while the participants used the question prompts to stimulate discussion and share stories².

All interviews were recorded using the VoiceRecorder App. The interviews were later transcribed into MSWord, then transferred into Excel spreadsheets to be parsed and analyzed based on the method described below.

At each session, supplemental data was collected from Graffiti Boards (Hanington & Martin, 2012) and Storylines (Conway, 2001). This additional graphic data was collected for triangulation purposes, to increase validity (Creswell, 2008; Polkinghorne, 2007), and to help participants reflect on their global narrative through graphic representation in the case of the Storylines (*cf* Conway, 2001; Parks, 2021).

Data Analysis

Once the data from the Story Circles had been collected and transcribed, I conducted an analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 2007) by first identifying, then coding narratives, and then identifying and counting narrative themes (and subthemes). Each of these steps is discussed in detail below.

Identifying Narratives

In an analysis of narratives, the researcher collects many small stories and analyses them to look for common themes (Polkinghorne, 2007). The Story Circles method drew heavily upon Cortazzi's (1993) method of analysis in which the researcher collects a large number of (event-focused) small stories. These are first identified in transcripts by their syntax, which is **usually** "in the past tense ... temporally ordered with respect to each other (and) separated by temporal juncture" (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 45). After collecting data from the group sessions, I found that narratives were most easily identified by sections where participants performed the story for

²I remained in the room in the pilot version of this method. However, after a few rounds of testing, I saw that the participants often attempted to answer the questions in a way that would 'please' the researcher (Is this what you meant? Is that what you were looking for?) With the researcher out of sight – presumably out of mind – the participants were much more focused on each other and sharing stories.

their peers through quoted dialogue. In many instances of these performed stories, the participants took on the roles of all actors in the story. These roles could include a student in the classroom, their cooperating (mentor) teacher, and their part in the story. They would then perform the story for their peers through dialogues. These dialogues were often signaled by the word “like,” as in the following examples: “I was like, ‘OK, I’m going to be honest with you...’;” “And you’re like, ‘O.k.’ and you’re prodding them with questions, and you’re like, ‘What do you think about this?’”

Once each narrative was identified, it was given a number (N1, N2...) for easy reference. Participants told anecdotes of various lengths. Some stories contained a few sentences:

But I feel like there’s a lot of stress on our shoulders...Every time I quit, every time I finish school, I’m like, ‘Oh. Well, I can do something else if I don’t want to teach.’ But then when I see their faces, and their smiles, and sometimes the fact that they learn, I remember it, and then I forget (Ro).

Other stories were longer and contained reported speech and role-playing:

Yesterday I was checking their journal entries, and one of the girls — I think I told you, I told you earlier — She drew on her things, like she doodled on her things, and when she came to me, I was like, ‘Oh, that’s very nice.’ So, I was like, ‘That’s a cool drawing.’ And then I was like trying to correct it, but I came back to the drawing, and I was like, ‘I’m sorry I’m distracted by your drawing. It’s super cool.’ And then I was like, ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah. OK. The text seems good.’ And like, 10, 15 minutes later, she was like, ‘Hey, can I ask you a question?’ I was like, ‘Yes. Of course.’ And she basically asked me if I drew or something —and I told her, ‘Yeah, I used to draw a lot, and I wanted to be an illustrator.’ And she was like, ‘Yeah, me too!’ Like, ‘I want to be an illustrator!’ So, I was like, ‘That’s super cool!’ We talked about it, we chatted. And I think we created a link, just with our interests (Izak).

Once all narratives had been identified and identification of the narratives verified by a second researcher, they were transferred to spreadsheets for numbering, parsing, and coding. The volume of the narratives produced was striking: participants in this project generated 222 small stories throughout the nine one-hour sessions.

Coding

Each narrative was parsed and coded using Labov’s (1972) Evaluation Model of Narrative. Labov’s approach is grounded in sociolinguistics; it is interested in how narratives function in a social context, making it a particularly apt method of analysis of stories told in a group of peers (Swain et al., 2015). It is also an excellent approach for analysing professional identity, which is contextually specific and socially negotiated (Gee, 2000; Riches & Parks, 2021; Sachs, 2005). In Labov’s (1972) model, the researcher classifies the events in a narrative into one of six categories, some of which are optional or occasionally absent in the telling (Cortazzi, 1993). These are:

- 1. the Abstract** (optional) typically initiates the narrative and gives the audience a sense of purpose or what the story is about;

2. the “**Orientation**” or context: the people in the story, the setting, and any other details the narrator feels are necessary for the audience to understand and appreciate the situation;
3. the “**Complicating Action**”: typically follows the orientation and gives the sequence of events that end in the “Result” of the story;
4. the “**Evaluation**”: the "raison d'être" of the story and is at the heart of why the story was told (Labov, 1972, as cited in Cortazzi, 1993, p.46). The Evaluation can be mined to understand what the story means to the person narrating it; in other words, what sense they are making of the events and how these fit into their evolving understanding of their identity;
5. the “**Result**” or resolution of the story signals an end to the conflict built up in the “Complicating Action”;
6. the “**Coda**” (optional): signals the end of the narrative and brings the audience back to the present moment (Cortazzi, 1993, pp. 44-47).

An example of narrative coding using Labov’s (1972) model is provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Examples of Analysis of Narratives Coding Using Labov’s Evaluation Model of Narratives
Narrative 1 (N1)

Story of Being the Teacher: Identity Through Student Recognition	
Abstract	I <i>find</i> it’s easier to <u>feel like the actual English teacher when my CT isn’t in the class</u> ; [Subject S: True, true.] Right? And I find – probably not like an English teacher, but like a teacher in general; is like when the super shy quiet kid, you know, finally raises their hand to participate [Subject S: yeah].
Evaluation	So, when I am able to lead the lessons that I planned, and I got all the materials ready for. And the students know, like, the work that I put in my desk all day and I get finally get to do with them. Then that’s when they actually respect me more, like actually look up to me as like, a teacher.
Orientation	One time – it was actually when my supervisor was there - the kids had to write – we were doing, like, numbers. And the kids had to write like, the number 12 000.
Complication	And we were correcting it on the board, and a kid wrote "120" – he just forgot a zero, but I didn't realize it. I was like, "Oh good". Like, whatever. And then the student, like the super-shy girl raised her hand and she's like, "You're missing a zero." And I was like, "Oh my god, like thank you so much!"
Result	I was so thankful that you participated and that you corrected me. This is the best day ever! Yeah, for real! I was like, "You're doing it!" Like, “Thank you!”
Coda	So, yeah.
Narrative 2 (N2)	
Story of Being the Teacher: In the absence of the CT	
Abstract	For me, it was the moment – well, it wasn't a specific moment; it was like an interval of time, where the students slowly transitioned from, as soon as they had a question, to turn immediately to the CT to turning to me instead. [Addie: Yeah]
Orientation	Like, at the beginning - especially the first, um, three weeks, whenever they would have a question
Complication	their first like, reaction was to go to the CT [Subject S & Addie: Umhmmm]. And then, slowly but surely, having replaced her totally –
Result	but like now, when both me and the CT are in the classroom, they turn to me for questions [Subject S: yeah]. Not to, like, me forcing them to [Addie: yeah.], but to them deciding to.
Evaluation	But you’re right, like, <u>when the CT is not in the classroom I feel more like a teacher</u> [Subject S & Addie: Yeah] Because I feel like I second-best myself so much more when she’s there
Coda	---

In the above examples, we can see that the second narrative (N2) shares the idea of feeling like a teacher through student recognition and engagement from the first narrative (N1) and is validated by the second participant. However, an important caveat is added to the story that this requires the absence of the cooperating teacher (CT). This idea is picked up and emphasized by the repetition of the phrase, “when the CT is not in the class(room),” which appears in both stories (N1, N2) by two different narrators.

In these examples, each participant takes the message of the narrative they heard and either supports the story's meaning, expands upon it (as in the example above), or occasionally pushes back against the meaning by sharing a new narrative that contradicts the meaning of the initial narrative. Thus, overlapping narratives can be seen as a social negotiation of meaning and testing of values and identity as each participant actively works on the meaning of the experience and incorporates the shared narratives into their understanding.

Identifying Narrative Themes

Once each narrative had been coded and revised several times, I turned to the Evaluation and mined it for information about the participant's beliefs about themselves, teaching, and the process of identity construction in the making. Each story was then assigned a preliminary (sub) theme based on information from the Evaluation. In the above examples, the stories are categorized by global theme (a Story of Being the Teacher) and then by subtheme (N1: Identity Through Student Recognition; N2: In the Absence of the CT)

Once I had designated a preliminary theme for each narrative, I grouped the stories under common, overarching narrative archetypes, refining, revising, and reducing the categories until I had settled on eight overarching themes. These were: (1) origin stories; (2) stories from teacher education; (3) language identity stories; (4) stories about managing students; (5) stories about teaching language; (6) stories of evaluation and feedback; (7) stories of being the teacher; and (8) stories of conflict, survival, leaving and resistance.

Supplementary and Corroborative Counting

The final step in the analysis was to take stock of the total number of themes and subthemes that emerged from the narrative data. As previously mentioned, this narrative data was collected as a part of a larger mixed-methods research project. The idea of counting themes was done to provide “evidence, in the form of numbers... such as frequency counts, in order to support the idea that the findings were derived through a rigorous, objective analysis of the qualitative data” (Hannah & Lautsch, 2011, p. 16). A summary of each of these counting of these narrative themes appears in Table 3.

Table 3
Numbers of Stories by Theme

Theme	Total	%
(1) Origin Stories	19	8.5%
(2) Stories from Teacher Education	10	4.5%
(3) Language Identity Stories	10	4.5%
(4) Stories of Learning to Manage a Class	23	10%
(5) Stories of Learning to Teach a Language	26	13.5%
(6) Stories of Evaluation and Feedback	38	17%
(7) Stories of Being the Teacher	63	28%
(8) Stories of Conflict, Survival, Leaving, and Resistance	29	13%
Total	222	

Discussion

The defining characteristic of the Story Circles method is the *circle* or group structure. I initially settled upon a group setting because of the natural inclination of my students to share stories with their peers during debriefing sessions. However, as I began to use and understand narrative research further, I realized that the group setting offered several other benefits. The first was that stories require an audience. While stories told to researchers in interviews provide an audience (of one) for the storyteller, the opportunity to tell stories to peers reflects the kind of interactions that occur naturally among participants, especially during moments of transition and transformation (Nunan & Choi, 2010). The group structure in Story Circles also meant that participants could generate a large number of short stories in a relatively short time. Stories were generated when participants picked up on ideas suggested in previous stories and used them to recall specific instances and narratives in their own lives.

The group setting likewise encouraged the production of the kind of co-constructed narratives described by Andrews et al. (2008). These co-constructed narratives can be analyzed to uncover how identity is constructed and performed in group settings, for example. As the stories in the example project were shared among peers, the transcripts showed meaning-making-in-progress. As narrators told the story, they drew on their experiences to confirm and consolidate aspects of their nascent teacher identities. Themes from these stories were then taken up by others in the Story Circle and used as a springboard for their own stories. This meaning-making-through shared narrative became a re-storying experience for the participants, as the stories' meanings were validated, expanded upon, or even refuted and reformulated by other storytellers. The narrative data collected in Story Circles proved extremely rich in individual and group understandings of experience as participants listened and lived the stories vicariously through their peers' narratives. These kinds of experiences are what Georgakopoulou (2006) calls the "salient and powerful narrative meaning-making ways in mediated interactions" (p. 3). The connections and comparisons participants made as they built upon each other's ideas and experiences provided data and insights that would have been less accessible without the interaction found in a group (Morgan, 1997).

While the group setting of Story Circles provided these advantages to the researcher, it also benefited participants as it encouraged reflective practice. In general, narrative research encourages reflection since it requires the storyteller to select an incident, to organize the telling of the incident in a coherent way to illustrate an intended message. The group setting of Story Circles, however, required the narrators to reflect more deeply on their experiences as they negotiated the meaning of their stories with their audience. Sharing stories with peers in the group setting allowed participants to analyse others' experiences. Analysing others' experiences after critical reflection is especially beneficial for teachers (Cortazzi, 2014) and can bolster teacher self-efficacy through vicarious experience (Bandura, 1997).

The opportunity to participate in deep reflective practice was perhaps not the underlying attraction of Story Circles for participants, however. As Georgakopoulou (2006) has noted, the compulsion to share stories or "immediately reworked slices of life ...arose out of a need to share with friends what had just happened" (p. 6). The emotional release during these sessions appeared to provide a cathartic space akin to therapy. In fact, this is just how one participant in the example study described the experience when she explained how much she and her peers looked forward to each session. In her words, it felt like "Paid therapy. That's what we call it!" (Beatrice). The connection between narrative and emotion has been established in other research (e.g., Hogan, 2003), but the benefits of the narrative research process to the participants deserve more attention in further research.

Validity and Quality

Many narrative researchers (e.g., Andrews, 2021; Polkinghorne, 2007; Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2007) argue that discussions of validity in narrative research are challenging—and even moot—because narrative research does not rely on traditional measures of validity and reliability. Knowledge claims in narrative research are “centered on the meaning life events hold for people... [and] about how people understand situations, others, and themselves” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 476). The lack of traditional validity and reliability measures in narrative research can be unsettling for researchers who prefer definitive answers. That is why Andrews (2021) and others have advised narrative researchers to describe measures set in place to ensure quality research. With the need for quality assurance in mind, I use two indicators of quality research set out by Andrews (2021), namely, trustworthiness and attention to co-construction of meaning, and describe how the Story Circles method meets these criteria.

Trustworthiness

Andrews (2021) describes trustworthiness in narrative research as the sense a reader has “that they are in trustworthy hands” (p. 363). Citing Riessman (2008), Andrews (2021) goes on to explain that “interpretations of data should be ‘plausible, reasonable, and convincing’” (p. 363). The first way the Story Circles method gives the reader a sense of trustworthiness is in the large amount of data produced. For example, in the project described in this paper, participants told 222 small stories in nine hours of group interview time. These large numbers of stories allow narrative researchers to “capture the commonalities between individual experiences” in an analysis of narratives (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 475) since commonalities that appear more frequently in the analysis can be considered important to the participants. In addition, the sizable number of stories allows the researcher to count and weigh themes, creating trustworthiness for readers convinced by corroborative counting strategies validation (Hannah & Lautsch, 2011). The opportunity to broadly quantify qualitative narrative data not only increases trustworthiness for researchers who are reassured by counting strategies but also makes Story Circles well suited to mixed methods research, for example.

Co-Construction of Meaning

Andrews (2021) cautions that to produce quality research, “narrative scholars should be sensitive to the ways in which meaning is remade by the speaker, listener, transcriber, interpreter and reading audience” (p. 363). The Story Circle method ensures one kind of sensitivity to the meaning created between the storyteller and the listeners in the circle, which is a sensitivity to *groupthink*. Groupthink is understood as the tendency of a group of people to conform to a dominant point of view rather than the diversity of opinion that emerge in individual contexts (Carey & Smith, 1994). While groupthink may be a validity issue in other forms of qualitative research, the inclusion of narrative within the group setting of the Story Circle method works to counteract the tendency to conform to a dominant point of view. In narrative methods, participants share stories of individual experiences rather than opinions on a topic. This is an important nuance. As narrators of their own stories, participants in the group setting of the Story Circle are (often) the only person present who can bear witness to the events that make up their narrative. Ownership of the narrative grants the narrator *authority* over the story’s message or moral. While participants in the Story Circle method may take up or contest the meaning of a story, the uniqueness of each participant’s individual lived experience means the interpretation of the events is profoundly personal and are less likely to be led by a dominant viewpoint in a group (Janis, 2008). As such, the narrative context neatly avoids the trap of conformity (Janis, 2008; Rose, 2011) that is present in focus group settings.

Conclusion

The increasing ubiquity of narrative research (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021) means that ways of doing narrative research have become increasingly diverse. Discussions in the literature abound on how narrative is defined and interpreted, what constitutes ethical and quality narrative research, and the kinds of theoretical frameworks that can be mobilized in narrative research. However, the relative paucity of clear descriptions and concrete examples of narrative methods leaves the field distinctly murky (Andrews, 2021). The objective of presenting the Story Circles method in this paper was to address this murkiness by providing a concrete example of one method of narrative research, by situating it within the larger field of approaches, and by providing some arguments to defend the quality of results.

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Notes on Contributor

Philippa Parks is an associate professor in the Faculty of Education at the Université de Sherbrooke. Her research looks at how language teachers form their professional identity during teacher education, particularly how they build self-efficacy and resilience.

ORCID

Philippa Parks, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2603-4877>

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