PROFESSIONS & PROFESSIONALISM

Methodological Insights on Teachers' Professional Agency in Narratives

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Abstract

This article presents post-structural narrative methodologies to examine teachers' agency. According to previous research, agency is important for the learning and well-being of teachers. However, post-structuralism has questioned the assumption of agency as being located in the individual and has claimed a more entwined and relational perspective. The article disturbs clear-cut categorisations of teachers' agency as strong or weak and argues for examining narrative practice because teachers use a variety of grammatical resources that are not inherently personal but are entwined with cultural narratives. This methodological approach reveals how teachers appear agentic and vulnerable at the same time. Thereby, it helps illustrate multifaceted views of the teaching profession.

Keywords

Professional agency, teaching profession, professional learning, narrative analysis, post-structuralism

Introduction

Professional work is characterised by the ability to execute agency within one's domain of expertise. At a very general level, professional agency refers to the power to act and choose one's actions at work (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Loutzenheiser & Heer, 2017). Teachers' professional agency has recently been examined by various theoretical and methodological approaches. It is a growing research field and is associated with both the teacher profession and their students' learning and well-being. In this article, I present post-structural narrative methodologies to examine teachers' professional agency.

Previous approaches to teachers' agency include various perspectives and epistemologies. While admittedly producing valuable knowledge on teachers' professional agency, the methodologies used in previous research seem mostly to rely on rather individualistic assumptions regarding humanity, centring human subjects as excessively autonomous beings. Proponents of the post-structural, post-modern and post-humanist positions in recent studies have contested that view, instead seeing agency as pluralistic and entwined in personal and impersonal relationships (e.g., Bennett, 2010; Burkitt, 2016; Loutzenheiser & Heer, 2017). In this process, the traditional methodologies that tend to categorise teachers' professional agency as either strong or weak seem increasingly inadequate for grasping the full spectrum of professional agency and discerning its nuances. Thus, I argue for methodologies that have the potential to reveal how agency is not only about autonomous individuals but also always incomplete and intertwined with linguistic and narrative systems and relationships within which teachers act.

In methodological literature, conventional humanist qualitative methodology (St. Pierre, 2021), including common-sense coding (Müller & Frandsen, 2020) or simply overlooking how empirical material is produced and communicated (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016), easily guides the researcher into thinking of humans as separate from each other and from the wholeness in which we all live. This article argues that focusing on narrative as practice can provide a means to explore the incomplete and intertwined essence of teachers' professional agency. This is because the narratives told by teachers are not located solely within them, but are constituted through reciprocal relationships embedded within the web of cultural narratives (Meretoja, 2017). In this article, I draw on both narrative theorisations and empirical studies to elaborate on the argument. However, at first, I argue for changing the perspective on teachers' professional agency. Throughout the article, "agency" refers to the same as "professional agency", as I concentrate on teachers' agency in their professional work while also using theorisations from traditions other than profession studies.

The need to think differently about teachers' professional agency

Updating how teachers' professional agency is understood is urgently needed. Due to individualisation, people are excessively seen as responsible and accountable for their

actions, both in professional work and in general. Established accounts on teaching tend to rely on an assumption that the world and the learner are apart (Mulcahy, 2014). This pressures not only the students but also the teachers in their work. Accountability policies, which emphasise measurable performance-based and instrumentalist notions of teaching, can be internalised by teachers (Buchanan, 2015). Learning and teaching are increasingly subjected to measuring and control, whereas the complexity of those phenomena is neglected (Strom & Viesca, 2021). This individualistic tendency has also been reflected in research. Researchers often unconsciously carry and reiterate the assumption that speaking and telling are transparent acts of agency (Chadwick, 2021) that imply personal capacities and abilities rather than larger phenomena.

Teachers' professional agency has been linked to supporting their professional learning (Cong-Lem, 2021) and professional identities (Buchanan, 2015). Although differences between the traditional approaches and epistemologies exist, they mostly concentrate on individuals or collectives acting within social contexts or structures that are analytically separated from the person. Researchers have only recently begun to question the focus on subjects as entirely autonomous beings, fully capable of making choices. According to this linguistic and post-structural approach, agency has been understood as mediated, relational encounters and material affordances that delimit the social participation of actors (Green & Pappa, 2021) or polyphony of multiple voices, implying diverse qualities of action (Heikkilä, 2022). These conceptualisations resonate with Bakhtin's (1986) dialogical perspective that argues against monological perspectives (Dufva & Aro, 2014), thereby elucidating internal tensions in teachers' agency. In addition, they have features common with those of Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) theoretical work, in which social actors can assume different simultaneous agentic orientations and in which agency is conceptualised as an internally complex temporal dynamic. Along with narrative analysis, systemic functional linguistics has recently been used to study teachers' agency (Shultz et al., 2019). The struggles to overcome the individual/structure dilemma clearly appear to require new methodological approaches (De Fina, 2014).

Post-structuralism, although a heterogeneous field, escapes assumptions of clearly defined subjects and centring of human subjects as conscious, rational and autonomous beings (Andreotti, 2014). These conceptions of the individual radically affect the way agency can be considered. Recent post-structural theories related to teachers' agency hold that agency does not merely signify the individual teacher's will to act (Loutzenheiser & Heer, 2017). This tendency is also visible in other fields. Some theorists claim that human agency does not rest on an abstract structure but on multiple, personal and impersonal relationships (Burkitt, 2016; Dépelteau, 2018), whereas some understand agency as assemblages consisting of not only human agency but also agency implied by material elements (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010). However, all these theorisations show how agency is always incomplete, intertwined with and produced through the linguistic and narrative systems and

relationships within which people act (Loutzenheiser & Heer, 2017). This article argues that these systems and relationships can be illuminated by focusing on narrative practice.

Why narrative practice matters for teachers' professional agency

From the intertwined understanding of agency, teachers' agency cannot be categorised as "strong or weak", which is an approach that has been used explicitly or implicitly in previous methodologies examining teachers' professional agency, especially quantitative ones. In their place, new methodologies that delve deeply into the situations and relationships from which teachers' agency emerges are needed. Those methodologies also have to pay attention to the interactions in those situations, whether verbal or embodied and whether with other humans or inhuman matter. Rather than seeing agency as a steady state or a finished product, its fluidity in time and space should be considered (Dufva & Aro, 2014).

By concentrating on verbal interaction, narrative understandings that examine the practice of narrative hold that people position themselves in various ways, sometimes as victims and sometimes as agentic beings who assume control over events and actions, and that they shift constantly between these positions (Riessman, 2011). This means that certain kinds of narratives are not inherently personal and that people will use a variety of grammatical resources. In narrative practice, the process of telling or writing one's account to someone else or for oneself (Meretoja, 2017) is the target of the research.

For example, in my research work, one day I may be telling my colleague, in a certain situation, very broadly about how the article I am writing is going very well and how I am enjoying the work. If I had to answer a questionnaire or a very short interview on how I sense *my* agency, then the answer would probably refer to an agentic stance. On another day, I confront problems in my writing, my mood is different and I meet another colleague in a different situation that makes me nervous, and I may, at first, estimate *my* agency as weak. This highlights the context-specific and dialogic nature of agency, whereby more nuanced methodologies are needed. Moreover, in these two situations, the grammatical resources available to me to express agency are very different. In the same way, interview situations inherently shape the content and form of what is said. Narratives and agency do not simply flow unilaterally but are shaped collaboratively (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016).

This example tries to show that instead of examining *my* professional agency, focusing on the relationships and situations that produce certain kinds of narratives is more appropriate. By narrating, people also pave the way for further agency, because their possibilities for action are founded in the narrative choices they explicitly or implicitly make in their narration. This is because people are not separate narrators using separate grammatical resources, but are embedded in a web of cultural narratives and meaning-making (Meretoja, 2017). In this way, narratives essentially shape peoples' possibilities for action

(Meretoja, 2017). They work to both represent and constitute reality (Bamberg, 2004) so that the text not only mirrors the world, but also creates the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

However, not all narrative research shares the idea of agency as pluralistic and entwined. The reality is actually the opposite, and narrative inquiry's frequent smoothing over of polyvocality in favour of univocal coherence has recently been criticised as one-eyed and undemocratic (Cirell & Sweet, 2020). Indeed, narrative research in general is a multilevel, interdisciplinary field with a wide range of approaches and theoretical understandings (Squire et al., 2017).

In the field of teaching and teacher education, narrative *inquiry* (Clandinin & Huber, 2010) has been dominant over linguistically minded methodologies. Traditionally, narrative inquiry has served to emancipate teachers' voices and tell their autobiographic stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). The use of narrative is hoped to work as a deconstruction that empowers individuals by allowing them to tell their own stories (Hodgson & Standish, 2009). However, giving voice to diverse groups can result in constituting multiple versions of the same voice (Hodgson & Standish, 2009). On the contrary, story criticality (Mäkelä et al., 2021) is needed in today's world, where affective stories of personal experiences are utilised to persuade people in various fields. In addition, the previous research has overwhelmingly focused on active elicitation or construction of narratives, whereby narratives embedded in research participants' naturally occurring interactions can remain hidden (Pulvermacher & Lefstein, 2016; Watson, 2007). Linguistically minded research that concentrates on narrative practice and the narratives told by ordinary people in diverse environments (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015) is compatible with the post-structural understanding of agency. Before the release of *The Handbook of Narrative Analysis* (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015), this tradition, often called "narrative analysis", used to be subsumed within broader linguistic fields, such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. Therefore, naming research narrative research, or even more specifically, narrative analysis, tells little about its ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding agency or subjectivity and therefore requires clarification, which will be provided next.

In qualitative research, agency is often traced through people's talk about their experiences. However, any methods do not allow us to enter into our respondents' worlds and understand their "experiences" and "perspectives" (Silverman, 2017). This is because when people tell their experiences, they do not objectively report what happened but interpret those experiences—both at the time of experiencing them and at the time of narrating them (Meretoja, 2017). The narration can sometimes seem neutral; however, a certain perspective from which people interpret their experiences always exists. Hence, agency cannot be deduced from the talk, as such, but requires attention to the narration within certain contexts—*how* and by which grammatical means the things are told.

The origins of these grammatical means are deep-rooted. Narrative, as an interpretative activity, is mediated by cultural models of narrative sense-making, often described as cultural narratives (Meretoja, 2017). These cultural narratives, as interpretative models, affect how people experience things. Narratives take shape in relation to other cultural narratives, which they implicitly or explicitly draw and comment on, modify and challenge (Meretoja, 2017). In doing this, people negotiate between their "own" and the prevailing cultural and social expectations (Hyvärinen, 2008).

Even in an inner dialogue, narrating takes place within a social web of meaning because people are inseparable from their surroundings and refer to various relationships in their narration (Hyvärinen, 2008). Hence, a lot of interaction exists in interviews without constant turn-taking, even when the interviewer stays still for a long time and lets the interviewee speak. For this reason, trying to "fade out" the role of the interviewer is pointless, but one must accept that interviews are always interactive (Holstein & Gubrium, 2016). Narratives are always, to some extent, jointly produced because people are never entirely separate tellers and listeners (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008).

Finally, narrative is relevant for understanding human possibilities. Actions and experiences expressed in a narrative imply a certain understanding of what is possible in a particular context (Meretoja, 2017). Narratives provide different subject positions, as people seize certain possibilities that are open to them and dismiss others (Meretoja, 2017). In narration, people consciously or—maybe more often—unconsciously choose how to orient themselves. A traditional understanding of narratives assumes that narration depicts past experiences. However, in contemporary research, narration is increasingly viewed as shaping prospective action (Andersen et al., 2020). Hence, narratives not only describe experiences related to agency but also play a part in the experience itself. If this profound role of narrative practice is not acknowledged, the understanding of how agency comes about will remain incomplete.

Analysing the narrative practice of teachers' professional agency

As said, narratives do not only refer merely to texts or talk but also to practice, interaction and action. The practice-based narrative analysis combines a focus on local interaction as a starting point for the analysis with an understanding of the embedding of narratives within their discursive and sociocultural context (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008). The narrative practice approach departs from the structural definition of narrative as organised with a beginning, a middle and an end, as established by Labov and Waletzky (1967). That definition resulted in a tendency to recognise narratives as only well-organised and largely monological texts with a beginning and an end (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015). Therefore, storytelling activity in the local context is neglected, and various materials that can be used for narrative research purposes are overlooked. Under the new approach, small

or incomplete narratives, or narrative accounts in which nothing much happens, become worth analysing and are no longer seen as mere analytic nuisances (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Lueg et al., 2020).

Similarly, understanding teachers' professional agency as a phenomenon of interaction means that they do not simply have agency; they negotiate agency in the narratives they tell and through the narratives told by others (Heikkilä, 2022). Various linguistically minded methodologies and approaches can be utilised in analysing the narrative practice of agency from a post-structuralist perspective. These methodologies are not clean or linear tools, resulting in predictability (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016). However, they share an interest in and an emphasis on how certain language usage or linguistic acts are selected in speech or text and the various qualities of agency they imply.

In research on teachers' professional agency, narrative practice can be analysed in a variety of ways. Kayi-Aydar (2019) studied the intersection of elements, such as the race, ethnicity and language background of one language teacher's agency, in the development of their multiple professional identities. In the linguistic analysis of the interviews, Kayi-Aydar (2019) concentrated on discourse markers (e.g. "oh", "well", "you know", "I mean") that indicated hesitation, certainty or doubt. She also identified indirect (reported) speeches that are related to agency, in which putting words into characters' mouths can actually voice the teller's own opinions but without taking responsibility (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). In the second phase of the analysis, Kayi-Aydar (2019) looked at how the teacher positioned herself in relation to her environment, including the researcher, to identify the identity positions she had constructed for herself.

Lefstein et al. (2018) applied linguistic ethnography in a case study on the agency exercised by a teacher team coordinator in shaping the scaffolding she received from her coach while jointly leading teacher team meetings. The analysis focused on how the teacher team coordinator positioned and identified herself, the changes in those positions, the authority she claimed for herself and others and how she ratified or contested assertions of her "own" and other's agency (Lefstein et al., 2018). The study illuminated how playing multiple roles created opportunities and obligations for the coordinator to be agentive (Lefstein et al., 2018).

Anwaruddin (2016) examined publications that emerged from a teachers' professional development programme in Bangladesh. In the analysis, Anwaruddin (2016) introduced a new materialist approach to critical discourse analysis, building a coding scheme based on these thorough theoretical and philosophical notions. He found that the publications overlook material factors that significantly influence teachers' professional learning and growth and that the discourses on technology-enabled success portray a one-dimensional and misleading view of teachers' agency (Anwaruddin, 2016).

Biesta et al. (2017) examined the role of teachers' talk in their achievement of agency against the backdrop of educational policy by referring to teachers' talk, discourses and vocabularies, but not explicitly to narratives. The study is an ethnographic research in three schools and utilised observation, semi-structured individual and group interviews of teachers and managers (Biesta et al., 2017). The point of departure for the analysis was that teachers' vocabularies are the outcome of the complex interaction between personal sense-making and wider discourses emanating from different sources, such as policy, research and public opinion (Biesta et al., 2017). The analysis explored how and to what extent the teachers' talk helped or hindered them in exerting control over and giving directions to their everyday practices (Biesta et al., 2017).

These studies indicate that narratives should not be seen as ready and stable accounts of agency that are detached from their context. Researchers must pay close attention to the local level of interaction and simultaneously go beyond the local level to explore how narratives are shaped by ideologies, social relations and social agendas in different communities, times and spaces (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015). Narratives are shaped by contexts; however, they also create new contexts and alter power relations, thereby constituting new practices (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015). This means that by looking closely at narration, researchers can understand both the representation and the constitution of social reality. They can, for example, ask what kind of power relations the narratives represent, sustain and resist. In addition, researchers should be sensitive to the fact that not all experiences of agency are possible for all and at any time, which derives from inequality and intersectional differences.

Professional agency in narrative practice: An empirical example of student teachers' voices

The empirical possibilities for analysing narrative practice are diverse, and there are no inherently right or wrong ways of doing it. However, thinking about professional agency as entwined in a less individualistic way guides the analysis of narrative practice. In the study in question, my colleagues and I were interested in the kind of professional agency Finnish student teachers express after having learned the research skills in a master's level teacher training programme in university and then used them during a teaching practice period (Heikkilä et al., 2020). In this study, we were not interested in the individuals' agentic orientations because we acknowledged that these are changing and situated and therefore only scarcely contributed to an understanding of the student teachers' agency and to the development of the study programme itself.

We used the student teachers' reflexive reports, which we considered to reveal agency in a more natural setting than would be achieved by interviewing them. Of course, writing a report is also a narrative practice, and the student teachers may not have considered writing a report very natural in comparison to, for example, their mutual talk. Hence, we

acknowledged that the topics the student teachers were given for their writing, as well as the whole context of the writing as a guided reflection, would have affected their writing. However, the idea behind the design was that agency was not elicited but was interpreted from the student teachers' narration in written documents that teacher educators conventionally request to prompt student teachers to reflect on their learning.

The study applied a linguistically oriented approach to reveal nuances in the texts that could have remained unnoticed. We applied Hyvärinen's (2008) focus on expectations and used, as a general guideline, the "evidence of expectation", which is a list of linguistic markers summarised by Tannen (1993): repetitions, hedges, negatives, contrastives, evaluative language and evaluative verbs. We also utilised Bakhtin's (1986) metaphor of voice, which implies that the expressions that people use have formerly been others' expressions and that the expressions are transferred through a dialectic process. In this way, we were able to illustrate wider speech genres, manifesting different qualities of agency rather than focusing on the individual student teachers' accounts. We discerned four voices, which implied enacted, limited, rejecting and open agency. This was beneficial because researchers too often assume that the authentic and singular voice of a participant can be unproblematically represented (Chadwick, 2021). Extracting the authentic "voices" of individual people to represent their point of view has been criticised within post-structuralism, with the argument that no voices are completely individual (Rautio, 2021).

Although single examples can hardly represent the whole entwinement of professional agency, to illustrate the use of linguistically minded narrative practice, I discuss an example from one student teacher in the study mentioned, where the instruction was to reflect on the use of research skills in teachers' work. The evidence of expectation is marked in bold font.

> **Anyway**, teachers' work in itself is some kind of research. The teacher **must all the time** conduct research on the pupils of the class, the level of knowledge, the atmosphere and so on. **Of course**, it is **not official** research but **important**, **nevertheless**. **However**, I think there are **plenty** of **different** things that **go before** conducting research. **Anyhow**, the **most important** thing is to be in the classroom **for** the pupils, **not for** research. It is **important** to conduct **real** and **vaster** research concerning teachers' work. It **supports** and **helps** the teacher to **support** and **understand** pupils by **new means**. **In my opinion**, **however**, they **should** be conducted by researchers who can **concentrate full-time** on research.

In what ways does this example manifest or not manifest professional agency? The quotation includes a rich variety of evidence of expectation (marked in bold), for example, "however", "nevertheless", "all the time", "real", "vaster", "newer", "important" and "should", suggesting that the student teacher is trying to hold two incompatible pieces together. This illustrates how the student teacher is balancing between two different

agentic stances towards research: first, is an idea according to which research and research skills build agency in teachers' work, and second, is an opposing idea according to which conducting research in the classroom steals the teachers' attention away from the children. In this narrative, the student teacher seems to be constructing a picture of research skills in relation to the pupils as something that is not beneficial for them but is contrary to their needs.

The text is also very personal: the student teacher uses the phrases "I find" and "in my opinion", which reveal that the student teacher is negotiating between the possible narratives in this particular situation. On the one hand, teacher educators have taught them research skills. On the other hand, competing narratives contest their usefulness in teachers' work. This also illustrates the relational nature of agency, which is not owned by the student teacher but manifests relationally between empowering and rejecting narratives regarding research skills. Materiality is also visible in this example, as the student teacher discusses the importance of the physical presence of the teacher in the classroom for the pupils.

Looking at the expectations expressed in the example also reveals that the student teacher, when using a critical voice, is feeling a strong pressure that, in their daily work, teachers are supposed to conduct educational research, which was actually not the purpose of these studies. In this way, the student teacher rejects the idea that research skills can serve as a means for improvement and can help in teachers' work and professional development. Here, the analysis reveals a misunderstanding and confusion around the purpose of learning research skills at the university. The study contributed to challenges in integrating different knowledge domains into teachers' professional work (Hermansen, 2020) and the need to recognise knowledge sharing and epistemic engagement as important to teachers' competencies in educating teachers (Jensen et al., 2022). For its part, it contributed to the challenge addressed in shifting attention from individual autonomy to the performance of a collective teacher community and their epistemic agency, as well as the recognition of a research-oriented teacher role (Jensen et al., 2022). Notably, forcing this example into strict categories of "strong or weak" agency or as "agentic or passive" would simply not work. The example has several actors, as well as comparison and repetition, as the student tries to put the different pieces together. In this example, the agency is rather polyphonic.

Given that stances can shift, this approach to research can reveal restricting structures and scripts that can profitably be developed, rather than focusing on differences between individuals. It can show that students do not operate from fixed positions but that these positions are constantly changing, depending on the narratives available and as elicited by instruction, teaching, peers and learning environments.

Discussion

This article has argued that new methodologies are needed to enable a different way of thinking about teachers' professional agency that is less individualistic and more entwined because conventional methodologies focus on agency as an individual capacity, whether separate or collective. Scholars (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Feely, 2020) have called for new methodologies compatible with post-structuralism. The exemplary articles introduced above on the linguistically oriented narrative practice of teachers' professional agency (e.g. Kayi-Aydar, 2019; Lefstein et al., 2018) do not call themselves post-structuralist. However, they began to escape the strict categorisations of conventional narrative agency research and paved the way for more nuanced understandings of agency.

Hence, this article invokes the suspicion that not all kinds of narrative research may be compatible with recent understandings of human agency in educational settings. Clear guidelines on how to perform narrative research do not exist (Squire et al., 2017), and this article does not intend to define such guidelines. However, concentrating on the practice of narrative will help challenge any stable assumptions around subjectivity and agency, allowing researchers to identify and acknowledge more nuances in teachers' professional agency.

Analysing agency in narrative practice is not a simple answer to the need to analyse agency from a post-structural approach, as it comes with its own limitations. Narrative methodologies focus on language, which may hide agentic processes that are not tied to language, such as bodily sensations, positions and gestures. Looking simultaneously at language and at emotionality or embodiment within the narratives (e.g., the tone of voice, pauses, eye movements, facial expressions, body posture and gestures) is a growing area of interest in research (Lueg et al., 2020; Squire et al. 2017). In addition, new materialist approaches (Heikkilä & Mankki, 2021; Strom & Viesca, 2021), which also acknowledge other-than-human or more-than-human agencies, introduce alternative perspectives to the research on teachers' agency by shifting the view from the human to the material that affects the humans. They contribute to the research on the teacher profession by supplementing traditional human-centred perspectives and challenging the established individualised perspective, where professional learning is primarily seen in terms of the intrinsic capabilities or potentialities of people (Mulcahy, 2014). However, using these approaches often includes some kind of attention to language, since material encounters appear, at least sometimes, in human talk or text. Materiality can also be intentionally traced in narratives (Feely, 2020).

However, the status of language is paradoxical in contemporary narrative research. Narrative is always primarily defined as a kind of language, but the research tends to focus on meanings or the social positioning they produce or reflect and bypass the language of the narratives (Squire et al., 2017). Hence, more careful and versatile ways of analysing the

language in narrative research on agency are needed in the future. In addition, linguistically minded research does not need to overlook the materiality of the world.

Considering agency, Squire et al. (2017) divided research according to whether it sees narratives as symbolising internal individual states or external social circumstances. In their classification, personally minded researchers mostly agree that narrative makes sense of and enables action within lives, whereas socially minded researchers are more sceptical of whether agency is possible and are interested, rather, in the social effects or "agency" of personal stories (Squire et al., 2017). However, post-structural research goes beyond these boundaries by neither focusing on separate agents nor circumstances but on the relations and positions in which agency is manifested in the narrative practice. Here, agency is not taken for granted; however, its manifestations, possibilities and implications are problematised.

Finally, how can the quality of research that aims to analyse professional agency in narrative practice be evaluated when considering the arguments raised within the post-structural paradigm? Mismatches can indeed occur between what people say and what they do. However, a narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of what happened or happens (Riessman, 1993) because no external world is against which a narrative should be evaluated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Hence, how the truth is understood affects the way the quality of narrative research can be evaluated. Data or methodologies should not be assumed, but creativity should be embraced (Koro, 2021), considering that validity is just one label and may hinder us from generating more provocative questions (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016). Hence, the value of analysing agency in narrative practice lies not in its ability to reproduce the outside world but in its capacity to evoke new ways of thinking and seeing (Huttunen & Kakkori, 2020) and to re-orientate thought towards experiment and the creation of new forms of thought and life (St. Pierre, 2021).

In the same vein, the quality of the researcher's interpretations cannot be checked by the participants, as narratives are not static and the meanings of the experiences told in the narratives will shift even as the researchers interpret the narratives (Riessman, 2011). Of course, the interpretations drawn from the narratives have to be reasonable and convincing, also involving profound ethical considerations concerning how we code, reduce and categorise our "data"—initially the participants' voices (Chadwick 2021). However, the same events can be narrated in radically different ways (Riessman, 1993). This is a key insight of post-structuralism: the need to move beyond structuralist ontologies of the social world in which core social, cultural or psychological structures are considered to strongly constrain the possibilities of human action (Fox, 2014).

Although for post-structuralists, no universal truths exist (Hodgson & Standish, 2009), and textual processes matter in achieving and sustaining relations of power (Fox, 2014). Therefore, not finding universal patterns of narratives is not a weakness but a strength of

narrative research because a critical and careful analysis of narratives embedded in a web of cultural narratives can reveal several options by which narratives can be told or untold. Perspectives aiming at more holistic views of not only human interactivity and agency have been claimed (Dufva & Aro, 2014). They reveal that agency is often tensioned and that people appear agentic and vulnerable at the same time. From this perspective, narrative practice always implies different and heterogeneous qualities of professional agency.

Finally, according to a widely acknowledged notion, teachers in their work are not merely policy actors but are active agents in adapting and resisting policies (Cong-Lem, 2021). As social practices and professional discourse usually breed conformity rather than autonomy (Campbell, 2019), teachers' professional agency becomes a delicate issue that requires true attention, which also relates to other professions. If professional agency is conceived as an ongoing performance accomplished locally in and through everyday interactions, then the narratives that emerge in this context become the focus of interest (Watson, 2007). Therefore, analysing narrative practice can help elucidate the incomplete and tensioned nature of teachers' professional agency.

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