

Puroila, A-M. & Johansson, E. (2018). Sharing, re-telling, and performing narratives: Challenging and supporting educators' work with values in Nordic preschools. In E. Johansson, A. Emilson & A-M. Puroila (Eds.), *Values Education in Early Childhood Settings - Concepts, Approaches and Practices* (pp. 145–164). Dordrecht, the NL: Springer.

## Sharing, Re-telling, and Performing Narratives: Challenging and Supporting Educators' Work with Values in Nordic Preschools

### **Abstract:**

This chapter draws on Norwegian and Finnish studies that were a part of a Nordic project on values education in preschools. In both contexts, narratives were combined with a participatory action research methodology. Narratives were employed to inspire reflection, contribute to new knowledge, and enable educators to share experiences about their work with values. The focus of this chapter is methodological: How do narratives promote researchers and educators to generate knowledge about values? How do narratives promote improving educators' work with values? With the aim of contributing knowledge about the potential of narratives in participatory action research, three examples are discussed in the light of the ontological and epistemological premises of narrative research. The chapter focuses on the two following aspects: First, narratives involve potential to promote educators' participation in an action research process by providing a meeting space for educators and researchers to collaboratively explore pedagogical situations. Second, narratives offer a fruitful ground for educators and researchers to reflect on how values are integrated into the complexities of the educational practices. The chapter contributes to methodological discussions of early childhood education research and offers different concrete examples regarding how to employ narratives in research and when developing values education in practice.

Keywords: action research; narrative; Nordic countries; values

### **Introduction**

We are brought up surrounded by stories; they flow through us and ratify us from birth, telling us who we are and where we belong, what is right and what is wrong (Bolton, 2006, p. 205).

Educational research has widely documented the value-bound nature of education (Sutrop, 2015). Educators constantly face situations and make decisions that are connected with values, such as decisions on what is good for children and what constitutes good pedagogy. Values education is explicitly or implicitly embedded in curricula, which means that educators are responsible for introducing young people to values (Halstead & Taylor, 2000; Thornberg, 2008). However, educators seem to be vaguely aware of the values that are communicated in education (Puroila, Johansson, Estola, Emilson, Einarsdóttir, & Broström, 2016; Thornberg,

2008). While the subject areas and academic learning are emphasized, there is a tendency to overlook values in educational practices (Sutrop, 2015).

How could research promote educators' recognition of values in preschools<sup>1</sup>? This question was crucial in the Nordic project, which this article is based on<sup>2</sup>. The project applied Jürgen Habermas' (1984) theory of communicative action as a broad theoretical and methodological framework. With the aim of supporting and challenging educators' work with values, participatory action research studies were carried out in Nordic preschools. Drawing on the Nordic project, this article addresses sub-studies conducted in Finland and Norway. In both countries, narratives were combined with participatory action research approaches. Action research approaches, which originate from Kurt Lewin's work, are frequently used methods when searching for change in working life (Somekh, 2006). Although there is variation among the action research approaches, a close relationship between theory and practice, a democratic relationship between researchers and educators, and a two-fold intention to generate knowledge and improve practices are considered characteristics of action research studies (Kemmis, 2009; Somekh, 2006).

Until recently, the connections between narrative and action research approaches have been largely ignored (Heikkinen, Huttunen, & Syrjälä, 2007; Pushor & Clandinin, 2009). However, a growing body of research raises the potential of employing narratives in action research studies. Conle (2001) remarks that narratives can serve both as research methods and means of professional development. Moreover, she argues that narrative researchers can employ Habermas as "a travel companion" (p. 23) as it is worthwhile to consider narratives in terms of communicative action. There is also evidence that narratives promote reflection (Stuart, 2012) and provide potential when dealing with values in education (Johansson & Röthle, in press; Rabin & Smith, 2013). This chapter aims to contribute knowledge about the potential of employing narratives in participatory action research studies, especially when exploring values in preschool education.

## **Values: A Challenge of Broadening the Concept**

This chapter is informed by theoretical ideas that highlight the inherent connection between values and education (Hansen, 2004; Sutrop, 2015; Thornberg, 2016). Sutrop (2015), among others, criticizes that contemporary educational discourses focus narrowly on knowledge acquisition and largely ignore values. She notes that many scholars tend to support assumptions regarding value-free education in increasingly pluralistic societies. Sutrop (2015), however, argues that values are present throughout education. For instance, the purposes of education are value-laden; the selection of teaching areas, methods, and assessments are based on value judgments; and values are evident in the organization, curriculum, and disciplinary procedures of educational settings.

Though important, the concept of values has remained an undifferentiated one (Sutrop, 2015). In psychological research, values are often defined in terms of relatively static *mental structures*, i.e. schemes, beliefs, conceptions, or principles about what is desirable and what

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, the term preschool refers to educational settings where children's ages range between 0 and 7 years.

<sup>2</sup> Values education in Nordic preschool – Basis of education for tomorrow (funded by NordForsk, project number 53581).

guides human lives (Halstead & Taylor, 2000; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004). Hitlin and Piliavin (2004) note that approaching values as static mental structures does not place much emphasis to values in *human action*. They remark that the term ‘value’ is both a noun and a verb, and that sociological research, especially pragmatist theorizing, has been interested in the active nature of valuing.

Drawing on John Dewey’s (1939) theory, pragmatists state that values need to be considered as concrete actions and practices. Accordingly, the term value does not refer to something one *is* but something one *does*. In education, this means broadening the focus from the contents of values (which values?) to *doing values* as a process through which people realize those values (which values and how?). Moreover, pragmatists maintain that doing values does not take place in a vacuum but rather in spatially and temporally marked situations (where?). (Dewey, 1939; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004.)

In this study, we are interested in doing values as a situation-specific process in preschools. Doing values refers to two levels: first, how educators communicate and embody values in everyday life situations, and second, how they reflect on values in the narratives drawn from those situations. In line with Hansen, Burdick-Shepherd, Cammarano, and Obelleiro (2009), we assume that educators have a capacity to stand back while still remaining close to lived educational practices—a capacity to reflect on lived life. In the Finnish and Norwegian action research studies, narratives were employed as means for educators and researchers to reflect on how values were done in educational practice (Johansson Fugelsnes, Mørkeseth, Røthle, Tofteland, & Zachrisen, 2015; Puroila & Haho, 2017).

The focus of this chapter is methodological. In line with the two-fold function of action research methodology, the research question is twofold: How do narratives promote researchers and educators to generate knowledge about values? How do narratives promote improving educators’ work with values? Starting from an assumption raised by several scholars (e.g. Spector-Mersel, 2010), we assume that methodology in educational research is intertwined with philosophical questions concerning the nature of human reality (ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology). In what follows, three examples of employing narratives in the Finnish and Norwegian action research studies are discussed in the light of the ontological and epistemological premises of narrative research.

## **The Study**

### ***Context and Participants***

85 educators from four Finnish preschools and 180 educators from seven Norwegian preschools participated in the studies. In both countries, researchers and educators worked collaboratively in order to generate knowledge about values education and improve educators’ work with values. The researchers’ role was to initiate, challenge, and encourage the practitioners to reflect upon values. The educators’ role was to identify issues that need to be developed and to contribute to the developmental process in preschools.

In Finland and Norway, two types of forums were organized to enable the action research process: reflection seminars and inspiration days. While the reflection seminars involved educators from one preschool, educators from all participating preschools attended the

inspiration days in each country. In both countries, narratives were employed to inspire reflection, contribute to new knowledge, and enable educators to share their experiences about their work with values. The initiatives of sharing narratives came from both the educators and the researchers.

### *Examples of Employing Narratives*

The following three examples provide insights into the lived and narrated situations in preschools. The reason for choosing these particular examples was twofold: On the one hand, the examples show glimpses of different daily events in which a variety of values are done in preschools. On the other hand, the examples illustrate different ways about how narratives were employed in the Finnish and Norwegian action research studies.

#### *Example 1: A brave girl in a bobsleigh hill*

I have chosen a 6-year-old girl. The reason for choosing her is that she, like many girls, are involved in makeup, clothes, fancy playing and family games. I have an episode from the bobsleigh hill.

The group of 5-year-olds is on tour on “the tammen” (a Norwegian nickname). The numbers of boys and girls are quite equal.

The hillside for sleighing is quite hard and icy. This girl climbs up to the top of the hillside and then dashes happily off on the sleigh down the hill. I experience this as rather frightful, but I can see that she has control. This girl continues to slide from the very top, many times, and she receives positive attention from the adults. We say things like ‘Fun’, ‘Very good’ and ‘You are really tough’! I myself am making such comments to another adult, saying that she and another girl are tougher when it comes to bobsleighing than the boys. The other girl, who also dashes off from the top, again and again, follows what is happening. I believe that many of the other children see what is going on.

I feel that it is irritating to acknowledge myself thinking that the boys should be the bravest in going down the hillside on a sleigh. I do not want to be like that! I also find it a little bit strange that I think like that. This is because when I was a child I always wanted to jump as far as the boys on the “jumping hill” and I never gave up easily. I thought I should show them that girls are as tough as boys.

This narrative was written down by a female educator in a Norwegian preschool. Values for gender were part of the action research study in this preschool. Therefore, the educators wanted to look at their practices with this in mind.

The initiative to use narratives as a tool for discussing values in Norwegian preschools came to a large extent from the preschool leaders and the educators (Johansson et al., 2015). The educators were encouraged to choose an event from their practice which was meaningful for them and that they wanted to share with their colleagues. The narratives ended up differently; the length of the stories ranged between five and six lines and one page. The narratives were used slightly differently across the preschools, but the main idea was to choose events from educators’ everyday practice, write them into a narrative form, and discuss the narratives together with the colleagues at the staff meetings. Working with narratives became a widespread method throughout the project and occurred beyond the researchers’ initiative and

control. The tool grew out of practice as a need for addressing the doing of values in practice and to take an analytic step backwards to be able to see values at stake in different interactions.

The educators referred in interviews and seminars to how valuable they found the narratives. They enthusiastically described the different dimensions of mentally and emotionally turning back to an event, writing it down, and reflecting individually and collectively on the event. The narratives thereby became a tool for individual and collective reflection in everyday practice, creating a collective space for knowledge (Kemmis & MacTaggart, 2005). With the educators' permission, the narratives also became analytic data, which were used by researchers with the aim to study the educators' reflection on values and possibilities for change (Johansson et al., 2015; Johansson & Röthle, in press). In this way, the research tool developed from the bottom up.

*Example 2: Wilma and the swine influenza vaccination*

It is a free-play situation in a group consisting of children between the ages of 3 and 6-years-old. The children are engaged in different activities. Iida and Oona are playing. None of the adults are near the girls. Wilma comes to Oona.

Wilma (whispering): *I watched TV yesterday and saw that all children will be vaccinated against swine flu. I saw white blood.*

Oona pays no attention to Wilma's news. Wilma comes to Elmeri.

Wilma (whispering): *I have bad news. Yesterday I saw on TV that all children will be vaccinated against swine flu.*

Elmeri: *That's not so bad. It doesn't hurt or it nips a little.*

Wilma goes away.

A couple of weeks later, the children are participating in a morning circle time. Just as the teacher notices Wilma's absence, Wilma and her mother enter the room.

Teacher: *Wilma is coming, good! Good morning, Wilma!*

Mother: *We were at the child health clinic.*

Teacher: *Okay, you had to go to the health clinic.*

Wilma sits down at her own place and her mother leaves.

Teacher: *Do you know that Wilma is holding her arm? Have you been vaccinated, Wilma? (Wilma nods). How was it? You are a brave girl!*

On the same day, another circle time is beginning. The other children go to their places, while Wilma is hiding behind the piano.

Teacher: *Wilma, you should also come and sit.*

Wilma stays behind the piano.

Teacher: *Wilma, come here!*

Wilma is still hiding behind the piano.

Teacher: *Wilma, do you think that you can act this way next year when you are at school? (Firmly) Wilma, do you think that you can act up like this at school? You'll begin your school quite soon.*

Wilma stays behind the piano. The teacher gives up and pays no attention to her.

The origin of this narrative was in a previous study on children's narrated well-being in Finnish day care centers (Puroila, Estola, & Syrjälä, 2012). The narrative was based on a researcher's observations from three events in which a 6-year-old girl, Wilma, participated. These observations were written into the form of a narrative. In the present study, this narrative was used to inspire reflection on values among educators in Finnish preschools.

In the first inspiration day, researchers were typecast into the roles of Wilma, other children, the mother, and the teacher. The researchers' team performed the narrative as a drama for the educators. The intention of the performance was to provoke critical reflection on doing values in educational practice. The performance was videotaped. After the performance, the educators shared their interpretations of the drama in small groups. They also received a written version of the narrative to be read before the next reflection seminar.

In the reflection seminars, the educators watched the video of the performance. After that, the educators were asked to form small groups, take roles, and perform the narrative. They were encouraged to enact the drama several times and take different roles in order to experience the narrative from different viewpoints. They were also tasked with creating and performing a counter-narrative, an alternative version of how the narrative would proceed and end. In this way, the educators were challenged to reflect on what they viewed as good, appropriate, bad, and inappropriate aspects of the narrative. The educators were then asked to discuss their experiences of being in different roles. After working in small groups, the groups shared their versions of the narrative.

### *Example 3: In a cloakroom*

This kindergarten is based in a residential building with a lot of small rooms. The group consists of 15 children aged 1–4 years. Four adults work with them. One is a trained pre-school teacher, while the others are assistants. The children are just on their way outside.

Five children are in the cloakroom, which is long, narrow and a bit short of space. A smaller room joins the cloakroom. The children's outdoor clothes hang from some hooks in the smaller room. The teacher talks with Johan (3:1<sup>3</sup>) about the pictures hanging on the wall. They are hung there so that Johan can understand what is happening during the day. The adult asks what the pictures are showing and where they are now in relation to this time schedule, but it appears that Johan does not understand. The teacher encourages one of the older children to put their outdoor clothes on themselves. Edit (3) sits on the floor and tries to get her outside clothes on. Bella (2:6) gets her coat from the adult and starts to put it on. Nisse (3) sits on the floor with his back to the door and his legs stretched out in front of him. He is ready. Johan sits down right beside him and Nisse shouts loudly. Amalie (1:2), who is near the adult, gets upset. 'No, Johan!' says the teacher decisively. 'Now Amelia is upset. Look!' urges the teacher. Johan leans forward and gives Amelia a hug. Amelia immediately moves away, complaining.

When the children are ready, they stand in a queue by the door. Johan is angry: he wants to be in front of Nisse. 'No, Johan. Wrong!' says the teacher, who holds her arm between them like a barrier. Johan complains. 'No, now Nisse stands in front of Johan', continues the adult. She sounds friendly but decided. 'Now it's Nisse who goes out first. Off you go!' the teacher says. Nisse goes out. An adult is already outside. Now there are seven children in the narrow cloakroom. Silva (1:4) cries and looks for her coat. She cannot find it. 'Look Silva, there!' says the teacher pointing to the other room, but Silva does not hear. She cries. 'Silva, listen! There is your coat', the adult says while also helping the other children. Mehmet (2:9) lies on the floor with his legs stretched out in front of him. His snowsuit is on the floor. 'How's it going with your snowsuit? Is it OK,

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<sup>3</sup> The numbers refer to children's ages, in this case three years and one month.

Mechmet?’ asks the teacher squatting down. Bella (2:6) cries and the adult goes over to her and asks what she wants. Bella gets her comfort blanket. Tina (3:7), who is wearing a thin dress, gets help from the teacher to put on her other clothes. ‘Well, you can’t go out in just a dress, can you?’ she says in a friendly voice. (. . .)

This narrative was drawn from Johansson’s (2003) study on the Swedish preschool context. The narrative is the researcher’s description of an observed event taking place when children and educators were gathered in the cloakroom in the morning. In the present study, the narrative was used at the beginning and the end of the action research studies to inspire discussions about values in the participating preschools.

Group interviews were organized for the educators to discuss the narrative about the dressing episode in both countries. The educators were asked to read through the narrative in advance and reflect on their first impressions about it. In the group interviews, the educators were encouraged to freely discuss their interpretations of the narrative. The researchers attempted to be flexible to follow the educators’ reasoning. Moreover, the researchers asked the educators to exemplify their interpretations and to reflect on both the dressing episode and their own experiences of working with values.

### **Exploring Lived values: The Ontology of Narratives**

We first explore the three examples from the perspective of *the contents of the narratives*. Our analytical question in this sub-chapter is: What kinds of insights do narratives provide regarding the doing of values in preschools? This question challenges us to focus on the ontological premises of narratives. Several narrative scholars highlight the crucial place and multiplicity of narratives in human existence (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Conle & deBeyer, 2009; Spector-Mersel, 2010). The central ontological premise of narrative research is that human beings are able to understand, make meanings, and relate to experiences through narratives<sup>4</sup> (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013). Based on the notion that there is no direct, unmediated access to human experiences, many researchers assume that narratives provide a potential window into the participants’ lived life, including lived and done values (see Bochner & Riggs, 2014).

#### ***The Mutual Relationship Between Life and Narratives***

At the core of the narratives, there are events from different everyday situations in preschools: free play, circle-time, getting dressed, and outdoor situations. Although the narratives are rooted in the lived events, we need to acknowledge that no complete correspondence exists between life and narrative (Bochner & Riggs, 2014; Spector-Mersel, 2010). The interpretive nature of narratives was already highlighted by Aristotle who argued that narratives mirror the world rather than copy it accurately. This is because social reality is so multifaceted that narratives are always partial; they are among the many versions of reality selected by a narrator for the audience in a particular situation. (Bruner, 1991; Spector-Mersel, 2010.)

Moreover, the narratives cannot be considered as neutral reporting on the lived events. Bruner (1991) argues for viewing narrative as a two-way affair: narratives do not only represent but also constitute reality. It is widely documented how people make sense of themselves and the

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<sup>4</sup> In this article, we use the terms "narrative" and "story" as interchangeable ones.

world around them, construct their identities, and create and maintain connections between each other through narratives (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). Gonzáles Monteagudo (2011), among others, draws attention to the transformative power of narratives; how narratives involve potential to promote social change by constructing possible realities. This assumption was of great importance in the present study. The purpose of utilizing narratives was not to entertain; rather, the aim was to contribute both researchers' and educators' knowledge of values and to improve educators' work with values. Caine et al. (2013) point out that when attending to the lived, re-lived, told, and re-told narratives, 'possibilities arise to discover new ways of knowing and understanding, and also for profound change' (p. 589).

### *Constructing Identities Through Narratives*

Our narratives are inhabited by a diversity of people: there are individuals with different ages, genders, and social positions. In the first narrative, the educator and the brave girl emerge as protagonists. The other people are not identified as individual persons, but rather as members of social groups, for instance, *another adult* and the *other children*. In the second narrative, Wilma is in the forefront although the other children, the mother, and the teacher play a part in the narrative. The third narrative tells about encounters between a group of children and adults. The children are narrated both as a group of persons (*the older children*) and as individuals (Johan, Edit, Nisse, Amelia, Mehmet, Silva and Bella). *The teacher* and *the adult* are also in the narrative, but it is not clear whether they refer to one or more individuals.

In our examples, the individuals are narrated in a certain light. The narratives contain cues about what kinds of individuals they are. For instance, the girl in the first narrative is presented as a brave one, as she ventures to slide down a challenging hill. In the second narrative, Wilma presents herself as a person who has interesting news, who is afraid of being vaccinated, and who resists participating in the circle-time. On the other hand, she is narrated by the teacher as a brave girl, a becoming schoolgirl, and a naughty child. Similarly, the adults are represented in a particular light in the narratives – as educators who are interacting with children both in empathetic and disciplinary ways.

Our examples reveal how narratives are connected with people's identities. During the daily situations, people constantly face value-bound accounts about who they are, who they will become, and what kind of humans they are expected to be. In narrative research, identity construction is often understood as a process that begins in the early years and continues throughout one's life (Ahn, 2011). This lifelong process is described with the concept narrative identity as a continuously told narrative that contains a moral orientation about what is valuable for individuals in different contexts (Farquhar, 2012).

### *Narrative: An Integrative Prism for Doing Values in Educational Practices*

Even though the narratives of our study were based on short incidents, they enabled exploring how doing values was interwoven in the multiple aspects of educational practices: actions, interactions, emotions, and consciousness. As Hammack (2011) remarks, narratives provide an integrative prism through which it is possible to interpret lives in their social and political complexities.

First of all, the three narratives are full of *action*. The children climb to and slide down the hill; they play, draw, sit down, and stand in a queue; they move, give a hug, and follow adults' instructions – or resist and oppose like Wilma. The adult educators, in turn, observe, supervise,



and control the children. The adults and children engage in diverse *interactions*. The adults talk with children, which includes giving feedback, commenting, praising, encouraging, asking questions, forbidding, urging, and ordering children. The children share news, converse, shout, and complain. The narratives are awash with different voices. The people are present as sensing bodily beings in the narratives and their bodies appear as sites of agency for varied values (Skattebol, 2006).

A variety of *emotions* emerge from the narratives. In the first narrative, the educator feels irritated when acknowledging that she thinks about gender roles in a traditional way. Wilma's fear against being vaccinated penetrates the second narrative. The perspective of *consciousness* is evident in the first narrative, where the educator reflects on her ideas about boys' and girls' appropriate behavior. In the second narrative, Wilma has become conscious of a vaccination process. The third narrative contains Johan, who does not understand the daily schedule. These examples are in line with Bruner (2004), who maintains that the landscapes of action and consciousness are essential ingredients of narratives.

All three narratives pose questions about *doing values*. In the first narrative, the educator balances between the values of safety and discipline: Is there any risk in allowing children to slide down a hill? She also struggles with gender values: Is it right to expect boys to be the bravest ones while bobsleighting? The second and the third narrative similarly draw attention to doing values: What is expected from a child's appropriate behaviour in a preschool? How should an educator treat children who show pain, resist adults, need help, jump in the queue, or cry? In line with previous studies, the narratives show that these questions arise throughout the fleeting events (Puroila & Haho, 2017; Puroila, Johansson, Estola, Emilson, Einarsdóttir, & Broström, 2016). Thus, doing values is not a separate area of education, but rather is intertwined in the complexities of educational practices.

### *Narratives in Context*

The narratives do not take place in a vacuum but are created in a specific societal and cultural context (Heikkinen et al., 2007). Tuval-Mashiach (2014) argues that all narratives echo three kinds of contexts: the inter-subjective relationships in which a narrative is produced; the collective social field where the narrative emerges; and the cultural meaning systems that give sense to the narrative. Accordingly, our examples do not solely tell about the events in preschools; rather, they also tell about the social, cultural, temporal, and research context.

First of all, the narratives open perspectives on the pedagogical culture of preschools where different everyday situations provide dissimilar conditions for doing values. On the one hand, the narratives contain situations echoing democratic values: in the outdoor and free-play situations, the children have a high degree of freedom to take the initiative, choose their activities, move, and contribute to conversation. On the other hand, the disciplinary values are in the forefront in the circle time and dressing situations: the educators maintain order and control and discipline the children. These notions are in line with previous studies that show how teacher-directed structured activities and child-directed unstructured activities characterize early childhood pedagogy in many countries (Emilson & Johansson, 2013; Zaghawan & Ostrosky, 2011).

Moreover, the narratives contain *temporal and global connotations*. In the first narrative, the educator moves between her past and present. She goes back to the memories from her childhood as a young girl who wanted to be as brave as boys when sliding down hills. These memories come alive when she narrates about the brave girl in the outdoor situation. The second

narrative also provides cues regarding the context. The narrative is rooted in the circumstances when the swine influenza was a globally topical issue. The narrative shows how the outside world is available for children through media and how these global matters intervene in the lived life in preschools.

Another important context is present in our examples, namely the *academic context of educational research*. The first narrative was told by an educator who participated in the present study. The other two narratives were drawn from researchers' observations in previous studies. In the action research studies, these two narratives were retold with the intention to challenge the educators to reflect on doing values in preschools. Hence, there were different ways to employ narratives in the studies and the educators' and researchers' participation varied accordingly. While the initiative to narrate came from the educators' side in the first example, the researchers brought the second and third narrative to the fore. This is often the case in narrative research: narratives are composed in various ways in the relational space between participants and researchers (Caine et al., 2013).

## **Generating Knowledge of Values: Knowing Through Narrating**

In this sub-chapter, the analytical position moves from the contents of the narratives to how the narratives were re-told and re-lived in the action research studies. Our analytical question is: How do narratives promote educators' and researchers' recognition of values? While the previous sub-chapter focused on the ontological questions of narratives, this sub-chapter will focus on epistemological questions concerning knowing through narratives<sup>5</sup>.

Narrative researchers often refer to Bruner's (1986) ideas about two modes of cognitive functioning, each providing distinctive ways of ordering human experience: logical-scientific and narrative knowing (Spector-Mersel, 2010). These modes offer different, though not exclusionary ways of working with educators in action research studies. While the logical-scientific mode applies theories, abstract concepts, and universal categories expressed in formal language, the narrative mode appreciates stories represented through informal language and in artistic forms, such as personal memories, expressive writing, poems, drama, and visual representations (Bolton, 2006; Stuart, 2012). This is how the borders between science and art become blurred when combining narratives with an action research approach (Heikkinen et al., 2007; Hendry, 2010).

### ***Co-Constructing Knowledge***

In the Finnish and Norwegian action research studies, narratives were told, listened to, shared, and performed. The three narratives provide examples of how narratives served as meeting places for researchers and educators to co-construct knowledge. Narrative research challenges positivist and post-positivist epistemological assumptions that emphasize a distance between researchers as 'knowers' and participants as 'known'. Instead, narrative research endorses relational epistemologies, highlighting the construction of knowledge when both researchers and participants communicate their necessarily partial views (Gunzenhauser, 2006; Spector-Mersel, 2010).

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<sup>5</sup> The concept *narrative* is derived from the term *gno*, 'to know' (Hendry, 2010).

During the research processes, both the researchers and the educators participated in the co-constructing of knowledge (Figure 9.1). For instance, the Finnish research team re-told the second narrative about Wilma by performing the narrative as a drama. After that, the educators were provided space to take different roles and perform the narrative. Stuart (2012) suggests that the double construction of events—proceeding from initial events to interpreted and narrated events—deepens understanding and adds new layers of meanings to the narrative. Performing the narratives is considered a tool for experiencing the narrative personally (Hamington, 2010; Rabin & Smith, 2013).

The Norwegian educators participated in a collective process of analyzing narratives together in order to identify and conceptualize lived values. This resulted in educators creating a space for community (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) in which questions, various interpretations, and understandings of doing values were outspoken and reconsidered.

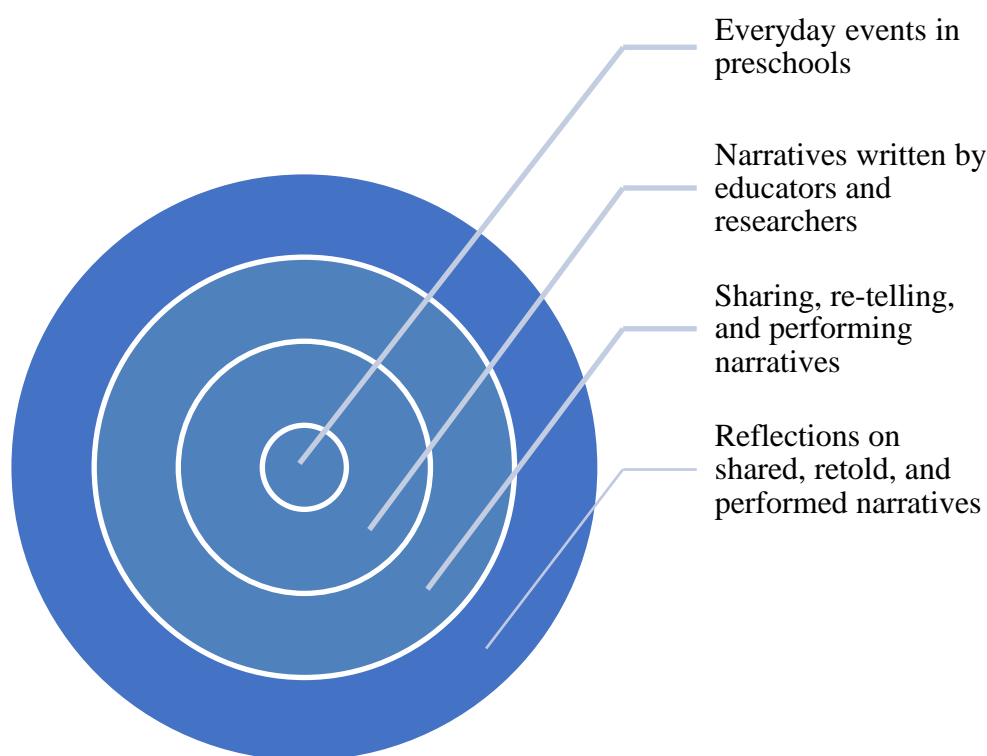


Figure 9.1. The multiple layers of knowledge construction through narrative.

### ***Familiarity and Strangeness of Narratives Promoting Knowledge Construction***

The narratives offered a common space for the educators and researchers, as the narratives contained elements recognizable to both parties. The preschool context was familiar to the researchers from their previous studies on early childhood education. For the educators, the narratives represented glimpses of their own work. When discussing the third narrative, the Finnish and Norwegian educators experienced that the dressing situation contained something familiar, even though the origin of the narrative was in a Swedish preschool context (Puroila et al., 2016).

Anna-Maija: *Does this feel familiar in anyway?*

Educator: *Yeah... This dressing situation, with the dungarees and all, is pure chaos.*  
(Group discussion in a Finnish preschool)

*I recognize myself in this situation [laughter], but this is everyday life in a kindergarten.*  
(A Norwegian educator)

Besides familiarity, the educators noted some differences. For instance, the Finnish educators wondered about the staff structure that differed from the regulations of their own country. A Finnish educator shares the following: ‘I said, please, read that, isn’t it quite a different preschool than ours? That straight away it kind of hit with the realities, that one qualified kindergarten teacher, and the rest are assistants’.

Narrative scholars refer to the familiarity involved in narratives with the terms *lifelikeness* (Bruner, 1986) and *resonance* (Conle & deBeyer, 2009). These terms mean that narratives remind the listeners about something that they have faced, heard, or experienced in their real life or imagination. The lifelikeness or resonance, however, is not a matter of agreeing with the point of the narrative. Actually, people often engage in narration when they think that something ordinary is violated. According to Bruner (1996), narrative serves as a means to find the balance again, i.e. to create an explanation regarding how to understand what has happened.

In the Finnish study, the narrative about Wilma was purposely chosen because it involved the potential to break the balance—to provoke critical questions about the educators’ values. As the following excerpt shows, the narrative stimulated critical discussion not just about Wilma’s case, but also about the educators’ own pedagogical practices (cf., Stuart, 2012).

*The next day after seeing the researchers’ performance about Wilma, I faced a similar case in the yard of our preschool. One mother brought her child to the preschool after the child had been vaccinated. I was just greeting and asking the child to begin the daily activities when I remembered Wilma’s case. I didn’t want to act similarly with the teacher in that case.* (A Finnish educator)

The first narrative also reflects a critical incident (Halquist & Musanti, 2010), which led the educator to a new discovery. When reliving and describing the event, the narrator realized her own gender prejudices and expectations. A conflict between ideals and lived values became apparent. The same phenomenon appeared when reflecting on the third narrative in the Finnish and Norwegian preschools. The narrative about a concrete pedagogical situation contained a combination of familiarity and strangeness that inspired the educators to engage in lively discussions about the dressing episode and about their own work (Puroila et al., 2016). These examples reveal that both familiarity and strangeness had functions in the knowledge construction. The familiarity helped educators to identify the events in the narrative. The strangeness provoked critical questions and promoted the educator’s recognition of the values done in educational practices.

### ***Knowledge Construction as a Holistic Process***

Narrative scholars often refer to knowledge construction as a holistic process that goes beyond rational-cognitive thinking. From this perspective, knowledge is not only connected with people’s minds but also with senses, embodiment, emotions, and imagination (Hendry, 2010;

Kinnunen & Einarsdóttir, 2013). In our action research studies, narratives became a site for the holistic process of knowledge construction as they contained a variety of different aspects of educational practices.

The first narrative about a brave girl grew from the educator's *emotions*: she acknowledged with irritation her own ways of addressing stereotypic gender attitudes. Working with the narrative on the dressing episode also provoked the educators' emotions. As the following excerpt reveals, reflecting on the narrative increased the educators' empathy for the children that they interpreted as being mistreated.

*I'm concerned about Silva, who's only one year and four months old, who's crying and searching for her cloths. That little girl is not very big. My sense is that she can experience this as unsafe and I don't know whether the adult expects that she should be able to manage by herself. (...) So I felt empathy for her. (A Norwegian educator)*

The *embodied* nature of knowledge construction is most evident in performing the second narrative in the Finnish preschools. Taking roles, imagining oneself into children's and adults' positions, moving, and acting involved the participants holistically; their bodies and senses became active parts of the knowledge construction. As noted in previous studies, performing narratives promotes empathy, i.e. perceiving the world through another's eyes (Hamington, 2010; Rabin & Smith, 2013).

After the educators had performed Wilma's narrative and alternative versions, many educators told how they experienced being in Wilma's role. One educator said that she still feels anxious, because neither adults nor the other children listened to Wilma's concerns. Passing the child, diminishing her sorrows, maintaining order, daily routines, and the role of a scapegoat were topics that were discussed. (Anna-Majja's research diary 17.9.2013)

As noted earlier, the narratives are not neutral reporting of events; instead, they pose questions connected with *values* (Conle, 2007). Johnson (1993) argues that when encountering a narrative, the listeners become imaginatively engaged in ethical questions: they enter into the lives of the characters and find themselves judging their actions. This also happened in our study.

When narrating about the outdoor situation the educator implied values related to equality and competence without directly referring to these concepts. Her story reflects the values of (in)equality in describing how she addressed the girl differently than the boys. She also described her taken-for-granted gendered expectations for being a girl, indicating that girls lack the competence that boys possess. These values are both implied in practice and later reflected on when the educator is looking back at the incident.

The narrative about Wilma similarly evoked questions about doing values through educational practices. When reflecting on the narrative, the educators raised issues connected with disciplinary and caring values. They criticized the adult's controlling behavior and called for caring, which includes encountering, listening, showing empathy, and meeting the needs of individual children. One Finnish educator noted as follows: 'The educator didn't discuss the issue [vaccination], though she noticed that it was occupying her mind. She left Wilma alone and didn't care about her when the other children participated in the circle time'. The narrative about the dressing situation also inspired the educators to engage in discussions about doing

values. Even though the educators rarely mentioned values explicitly, the researchers could identify a variety of aspects connected to caring, discipline, competence, and democratic values (Puroila et al., 2016).

*From my perspective, they [the children] weren't seen or cared for. I consider it a very bad situation for the children. (A Norwegian educator)*

*I think myself that it [the dressing situation] is a learning situation, to learn how to dress. (A Finnish educator)*

The narratives provided means for educators to discuss values with an experience-near language that was familiar to them. As van Manen (2000) suggests, the field of education needs a moral vocabulary and language that is sensitive to how pedagogical relations are lived and experienced.

## **Concluding Remarks**

In this chapter, the aim was to contribute knowledge about the potential of employing narratives in action research studies, especially when exploring values in preschool education. Based on the notion of the two-fold function of action research methodology, we set out to explore two research questions: How do narratives promote researchers and educators to *generate knowledge about values*? How do narratives promote *improving educators' work with values*? We analyzed three examples in the light of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of narrative research. The chapter contributes to methodological discussions of early childhood education research by providing theoretically and philosophically based reasoning about the potential of combining narratives with an action research methodology. Moreover, the chapter offers different concrete examples regarding how to employ narratives in action research studies. In the examples, there was variation in many respects: who initiated the narratives, in which mode the narratives were presented, and how the narratives were shared and retold in the action research studies. To conclude, we make two points that support utilizing the potential of narratives in action research studies and when exploring values in education.

*First, narratives promote the collaborative relationship through which researchers and educators co-construct knowledge.* The common idea of action research methodology is to reduce the sharp division between researchers' theoretical expertise and educators' practical knowledge (Kemmis, 2009). Rather than being based on hierarchical top-down designs, action research methodology advocates more equal relationships between researchers and educators. This is easier said than done, as educators often tend to view researchers as someone with expertise that they themselves lack (Madsen, 2013). Nor can we bypass the condition that researchers are often the initiators of action research projects, and to a certain extent, have control over the research design and reporting the study. Within these limitations, we suggest that narratives offer a shared meeting space for researchers and educators to develop collaboration and co-construct knowledge. Narratives are deeply rooted in educational practice and are thus close to educators' everyday life. Approaching educational practices through narratives challenges the traditional privileged position of logical-scientific modes of knowing and gives space to the narrative modes of knowing, which are mastered by everybody regardless of age, position, or educational background. Whereas abstract concepts and theories appeal to educators' cognitive-rational thinking, narratives involve the potential to touch them in a more

holistic way by evoking emotions and memories. Narratives thus may increase educators' ownership regarding the research process and the knowledge produced during the study.

*Second, narratives offer a fruitful ground for exploring values as components of educational practices.* The action research methodology in educational research is closely connected with educational practices. Kemmis (2009) points out that action research is a practice-based methodology that aims to transform practices at three levels: practitioners' practices (*doing*), their understandings of their practices (*thinking and saying*), and the conditions in which they practice (*relating to others, things, and circumstances*). In this view, the focus of an action research methodology is broad; it covers educators' acting, thinking, and communicating as well as the contexts where educators' work takes place. This study reveals that working with narratives enables educators and researchers to explore how values are integrated into the whole texture of the educational practices. We propose that exploring educational practices through narratives may benefit both researchers and educators. For researchers, narratives offer fruitful means of exploring how values are interwoven in educational practices in different situations and contexts. For educators, narratives offer a tool for discussing educational practices from different angles and from different persons' perspectives. These holistic experiences involve the potential to force educators towards critical reflection of their practices. Creating a common space open for reflection on lived events offers potentials for new insights. At their best, narratives may contribute to the improvement of educators' pedagogical practices (Madsen, 2013).

Though arguing for the potential of employing narratives in action research studies, our purpose is not to deny the significance of moral theorizing. Rather, we consider that narratives may make the conceptualizations and theories on values personally meaningful for educators. Furthermore, we highlight the need to avoid naive assumptions according to which single narratives directly lead to the improvement of educational practices. In accordance with Hansen (2004), we view reflecting on and articulating values as an ongoing task in education. Since education takes place in continuously changing and sometimes contradictory situations, ongoing conversation on values is necessary.

### *Acknowledgements*

The study is part of the research project "Values education in Nordic preschools – Basis of Education for tomorrow", funded by NordForsk research programme "Education for Tomorrow" (project number 53581).

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