Title:

READING STORIES OF INCLUSION: ENGAGING WITH DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS AN AGENDA FOR INCLUSION.

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ABSTRACT

As a tool for emancipation, participatory research is one way to engage people in a process that aims to challenge oppressive structures that define and control informants lives (Bernard, 2000, p. 185). Regrettably life story and narrative have often been considered as not being 'academic enough'. 'Participant' inclusivity and emancipation in research has drawn mixed views. A major tension facing academia is that of combining diversity with solidarity in an intelligible way. This work will engage with a variety of notions and questions (Sleeter 1999);

1. Is educational research about accommodating differences?
2. Is research a rejection to the principle of conformity?
3. Are scholars organised well enough to respond to intolerance?
4. Is research contributing towards caring and tolerant communities?
5. Can educational institutions become an appraise of social inclusion (Clark, Dyson & Millward, 1995)?
6. Will research shed light on the oppressed clusters that will exist in future society?
7. In what ways can the stories of children at the margins be used to promote critical debates about inclusion?
8. How can different perspectives of parents, policy-makers, disabled persons, teachers, students and social workers be drawn upon to inform a transformative agenda for inclusion?
9. Do the students in our schools fit within the social structures that contain them?
10. Do our schools tend to reproduce paradigms that are oppressive and exclusionary?
11. Can educational research provide concrete opportunities to increase the confidence of those students who are not content at school?

This work will be looking at the prospect of having academic work featuring not in library shelves but in affecting change in the mentality of educators, pedagological practices and understanding of students. As researchers we need to ask ourselves what are the responsibilities that arise from the privilege I have as a result of my social position as a researcher?

To engage with this discourse I will refer to the research I am doing as part of my Doctoral Thesis, where the core of my research lies in a combination of short autobiographies and narratives where the protagonists are the people who are emarginated for labels they carry or characteristics that somehow distinguish them.

1. PREAMBLE

It is most certainly a great privilege to address this Conference. As I skimmed through the numerous presentations that are taking place, one could immediately identify a deep-seated trend – a willingness, an enthusiasm, and an eagerness to understand and comprehend the complex and intricate debate that disability studies bring to us.

What I find amazingly intriguing, and what makes this Conference exceptional is the *grinta (*we call it in Maltese), the passion and the flare to make things creative, because creativity is one important notion that will make a difference in society, that is to say if we want our society to move forward and conceptualise disability as a positive feature in our decadent society that is self-centred and intrinsically individualistic. Creativity is the pinnacle of participation and of getting people involved in the processes that we are engaged in. I believe the anguish of society lies in our overly complacent attitude, passive interpretation of the world around us and the fear of change and experimentation. Creativity surmounts all that.

2. A LITTLE BIT ABOUT ME

I am currently working in a secondary school in the south of Malta, I manage a social work service for disabled people and their families, I am also pursuing Doctoral Studies. I work closely with a self advocacy group as their advisor, I teach at University and I am involved in policy making and implementation in the inclusive education arena. Following last year's disability conference, I was involved in the setting up of the *Maltese Disability Studies Association* and I am coordinating a committee on the introduction of *Direct Payments* in Malta. One reflection that immediately comes to mind is that most of the structures in society that are designed to provide support end up magnifying the dissimilarities. Diversity is not seen as a quantity but as a calamity.

School seems to be a case in point. The school I work in seems to be failing our students despondently. We look at our students not as individuals requiring a specially designed programme but a system that reminds them continually that they are failing in whatever they are doing, be it study, play or relationships. As I explained further on, I am also closely involved in the disability field, and this experience gives me an ability to interpret the world from a perspective that is shared by a minority, where negative social constructions dominate and deteriorate the relationship between society and its oppressed members. As I go through life, all the stories I come across in my experience as a social worker, teacher, researcher, advisor and academic stir a fervour in me to listen rather than to ask and talk. This is the root of my presentation, reading the narrative and listening to the story. *Quote*;

> People with impairments whether they are physical, sensory or 'cognitive' have traditionally been oppressed by psychological research. This oppression is rooted in assumptions that view such impairments as violating individuals' very personhoods.... However, recent developments in research thinking have challenged these individualistic assumptions and, in contrast, unearthed the ways in which people with impairments are disabled by societies that threaten to exclude them from mainstream activities. Two research approaches can be identified – narrative and discursive approaches to research – that promise much in terms of highlighting the social causes of disability. (Goodley 2003, p. 1).

It has always been an important consideration to have a qualitative research that is particularly suitable for school-based research where human activities and relationships are intransigently interlaced. This paper is derived from research into the nature and meaning of change in the personal, social and institutional lives of the members of the school community. I have personally found that, it is the strength of narrative that manages to surface these profound, intense and complex stories of people that know exclusion in our schools as an

acceptable part of their existence. It is my belief that reflection on inclusion and diversity is a manifestation on the culture which makes this whole thinking more interesting, productive and placed where emotions, passions and intuitions become part of a scientific method of understanding that reality. It is a method that allows the informant to be in control and present during the whole process. All of a sudden the teachers, students, administrators and all those involved in the school community are at a plain level. The hierarch, which, is an intricate ingredient in school management disappears.

3.   EDUCATION IS A CONTRADICTION

I would say that somehow there is an inconsistency in this whole concept of 'education'. On the one hand we interpret education, as a process that is there to resolve and engage with the difficulties that are happening in time and others that are expected to come about - education seems to come in handy as a major contributor to this social 'healing process'. In contrast we see an education process that is drab, conservative, wary, suspicious and mistrustful, which make the much-needed changes increasingly difficult.

In this paper I will be asking some elementary but deep-seated questions, (please don't expect as many answers!). To be able to answer these questions I will be looking at a particular dimension, which is the use of narrative in educational research, which creates a new way of including subjects in educational research and where educational research in turn becomes restorative. Participatory research is a tool of emancipator-oriented research. It is one effective method that engages people in a process that aims to challenge oppressive structures that define and control lives and covert voices.

Without further ado, I get faced with an important array of questions:

a. What responsibilities arise from the privileges I have as a result of my social position as a researcher?

b. Is educational research about accommodating differences?

c. Is research a rejection of the principle of conformity?

d. Is research contributing towards caring and tolerant communities?

e. Can educational institutions become an appraise of social inclusion (Clark, Dyson & Millward, 1995)?

f. Will research shed light on the oppressed clusters that will exist in future society?

g. Can educational research provide concrete opportunities to increase the confidence of those students who are not content at school?

h. How could we research the processes of collaborative educational research?

4. THE APPEAL OF NARRATIVE

The twist towards having narrative and story telling methods in social sciences is yielding rich harvest of research conclusions (Goodson and Sikes 2001; Goodley et. al. 2004,). It is also a way of vitalizing the relationship between policy and practice. This method provides a more meaningful and creative practitioner – service-user relationship and a better understanding of professional sound practices.

That is why research becomes the process of not only identifying the complexities, dynamics and snags we are engrossed in but also to find the ways and means to get back on track and to come up with solutions.

Stories lie in the blue print of narrators. Empirical narrative work in the study of diversity typically values narratives and story telling as a form of emancipation, of 'giving a voice', to otherwise silenced groups. This is very much in line with the work of the disabled activist and academic Mike Oliver (1990). In emancipatory research, the central purpose of research is seen as supporting the empowerment of service users, and the making of broader social change. Oliver, identifies three key priorities for the 'emancipatoy' research paradigm, which the disabled people's movement has pioneered. These are reciprocity, gain, and empowerment (Oliver, 1992). Quote:

> Disillusion with existing research paradigms has raised the issue of developing an alternative emancipatory approach in order to make disability research both more relevant to the lives of disabled people and more influential in improving their material circumstances. (Oliver, 1996, p.141 *In P. Beresford, 2002, p.99).*

I believe that the core of narrative luxuriates in story telling and remains bound to a partiality of perspective and rejects any form of abstract universalism. Narrative can take different forms; historiography, oral life story, myth, novel or film as their point of departure (Plummer, 2001). Within social action, there are issues of social, cultural, and political belonging.   I believe that the core of narrative and its social and political importance lies in the fact that narrative and storytelling remain bound to a particularity of perspective, and thus rejecting any form of abstract universalism. At first, this seems to contrast 'theory', 'concept', and 'narrative', but we also insist on exploring the possibilities of narrative theorizing. The argument always seems to bring it all down to a key notion: Can we feature storytelling as a powerless form of universalism? Can we find commonality in this method to the world of inclusion, exclusion, and diversity?

We need to look at narrative research with three concepts in mind (Griffiths, 1998):

    (i)   The nature of collaboration and how it is going to be analysed;

    (ii)   The function of story in research and its writing;

    (iii)   The implications of using a disjointed rather than linear mode of presentation.

Each concept in turn can be addressed in three voices;

1. The first voice is the most straightforward. It considers ways of getting evidence about collaborative endeavours.

2. The second, more critical and sceptical, questions the assumptions and methods that the first use.

3. The third, the most reflexive, ponders and interrogates the process as a whole.

The four important words in this *paper* are - 'this is a story'. But how can research in the form of narrative be validated? This can be a significant *impasse*. The narrative form is something one should be reflective and reflexive about. We need to create a dialogue within ourselves to start engaging with such a discourse: 'I' need to study myself doing. How can I do this without destroying the story I am telling? All I need to do is to position the story into perspective without criticising it out of existence. I want to show that it is an account, an anecdote, a story, which has many layers, many explanations and a great deal of indecisive conclusions.

5.   THE CREATION OF NARRATIVES

Narratives are not so much created by the mind but by 'what', 'how', 'when' and 'where' people listen. Narratives are useful tools in the construction of the 'self'. Meaning comes about through our ability to

listen. According to Bruner (1987), it is difficult to imagine oneself as a realist in life: there is no such thing as "life in itself" without an interpretation (p. 11-12). It is impossible to grasp the "self" without externalising through narrative. The individual in turn evaluates the narrative in view of his or her experiences to check its veracity.

Narrative identity is closely related to the view that identity comes about through a conversation between 'me' and the environment. In order for a narrative to come about, there has to be a true dialogue between participants who listen and recognize each other (Syrjala & Estola 1999).

This dialogue will create:
1. Simultaneous reflection on his/her self and life;
2. A better understanding of his/her identity;
3. The attitude of the audience towards the narrative also affects the narrator's identity;
4. The self-knowledge of both the narrator and the listener/reader are enhanced (Miller 1994).

Whilst telling a story, the individual constructs the 'story line' with a narrative tension and plot. The story sets in an understanding of whether the experience is a tragedy, a comedy, or 'a story of possibilities that never came true' (Ochberg, 1994). This sense making may be directed to several audiences, first of course being the storyteller. Most stories, however, are addressed also to an interviewer or to the larger audience. This means that life stories are a way of fashioning identity, in both the private and public senses of the world (Ochberg, 1994).

6.   THE EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Narrative identity can be described as a constantly evolving story, which compounds the past experiences of human life. A person constantly renews his or her narrative by re-creating mental experiences in the form of words and sentences that entertain readers in stories. What is intriguing is that when you are reading narrative you start putting in doubt what is true and what is fictious, what is proper and what is illusive. Experienced life and narrative life intertwine and can be weaved into a clear tapestry of understanding. Life, they say, is a long process of narrative interpretation. The significance of existence cannot be differentiated from the stories that are told of it. The relationship between experience and narrative is reciprocal.   The narrative is a continuous interpretation of life, which is used by people to organise their experiences and thus create meaning for them. Existence, in turn, is a novel version of the tale being told (Bruner 1987).

7.   EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND TEACHERS

Being a teacher is part of my identity besides my distinctiveness as a professional researcher. Modern educational research has generally accepted the view that to be a teacher is a moral endeavour. Teachers' work is full of moral and emotional challenges. The moral lies in the practice. The moral dimensions of teaching, demonstrates that behind such actions are indeed views of what teaching is all about. A person in order to be a teacher has to cope in a way or other with the moral demands of society. This makes the teacher an ideal contender for the role of researcher. Because researching becomes an 'in' thing, a complex relationship immersed in a reality that is being lived, day after day. Probably, the most intricate and complex role of any teacher is to help the students connect with their identity, individuality, uniqueness, and exceptionality.

Narratives are the meaning-making tools that help people recognize this identity. The human being is continually asking: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?. It is a way of engaging with an existence that is at times bleak and compromised by a collective veracity that seems to be collapsing under the dearth of values, the longing for consumption, the general sense of gratification and pre-determined perfection. Sometime back I came across a poetical representation that points to the value of understanding. Chuang Tzu (Wicks, 1998), a spiritual ancient philosopher says;

When an archer is shooting for nothing
He has all the skill.
If he shoots for a brass buckle
He is already nervous.
If he shoots for a prize of gold
He goes blind
Or sees two targets –

He is out of his mind!
His skull has not changed. But the prize
Divides him. He cares.
He thinks more of winning
Than of shooting –
And the need to win
Drains him of power.

In order to make sense of him/herself, the person grasps life through a narrative, whether one likes it or not! People have different experiences of what their position is in relation to what they are aiming at. But it is also a question of what the person has within, and how that 'persona' is interacting with the environment he or she is engrossed in. The weight of these experiences is only understandable in view of the meanings they acquire in the whole-life narrative. We must move around to be able to make an adequate evaluation of these circumstances. We must forcibly relate to a biographical approach.

Bolton (1994) has summarised the value of narrative fiction in terms of its capability:

- to propose "an intelligible research summary of the huge body of data which qualitative research tends to provide";

- to engage with and explore a professional problem that is "inaccessible or problematic by any other means";

- to express "the ambiguities, complexities and ironic relationships that exist between multiple viewpoints";

- and finally, to examine its tendency to "leave gaps for the reader to fill in and raise questions through the unresolved plurality of its meanings." (p.56).

8.   STORIES - A CONTRADICTION TO REAL LIFE?

What can a story tell us about reality? What can we read in such a story? What reality will this story narrate about the social dilemmas, the social dynamics and the tensions that are raised in this arena?

We speak about research as if it is a dimension beyond us. We speak about research as if we are speaking about a conscious that doesn't belong to the informants, to my students. But what is research? What makes research valid and true? What can be defined as facts and fictious data? What makes research creative and effective? I will not even try to attempt to answer such complex, multifaceted and complicated dilemmas. What I am proposing is that we start engaging with research as a process of creative reflection and suppress the traditional qualms. We need to see qualitative research not as a distinct position away from us but a reality that each researcher needs to connect with. If we were to focus on educational research than this becomes even more critical. At times I get the hunch that researchers, professionals and academics in qualtitaive research see themselves as distinclty aloof and not at ease with this method. Well the argument is a simple one. I get the impression that what is happening is that research in itself has become a 'trend setter'. It is research that moves

people to think about something and this is a new function of research that goes side by side with the interpretation of facts and circumstances.

The Polish Peasant in Europe and America by Thomas and Zbnaniecki (Zaretsky [ed.] 1996) is a classic when it comes to understanding this whole debate. Prior to a decision taken by the notorious Chicago School of Sociology, the only way that information was gathered was through 'social surveys'. This style collated data without providing the capacity to analyse the causes of these notions. "Thomas and Znaniecki, by contrast, sought to explain social problems by examining the relation between individuals and their surrounding society" (p. xii). Quote;

> The meanings of narrative arise out of the interaction of story, storyteller and audience (Reason and Hawkins, 1998, p. 86). What audiences do with stories is often unclear. (Goodley, 2000, p. 57).

The focal point of this paper is that life stories as a research tool gives control to the informants. Understanding experience as lived and told stories, also known as narrative inquiry, has gained popularity and credence in qualitative research. As a research method, narrative inquiry can reveal or capture political, ethical, and moral dimensions of life, experience, and professional practice that other research methodologies cannot. While well-crafted and documented stories can serve as primary data in formal academic research, they can also serve as powerful teaching and organizing tools and sources of wisdom and inspiration in action-oriented community development and collaborative inquiry projects.

Using such a technique in educational research creates a new way of including informants:

- It helps individuals acquire knowledge about the historical context of narrative research and 'social surveys'.
- It encourages the development of knowledge on narrative research, life-stories and life histories.
- It introduces opportunities to safeguard ethical boundaries.

The shortcomings of such a research technique are the following:

- What can reasonably be described as a 'story'?
- What is the relationship between stories and endings?
- What is the value of an ending?
- Can we have a story with multiple endings or without any ending at all?
- Without closure to our stories, are we not left with a deep feeling of unease? And if so, what does this tell us about ourselves?
- Is critical reflection just another form of privileged rationality?

If we are not to accept every splinter of speech as a story, every clumsy description as storytelling; if we are not to be content with a lack of endings, plots and characters, then it is time to carefully consider the limits of storytelling.

9.   WRAPPING UP

Using narrative in educational research is another way of creating a new way of indulging in the theme under consideration with the informants involved in the whole process. Research has become one way of identifying the causes of certain changes, dilemmas and tensions that are taking place in our school community. Education is the panacea of all social woes. The evidence I read through the stories people tell are in harmony with what is happening and what will be happening. The story lies in the crystal ball – the narrative.

The twist towards having narrative and story telling methods in social sciences is yielding rich harvest of research conclusions (Zaretsky 1996; Goodson and Sikes, 2001; Plummer 2001; Goodley et. al, 2004). This method is a way of vitalizing the relationship between policy and practice. This technique provides a more meaningful and creative practitioner–service-user relationship and a better understanding of professional sound practices.

Being an ocular-centred community, we need to see what is happening and to read stories that are close to the reality we are succumbed in even if they are stories that we are not usually directly involved in. These are stories that transcend from the people to the people, rather than from the researchers/academics to researchers/academics. This work is based on the power of stories. Stories and narratives are often intersected by multiple allegiances ranging from a historical context to political conformity, from grass-root struggles to social constructions and cultural hagemonisation, from researcher consent to economic agendas. Maybe the most complex of all issues is not the presentation of stories but to figure out and recognise what constitutes a story, defining story limits, recognizing the usefulness of narration and finally reflecting whether the morale of narratives is context-bound.

The core of my research lies in my student's stories, that, I have written and relocated back to the varied locations I am involved in using focus groups as my *modus operandi*. Conversely, this scenario is complemented by stories I collated from disabled activists and parents of disabled people. This brought me to the enmeshment of auto-ethnographic and narrative enquiry. The major research questions in this Thesis stem from a personal engagement.

As a researcher, rather than attempting to change the thinking of my informants, I sought the active participation in this diversity debate (Holdaway, 2000). I wanted a methodology that will provide an opportunity for my informants.

In writing this Thesis I am trying to get beneath the clichés of disability metaphors to reveal the social constructions. I have sought inclusion not in a fixed and resolute facet but I wanted to engage with the various experiences that are shaping my views on inclusion in an assortment of perspectives.

This work has contributed towards an understanding of the ways the stories of children at the margins can be used to promote critical debates about inclusion. The different perspectives of parents, policy-makers, disabled persons, teachers, and social workers are drawn upon to inform a transformative agenda for inclusion.

The work is split into three main portions. The first part which includes the *Preamble*, *Introduction* and *Literature Review* gives us the main ingredients that have fashioned my thinking, where 'I' stand in this work and how I have betrothed the research questions. The second part of the Thesis includes the *Methods* and *Methodological* issues in depth, the *Narratives*, *Stories*, *Auto-ethnographic* findings and other bits and pieces that have moulded up my research base. Finally, part three of this study will take account the *Data Analysis* and *Conclusions*.

In reciting the story of inclusion and inclusivity, I endeavour to cover six fascinating and knotty years of fieldwork, reflection and research I have been wrapped in during my Masters and Doctoral Studies, entangled with a career that has taken me to the highs and lows of this complex debate. This experience has changed me from the roots.

I would like to conclude this presentation by a quote by Clough from Goodley et. al. (2004):

> The use of narratives and fictions in social science research makes it possible to render the lives of others in such a way that others might access something of the raw truths of their lives. Conventional research reports (often) effectively render out the personal. ... Lives and difficulties are disinfected and presented 'steam-cleaned', and though creased and worn – they are offered up to the reader in a relatively painless way (p. 184).

Let's not forget that we all hold together by 'social-ties' (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1996). What better way than the narration of stories to assist us in this process?

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