



WALKING TOGETHER: THINKING ABOUT AND CARING FOR THE RESEARCH RELATIONSHIP IN NARRATIVE INQUIRY

CAMINAR JUNTAS: PENSAR Y CUIDAR LA RELACIÓN DE INVESTIGACIÓN EN LA INDAGACIÓN NARRATIVA

CAMINHAR JUNTAS: PENSAR E CUIDAR DA RELAÇÃO DE INVESTIGAÇÃO NA INVESTIGAÇÃO NARRATIVA

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the experience of coming alongside Marta, a social educator, as we co-compose a research relationship. This journey became a space of possibility, where understanding the centrality of our relationship emerged through attending to her "stories to live by" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) and appreciating her "curriculum of care" for children (Noddings, 1984). Our narrative inquiry shows how this relational process shaped a tension between what one of the researchers previously knew and what began to appear as a new reality. This tension called for the creation of a renewed relationship, in which Emma and Marta walked together, acknowledged their respective lives as researcher and participant, and honored their shared experience of living alongside one another as former colleagues. As we engaged with the narrative account, we identified two resonant threads that shifted our own "stories to live by" and supported us in caring for the research relationship. The ways in which this relationship was composed—as a form of lived pedagogy—led us to wonder how teacher education might engage more deeply with relationships shaped by lived experience, care, and sensitivity.

Keywords: narrative inquiry; research relationships; relational ethics; care in research; Teacher Education.

Resumen

En este artículo, exploramos la experiencia de situarnos junto a Marta, educadora social, a medida que co-componemos una relación de investigación. Este recorrido se convirtió en un espacio de posibilidad, donde la comprensión de la centralidad de nuestra relación emergió al atender a sus "historias para vivir" (Connelly y Clandinin, 1999) y al reconocer su "currículum del cuidado" hacia la infancia (Noddings, 1984). Nuestra indagación narrativa muestra cómo este proceso relacional configuró una tensión entre lo que una de las investigadoras sabía previamente y lo que comenzó a aparecer como una nueva realidad. Esta tensión dio lugar a la necesidad de crear una relación renovada, en la que Emma y Marta caminaron juntas, reconocieron sus respectivas posiciones como investigadora y participante, y honraron la experiencia compartida de habitar juntas la investigación como antiguas colegas. Al involucrarnos en el relato narrativo, identificamos dos hilos resonantes que transformaron nuestras propias "historias para vivir" y nos ayudaron a cuidar la relación de investigación. Las formas en que esta



relación fue co-compuesta —como una pedagogía vivida— nos llevaron a preguntarnos cómo la formación del profesorado podría implicarse más profundamente con relaciones configuradas por la experiencia vivida, el cuidado y la sensibilidad.

Palabras clave: indagación narrativa; relaciones de investigación; ética relacional; cuidado en la investigación; formación del profesorado.

Resumo

Neste artigo, exploramos a experiência de estar ao lado de Marta, educadora social, à medida que co-componhamos uma relação de pesquisa. Essa trajetória tornou-se um espaço de possibilidade, no qual a compreensão da centralidade de nossa relação emergiu ao atentar para suas "histórias para viver" (Connelly e Clandinin, 1999) e ao reconhecer seu "currículo do cuidado" voltado para a infância (Noddings, 1984). Nossa investigação narrativa mostra como esse processo relacional configurou uma tensão entre o que uma das pesquisadoras sabia previamente e o que começou a se revelar como uma nova realidade. Essa tensão gerou a necessidade de criar uma relação renovada, na qual Emma e Marta caminharam juntas, reconheceram suas respectivas posições como pesquisadora e participante, e honraram a experiência compartilhada de habitar a pesquisa lado a lado como antigas colegas. Ao nos engajarmos com o relato narrativo, identificamos dois fios ressonantes que transformaram nossas próprias "histórias para viver" e nos auxiliaram a cuidar da relação de pesquisa. As formas pelas quais essa relação foi co-composta — como uma pedagogia vivida — nos levaram a refletir sobre como a formação de professores poderia se engajar de maneira mais profunda com relações moldadas pela experiência vivida, pelo cuidado e pela sensibilidade.

Palavras-chave: Investigação narrativa: relações de pesquisa; ética relacional; cuidado na pesquisa; formação de professores.

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Beginning in experience

If you were one of those three adults, one of those educators, where would you position yourself in the children's line?" Marta asked during our fifth research conversation. We were sitting on a terrace facing the sea. As we talked, a group of children passed before us. We imagined they had just finished swimming; some draped towels over their shoulders, some combed wet hair with their fingers, others struggled to slip into their shirts. One child walked quietly, eyes fixed on the line where sea met sky, as if tracing its magic. Three adults stood among the children, accompanying them in their journey. We remained silent, witnessing the small ritual until the group faded from our view. Again, the image of tiny waves lapping against delicate sandcastles surfaced before us [...] as I imagined myself among the children, Marta added softly, "Do you know what? I love to feel the joy the children spread every time they are near the ocean (interim research text, conversation with Marta, May 15, 2015).

In that moment, our conversation became more than words. It was a shared presence, a mutual noticing of life unfolding at the edge of land and sea. Emma first met Marta while

working at Alda, an educational community in a suburb near Barcelona, Spain. The neighborhood was predominantly Roma, families who had emigrated in the 1960s and, as the Catalan metropolis expanded, had been rehoused by the government into a different urban area alongside other families facing economic and social challenges. During the two years they worked together, both built a network of support, learning from and alongside each other. As social educators, and two white women embedded in a Roma community, they shared similar understandings of the educational process. A common language and philosophy of education became the foundation of their collegial relationship. When Emma transitioned into Academia and began her journey as a researcher, she felt a deep responsibility to share the experiences of social educators working alongside children and families in vulnerable contexts. It was at this point that José encouraged her to join his research project and suggested inviting Marta to engage with Emma's doctoral work. For ten years, José had been exploring the notions of "personal practical knowledge, or experiential knowledge" (Clandinin, 1985; Contreras, 2013) with elementary teachers. This invitation opened new possibilities for Emma to rethink how social educators co-compose a curriculum of care with children and families, extending her attention from her own practice to the relational, lived knowledge of others. It also invited her to return to the lived experiences of those she had worked alongside. Emma found herself listening again, attentively, to the ways Marta's pedagogical knowledge and care practices had unfolded over time. She began tracing the rhythms, small decisions, and subtle shifts in Marta's approach to children (a narrative thread that carried the inquiry from reflection into the tangible, relational, and embodied experiences shaping her work).

Recalling Marta's story, then, invites us to imagine how her ways of caring for relationships had shifted, not only in her role in relation to the children, but in how she attended to them, lived alongside them, and looked after them. One day, as Emma and Marta sat on a terrace facing the sea, Marta shared that when she was young and had her first job, she felt comfortable taking the lead in the children's line. She would mark the path, guide the way, and point out the direction. "I used to express a feeling of energy that seemed to energize others as well" (conversation with Marta, May 15, 2015). Over the years, she discovered a quiet joy in positioning herself in the middle of the group, between those who walked quickly and those who lingered behind. In fact, she remembered chatting with the children, offering gentle nudges to keep them moving, and noticing the unique rhythms of each child. Yet when Emma met her, Marta began to sense the possibility of another stance: placing herself at the end of the line. Being last allowed her to move slowly, to attune to the different cadences of the group, and to stay close to the children who paused to watch the horizon or tie their shoes. In that space, she could simply be with them, fully present, without hurry. These shifts revealed a subtle but profound pedagogical knowledge, the knowledge of presence, patience, and relational attunement that shaped her work.

As Marta shared stories about how she built relationships with the children, it became clear just how much those connections mattered to her. Her experiences, and the care she placed in recounting them, resonated deeply with the questions that frame this paper: How can we walk alongside our research participants? In what ways might we care for the research relationship? How might we remain together amidst the stories and experiences that formed the heart of our conversations? How, as researchers, could we create boundaries that are both respectful and flexible, helping participants feel safe

within the inquiry? How do we make space to be with them, and to be with ourselves? Attending to Marta's stories alongside these questions drew us toward two resonant threads in her narrative account. The first, learning to walk together, reflected the ongoing work of authorizing, enacting, and living the inquiry. The second, walking together, revealed the ways we allowed ourselves to be touched by one another. These threads opened new wonders for us, highlighting the subtle pedagogical processes that sustained the research relationship we co-created.

Situating the inquiry

Our inquiry is grounded in an exploration of relations of care and of the pedagogical knowledge that sustains them. To think about care is to think about naming, making possible, and taking responsibility for something or someone, but also about being watchful and alert. Care, as a way of gathering concrete acts and situations, is made up of qualities for which words are often difficult to find. When we try to define it, what comes into view is not simply a concept, but a memory, a place, a story (Quiles-Fernández, 2016).

Care calls for more than definition; it is something to be understood as experience. This does not mean that educational care is dissolved into abstraction, but rather that what allows us to grasp how, and to what extent, it takes place is a careful attentiveness to the gestures and bodies in which it dwells. In this sense, this inquiry unfolds through three movements. The first attends to pedagogical practices in which care for the other, for others, and for the world becomes the central axis of experience, an experience shaped by love, availability, language, hospitality, authority, and relationality. The second invites an exploration of the meaning of educational work, attending to the open question through which educational experience is sustained as a relation without end. The third turns to the inquiry process itself, asking how such an experience might be inquired into narratively (Quiles-Fernández, 2020).

More specifically, we approached this two-year study as a narrative inquiry, carrying diverse experiences, our own as well as Marta's, each shaped within a tradition of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). In this tradition, people are understood as shaping "their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of those stories" (p. 477). Building on this understanding of experience as storied, narrative inquiry positions the study of experience itself as a story. It calls for a particular way of thinking about experience and entails a narrative view of the phenomenon itself (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). From this perspective, to employ narrative inquiry methodology is "to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). It is both a study of experience understood narratively and a way of thinking about and engaging with experience. As Wang (2017) notes, "We tell stories so that we can know what is happening; we listen to stories, so we can understand how people think, or have thought, helping to understand their experiences" (p. 45). In narrative inquiry, researchers think narratively about experience throughout the inquiry process, which in turn deepens our understanding of our own histories. Storytelling is thus inseparable from knowing and knowledge (Barthes, 1975; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Singh, 2014). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) invite us to understand the narrative inquiry conception of experience as rooted in two central dimensions of Dewey's (1938) philosophy of experience: "interaction and continuity enacted in situations" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 12).

Framed within this view of experience, the focus of narrative inquiry is not only on an individual's experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted. Narrative inquirers study the individual's experience in the world, an experience that is storied both in the living and telling and that can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside another, and writing, and interpreting texts (p.42-43).

In this sense, experience is relational, continuous, personal, and social; thus, the work that Marta and Emma engaged in was, at its core, relational. When we began imagining this paper and the questions it raised about the research relationship (particularly how closeness might be cultivated) we came to frame these wonders as "a research puzzle that carried the sense of a search, a research, a searching again, a sense of continual reformulation" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124). The study focused on the central role that relationships play in enabling attentiveness to a curriculum of care, with the relational dimension of the work with Marta becoming central to the inquiry. Through Emma's autobiographical work (Quiles-Fernández, 2010), supervised by José, we began to notice how care, and caring within educational relationships, emerged as recursive threads throughout her master's thesis writing. Together, we explored how an ethic of care entails sharing responsibility for learning with children by creating spaces in which they can make choices about their own learning. We understand relationships as emerging from an ethic of care in teaching; as Webb and Blond (1995) suggest, "relational knowing derives from, and is situated in, relationships" (p. 621). However, it was through the work of Noddings (1984; 1991; 1992) on the ethics of care that we came to more clearly articulate the research puzzle of this study. Understanding care as a relation offered a way of living care as a prerequisite for intellectual growth (Noddings, 1984). Inquiring into the research relationship in this way not only led us to reconsider how care is grounded in interpersonal connection, but also to recognize how stories shape the ways in which we come to live and compose our inquiry.

Entering into a caring research relationship with Marta did not simply respond to a tendency toward gentle smiles and warm hugs (Goldstein, 2002). Rather, it opened a research space in which care could be lived as both a moral and an intellectual relationship. In this sense, the experience of care, which is "rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (Noddings, 1984, p. 2), invited us to revisit Marta's stories through these three pedagogical qualities. To care involves active moments in which engrossment is present. In such moments, the cared-for is encountered not as an object, but as a person. This understanding of care resonates with the way narrative inquiry conceives research participants, not as subjects of research, but as participants with whom research is composed (Clandinin & Huber, 2010; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Contreras & Quiles-Fernández, 2017).

Looking back on the research relationship we built, we see how learning emerges with others, rather than from others. From this perspective, learning is always relational. It is not constituted as conceptual or procedural work alone, but unfolds through walking alongside others (Contreras & Pérez de Lara, 2010; Contreras & Quiles-Fernández, 2017). It was from this understanding of relational care that we approached the

beginning of our study, recognizing that narrative inquiry requires entering our own lives alongside the lives of our participants. While many researchers begin their studies through interviews or conversations, we sought instead to create spaces in which José could share stories of his past experiences and Emma could retell her own within the context of her doctoral work. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) remind us that this process is "a more difficult, time-consuming, [and] intensive [but] in the end, narrative inquiry is about life and living" (p. 478). Furthermore, it was important for us to situate ourselves within the inquiry before finding ways to build relational connections with Marta.

Returning to Emma's workplace might have appeared as a journey into a familiar landscape, a well-known educational space, an already acquainted place. However, returning to Alda offered her a sense of origin that brought her into conversation with her own past stories and opened possibilities for creating new experiences within the institution. These included new relationships with the educational landscape, with Marta, and with herself as a teacher educator and researcher. As these renewed relationships began to take shape, Emma became increasingly attentive to subtle shifts in the space. In returning, Emma sensed that something in the atmosphere had shifted. The stories that seemed to inhabit the institutional walls now held, as their central protagonists, the children, youth, and families who constituted Marta's present. Emma recalls standing with Marta in front of the photographs hanging along the hallway. "I like to look at them before I start my day with the children," she whispered. This shared moment drew our attention to how Marta was living alongside the children, youth, and families, and how she was caring for those who had become the heart of the educational space. In time, these moments of shared attention became part of how we lived the inquiry together. Each day, as Emma took part in the activities Marta facilitated, they would pause together for a few seconds in silence before those photographs. Over time, this quiet moment became a relational research ritual.

Looking back, we remember how, in our supervision meetings, we also explored the significance of these research rituals. As Marta prepared herself for the educational encounters, Emma simultaneously prepared for her role as a researcher. In both spaces (Alda and José's office) we cultivated a shared ground where silence and serenity could coexist. Building the relationship from this place was vital because it allowed us to consciously attend to what was happening to us and to explore the reverberations we felt. During these supervision meetings, when we revisited Marta's and the children's stories, we became aware of the ways in which Marta and Emma were caring for each other. This process of awareness enabled us to reflect deeply on caring as an experience, on how it manifested, and on the personal and practical knowledge it encompassed.

It is within this relational and reflective space that narrative inquiry truly comes alive. Rather than following a linear path, it unfolds as a circle: being in the field, composing field texts, drafting and sharing interim research texts, and composing the final narratives. Throughout this unfolding, the relational dimensions of our study demanded continuous ethical attentiveness. Each conversation took place at a time and in a space chosen by Marta, never lasting more than two hours, and each became a moment of shared presence, careful listening, and mutual reflection. To trace how Marta and Emma moved together through the inquiry, we returned repeatedly to Emma's field notes

(2014–2016), the nine recorded and transcribed conversations, and the negotiated narrative account. In revisiting these materials, we became attuned to the rhythms of care and reflection embedded in each interaction. Marta's lived and told stories emerged not only as accounts of who she was, but as threads of who she was becoming: stories that sustained her growth and shaped the spaces we inhabited together. The inquiry, then, was not simply a method, but a living dialogue in which ethical attentiveness, relational presence, and the ongoing composition of stories were inseparable. This recognition highlighted the necessity of negotiating research texts that respectfully represented and honored Marta's experiences. Completing the inquiry, therefore, required acting in ways that upheld the principle of "doing good and avoiding harm" (Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2000, p. 93).

Because Emma already had a prior relationship with Marta, it was essential for the study to ensure that Marta's voice remained authentic and unaltered. After each conversation, we returned a transcript to her, allowing her to check for resonance and accurate representation. At the end of the second conversation, she remarked, "I am impressed by my words and the ways in which everything seems well-connected" (conversation with Marta, November 27, 2014). Her words prompted reflection. We began to question whether, unconsciously, Emma might have been shaping or fictionalizing Marta's voice through the writing process. To address this, we turned to annals, found poems, and artifacts, which offered new ways to express and make sense of what Marta was not yet able to articulate. Three months later, Marta stated:

I was surprised. I mean, 'surprised' in a good way. I did not mean that I do not see me here, or that I am not here, in the writing [...] sometimes I think out loud and I do not see how I connect my ideas or how intense my stories can be. It is an interesting exercise to see myself in a printed writing (interim research text from conversation with Marta on February 5, 2015).

Spending long, uninterrupted moments in conversation allowed Emma and Marta to enter these exchanges fully, with a shared desire to simply be and to know. Receptivity became a living quality of their time together—not merely empathy, but a relational practice in which they saw, felt, and moved alongside each other. In these exchanges, silence, attention, and presence intertwined, shaping the rhythm of their interactions. In her research journal, Emma reflected:

Now I am able to understand Noddings (1984) approach of "becoming duality" (p. 30). I sense Marta and I are becoming duality. In our research conversations, I purposely try to receive her into myself without projecting my own stories and, when I share a story connected with hers, she does not analyze it [...] there is no judgement in the stories I share with her [...] I feel safe because she does not generalize in her experiences and stories (interim research text June 20, 2015).

Emma immersed herself in Marta's experience, opening herself to feel alongside her as vulnerable stories surfaced. This sensitivity did not emerge automatically; it arose from the ongoing practice of living with care, from engaging fully in the give-and-take of

relationship. Each encounter became a moment to inhabit a caring relation (Goldstein, 2002). Over time, Marta's responsive presence allowed Emma to sense a shared storyline weaving through their interactions—a narrative of their lives as social educators. This common thread made it easier to intertwine their life stories, to trace the rhythms of their work and learning together. The desire to learn alongside one another was strengthened by the harmony they created, a quiet space of trust and safety (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). At this stage, it hardly mattered if one needed "to stop to tie her shoes" (interim research text from conversation with Marta, May 15, 2015). The other remained fully present. Sometimes Marta paused to take a deep breath while telling a story; other times, they lingered for a moment, letting the narrative settle before continuing. In these pauses, in this attentive presence, the self was never diminished. Instead, it was enriched, expanded by the act of seeing, listening, and being present with the other.

I began to see how important [the research] is [...] well, I did not realize until yesterday, when [her partner] asked me, "what exactly are you doing with Emma?" [...] I shared a bit of what we talk and, as I was sharing what we do, it impressed me the depth of what we do [...] he did seem to be impressed! (Interim research text from conversation with Marta on January 15, 2015).

When Marta verbally acknowledged the value of what they were exploring together, Emma felt that they could see themselves mirrored in their relationship (Buber, 1965). Marta was not simply authorizing Emma as a researcher; she was living the significance of the relational process itself. Emma's wonder became Marta's wonder, Emma's puzzle became Marta's puzzle, and together they felt as if they were walking through the "same" landscape, side by side. Even after the research formally ended, we remained immersed in the ongoing rhythm of living, telling, reliving, and retelling the stories that shape our lives, both individual and social (Clandinin, Huber, Menon, Murphy & Swanson, 2015). By listening closely and attending to Marta's stories, narrative inquiry opened spaces for new perspectives, new narratives, and insights that could speak to the experiences of other social educators, researchers, and teacher educators. As we narrated, retold, and relived our lives, stories began to echo against one another, revealing new plotlines and casting old plotlines in fresh light.

Thinking relationally with these emerging threads became central to the inquiry, for "without living in relation in wide-awake ways [...] we cannot know, feel, understand, and recognize tensions" within lives and relationships (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber & Orr, 2010, p. 83). Engaging with the tensions we encountered as researchers walking Marta's landscapes was not a disruption but part of the rhythm of narrative inquiry itself—a living, unfolding dialogue in which presence, attention, and care shaped both the stories and the storytellers.

Returning to our conversations and revisiting them after negotiating the narrative account with Marta brought into focus the two resonant threads that structure this paper. Through found poems, we trace how we walked together. The purpose of sharing these poems is not to suggest that our ways of caring for the research relationship were



flawless or exemplary, but to open space for reflection on the relational work that is inherent in every research journey we undertake. This is a journey that cultivates togetherness (Caine & Estefan, 2011) and allows us to embrace the subtle magic inherent in research relationships.

In the following section, we illustrate how narrative inquiry has helped us think about the relational research process. To think narratively is to think with experience—attending to temporality, sociality, and place—and requires understanding Marta's experiences "individually and socially, as composing storied lives, inside and outside of schools" (Huber, Caine, Huber & Steeves, 2013, p. 227). We demonstrate our narrative thinking through Marta's stories across time, place, and diverse situations. We continue to think narratively as we reflect on experiences in Marta's workplace that have shaped her embodied knowledge of building relationships. This reflection also highlights a fundamental movement within the notion of always becoming (Greene, 1995). It embraces two pedagogical dimensions of our "walking together": one that could not be predicted, how stories act upon us, or how we find the right moment to share them, and another that needed to be intentionally cultivated in order to "walk [the research path] in a good way," encompassing the passion, commitment, care, and trust essential to all research relationships (Young, 2005).

Re-engaging in *walking together*: The stories of our research

To illuminate the ways in which Marta's personal and professional experiences shaped the knowledge she brings to her interactions with Emma as a researcher, we share found poems¹ drawn from the many stories Marta shared throughout the two-year narrative inquiry.

Learning to walk together: authorizing, enacting and living the inquiry

I never imagined myself as a social educator
Photography was my world
I liked to meet new people
Capture one second of life
Inside the camera
When I travelled
Hours passed
Until I took a picture
I needed to feel the connection
With the people
The mountain
The bird
This relational need
Brought me into the world of education
Life has always shown me the path
Where to go
I trust in life and all that it offers
I lived a life with no difficulties
This was my first educational commitment
I want children to be happy
In tune with their own rhythms



Accepting what comes
Without forcing anything
My professional career started
Especially late
Full of movement, inside and outside
Of myself
I did not dream of being in Alda
I do dream of being with them
Now

(Interim research text from conversation with Marta on October 14, 2014).

When Marta and Emma met that early Tuesday morning, it was on the terrace of a small bar overlooking the sea. After ordering coffee, their conversation began with Marta's professional experiences in the educational landscape. For a brief period, she had worked as a photographer, traveling alone and meeting many people—though she did not photograph all of them. Her relationship with photography had reshaped her lived stories, and the sense of connection she described had remained a guiding thread in her life. Marta quickly drew us into Alda's context, sharing relational stories about how the lives of children and families were reshaping her own stories and her understanding of the meaning of life.

We were aware that some of the most profound and challenging responsibilities in relational research emerge as ethical tensions, arising both from the open-ended nature of narrative inquiry and from the dynamic characteristics of relationships as they begin, evolve, and eventually conclude. Yet, we chose to follow Marta's guiding wisdom—to "trust in life"—and to honor the natural rhythm of the relationship unfolding between Marta and Emma. This also required mutual authorization, especially as their friendship was evolving into something different. Through Marta's shared experiences, we understood that this mutual authorization involved a dual gesture: it had to arise from a specific place, experience, or relationship, and at the same time, it required stepping outside oneself to inhabit another symbolic space—a new wonder, a new relationship (Rivera, 1993).

As a visual person, Marta offered to share some of the photographs that had inspired her life as a social educator. "You will see in my photos how life has been pointing me where to go," she said. Even after the tape recorder was turned off, they remained at the table, with Marta continuing to recount stories of how she built relationships with the people she photographed. Before leaving, they scheduled their next conversation at the same bar. In our next meeting, before starting the recording, Emma casually asked Marta how she felt as a research participant. "I feel very good. I like to be your object of study," she responded. Her words struck us intensely. Emma was striving to build a study grounded in relationship, wanting Marta to feel like an active, "real" participant. Yet, hearing her say this, Emma imagined Marta was engaging with the study without fully inhabiting it, without her body, without authentically embodying what she said, thought, or did.

Emma revisited all her field notes and transcribed conversations, but she could not pinpoint the source of the misunderstanding. "How am I cultivating the research practice? If she names herself the object of this inquiry, how is she living herself as an object? How can I shift her perceptions through our conversations and gestures?" (Interim research text, November 1, 2014). These questions became a mirror for us—discouraging, yet illuminating. What we aimed to explore was inseparable from the

way the research itself was shaped; we could not disentangle the research puzzles from the research relationship. Both converged on the same space—the space of otherness. An otherness that reflected not only how we, as researchers, were creating a space for Marta, but also how she was opening a new space for us within her professional landscape. We longed to inhabit the study “with the mind, the eyes, the feelings, and the thoughts that lived in our bodies” (Wild, 2006, p. 90).

Misled by our own assumptions, Emma placed these questions at the center of our attention, exploring the tensions arising from differing ideas about the research process and methodology. Our early interactions relied on walking together with a shared language. It was crucial not to take feelings, conceptualizations, or educational notions for granted, but to generate a space where we could name and attend to how we were living the research relationship. As the study unfolded, we began to understand that Marta’s notion of “being an object” actually meant:

You have come here searching for me because you sense that something in Alda is meaningful for you [...] You are the one carrying the research question and the commitment, because you clearly know what you want to explore (Interim research text, conversation with Marta, November 25, 2014).

Her words became the mirror we needed to see ourselves. She imagined the notions of “research subject” and “object” not as abstract concepts, but as living extensions of a concrete relationship: the “research object” was the one from whom something was sought, and the “research subject” was the one who sought. This insight drew us deeper into pondering the pedagogical qualities that our relationship was quietly unfolding.

We deliberately made our togetherness visible, understanding that words alone could not shift any traditional assumptions she might hold. Marta did not need explanations; she needed gestures, actions that could transform her experience of the research. Slowly, she began to inhabit our “work together” in a new way. This did not mean sharing identical responsibilities, but moving through the inquiry as companions, navigating side by side. We learned to enter one another’s worlds, a process possible only by standing “in a common situation with the other” (Friedman, 1965, p. 29). In this shared space, they began to authorize each other (carefully and deliberately) knitting a relational tapestry where beliefs, hopes, and worldviews could be held together, tended, and explored.

Each conversation demanded a delicate sensitivity, an openness to the gestures that surfaced within the silences woven through Marta’s stories. Attuning to her body language revealed new ways to inhabit our research conversations. Marta, energetic and full of life, loved to knit. One day, she brought Emma a handmade bag—a small gesture that opened a new path for connection.

For months, our meetings had followed the familiar rhythm of the same cafés. Gradually, Emma invited Marta to meet through shared pleasures—sewing, drawing, walking along the shore, sharing meals. As their relationship unfolded, the conversations moved into their homes, and the question shifted from “Where shall we meet?” to “Shall we meet at my place or yours?” The intimacy of a warm home transformed the research. Care was no longer merely discussed; it was enacted, embodied, lived. The new spaces nurtured richer conversations, pauses pregnant with thought, moments of complicity, and a deepened willingness to begin with oneself. Time seemed to stretch, reminding us again and again that the research journey did not end when a conversation closed. Each



encounter became a beginning, an opportunity, and an origin, a space to authorize, enact, and inhabit the inquiry together.

Walking Together: Being Touched by the Path

I want to share a story.
Only, today, I will tell you.
A long time ago, you asked,
"What did you learn when you worked as a social educator in Bolivia?"
I did not answer.
You never mentioned it again.
I felt you knew
I wasn't ready, yet.

Today, I want you to know a story.
I went to Bolivia
and found an educational community
situated in a low-income district.
They hired me, and I worked in a program for teenage girls.
During my days there,
Clara came to me and said she was pregnant.

She gave birth to a beautiful baby.
Everyone in the community loved him.
He smiled all the time.
I visited him with a colleague,
and we thought he seemed malnourished.

My colleague and I
decided to help her financially.
Others said,
"There are lots of babies like him."
They were right,
but he was unique for us.
We knew Clara.
We felt we had to do something.

A week later, a man phoned the office:
"Clara's baby has passed away."
Tears, tensions, contradictions.
How could we be ready for something like that?
How could we stand alongside her and her family?

Clara's family could not pay for the burial.
We collected wood and built a niche.
We placed it in a dirty, muddy field.
The beautiful baby was buried.
It was a rainy day.

The young mother was Catholic.
I visited the only priest in the community.
He gave us a cross,



with another name on it.
We recycled the cross of someone who had died before.
How could I tell Clara about it?
I was the one who scratched out the other name,
with anger and pain.
I could not write the baby's name.
Someone else did it.
I did not know what to do, what to say.
Clara stayed there, looking at her baby,
until the rain stopped.
(Interim research text from conversation with Marta, June 23, 2015).

What Marta seemed to experience through our interactions was that, as researchers, we made a conscious effort to respect her personal rhythms and the ways in which she chose to share her stories. Being a research participant did not mean surrendering the power of her own narratives. In fact, honoring her silences became part of how we were growing together. Marta recognized that our gentle non-insistence may have stemmed from an understanding that revisiting her experiences in Bolivia was not easy. She also reflected on how to be present with Clara, and how to honor her feelings while maintaining the personal space the young mother needed.

I am telling you this, and I am feeling it right here. I know it is a hard story [...] I will never forget that day because I cannot forget what stirred me so deeply. In Alda, I have not experienced the death of a child, but we have lived what I call 'the fast goodbyes.' You know what I mean [...] some families decide to leave so suddenly, and before you realize it, they are gone—you haven't had the chance to hug the child, to write a postcard, to play their favorite game one last time [...] and you do not know what to do. You just do your best (Conversation with Marta, June 23, 2015).

After hearing her story, a long silence settled between them. As had happened with Clara, Emma did not know what to say. Yet when Marta held that silence, Emma did not feel uneasy; rather, it filled them both, allowing them to inhabit the fullness of their research relationship. During supervision meetings, José often reflected on these shared silences, seeing them as inspired spaces where Emma could connect with the research experience and the process of retelling it. These pauses became places of peace that they returned to mentally during the writing stages of the doctoral work.

Emma could not separate her emotions from Marta's story, so she asked if it was okay to stop the recorder and embrace her. This instinctive gesture did not stem from a protective impulse, but from an attitude of receptivity. Looking back, Emma remembered hugging Marta after a difficult day at Alda, it felt reassuring to know someone was truly present with her. In that moment, as Marta brought the memories of her Bolivian experience into the present, she was able to restore and restory her past, and subtle resonances with Emma's own life emerged.

That day in June, their conversation was shorter than usual. On the metro, on her way home, Emma reflected on the question of who we allow ourselves to be touched by (Migliavacca, 2004) and considered how Marta was experiencing the research relationship as a conscious and recognizable connection—one that allowed her to sense the quiet story residing in her heart. Traveling into Marta's world (Lugones, 1987) revealed that what mattered was not the mere reproduction of her past, but a recreation



of life as it was internally experienced and perceived as movement. This movement was essential to their research relationship. "Mutual vulnerability" was the phrase Emma wrote in her paper that day on the metro. Even though she had not shared a vulnerable story with Marta, she felt her own vulnerability awaken, along with other memories—stories of uncertainty about what to do or say, and stories of people who had passed away while she was physically close to them. Listening to Marta brought those memories back, making them vividly present and also rendering her vulnerable. The day Clara lost her baby, with Marta alongside her, became intertwined in Emma's memory with the day she had lost her grandmother while sitting by her bedside. Their "goodbyes" were different, yet both had felt the profound disorientation of loss, creating a powerful connection between them. Emma saw herself in Marta's story, though she was not yet able to share that reflection aloud.

The day after our research meeting, Emma planned, as usual, to write Marta a brief note thanking her for her time and commitment to the study. However, this time, she chose to share more, opening a letter to tell the story of her grandmother:

I did not meet her as a child
We built our relationship when I was a teenager
She always cooked for me
Most of the time, she lost at Parcheesi
She fell ill
Her heartbeats grew weak
I visited her in the hospital
Until
I thought she was smiling at me
But she was gone
Her heart had loved so deeply.
(Interim research text, June 24, 2015).

Marta never replied to Emma's letter, yet something in their relationship shifted. They had shared a vital story that, at some point, compelled them to open a new chapter in their lives. Both experienced a rupture with "what had been established in our own lives, but we kept arousing ourselves to begin again" (Greene, 1995, p.109). It became significant to reflect on what had happened, what was created for them, and what entered their lives as they walked the research path together. Attending to all of this marked the first step in Emma's way of thinking with Marta's stories: to think not through reason, calculations, or arguments, but through the desire to make sense of who they were and what was unfolding in their shared journey.

Both stories reminded us that the past could be remembered with the same intensity as the present, because the stories returned in the very act of remembering, where time seemed to collapse. We also acknowledged that

inside stories we can accept pain, find justice and experience relation [...] it connects the disconnections of human experience and gives something whole and meaningful to it [...] we join others emotionally and intellectually and develop a sense of rightness and belonging [...] Stories also offer us insight and understanding into ourselves (Livo & Rietz, 1986, p. 5).



Reflecting on Marta's moments of vulnerability and on our efforts to make the togetherness of the study palpable, Marta moved naturally into stories of her encounters as a research participant with us as researchers. In these shared narratives, we held the pain, the uncertainty, and the emotions together, cultivating a profound sense of belonging within the research journey.

Thinking narratively with these two threads from Marta's lived experiences across time, place, and situations allowed us to make the relational contours of the research visible. It illuminated how Marta's knowledge and understanding were intertwined with the act of being in relationship, showing that the research was not merely about her, nor about us, but about the space created between us. Her wisdom (as both a social educator and a research participant) invited us to honor the wholeness of our lives in motion, to attend to our shared stories as they emerged, and to recognize that the inquiry was a living, co-composed process that extended beyond any single conversation or moment.

Resonances

Looking back and imagining once again the place Marta would occupy in the children's line after a field trip invites us to reflect on her understanding of "place" and how she experienced it. For her, "place" was never fixed or linear; it was a mode, a landscape, a question, an experience lived within a particular time of life. For us, Marta's notion of place and time revealed how identity and relationships, with oneself, with others, and with the world, are continuously constructed. As Silko (1996) reminds us, our identities are inseparable from our experiences in specific places and from the stories we tell about those experiences. In considering how we cultivated our research relationship, we recognize that Emma and Marta generated two distinct movements through place, each shaping the ways they lived, understood, and connected within their shared inquiry.

For Marta, Emma preferred to engage in research conversations in physically safe spaces, where both felt at ease. Every space where they slowed down and shared a conversation not only revealed something about Marta but also reflected the careful unfolding of their relationship. They could not foresee, predict, or prescribe the spaces Marta chose, yet they learned to recognize and honor them as integral to her life. Living her stories as places to visit or inhabit allowed them, as researchers, to see that certain research spaces require "another language", a language of togetherness. These symbolic places, imbued with uncertainty, demanded a research walk in which mutual vulnerability became the path to authenticity. As Clandinin (2013) reminds us, entering inquiry with an openness to uncertainty allows relationships to renew and deepen alongside those who share the process. After their final research conversation in February 2016, Marta recounted:

You have been walking with me—
together.

I have navigated complexities,
turned them into fruitful tensions.

I need to know:

What have you learned in these two years?

How did it feel, walking alongside all the stories we shared?



(Interim research text from conversation with Marta on March 4, 2016).

We sensed that Marta, like us, was puzzling over and hoping to understand something deeper about our interactions within the research process. As we noted at the outset, narrative inquiry is a relational methodology that relies on reciprocal relationships between researchers and participants. Her questions reminded us that coming to know her stories carried responsibilities: the responsibility to honor her experiences and to ensure she recognized how profoundly we were engaging with her conversations and embodied knowledge.

Looking inward, we realized that walking together taught us the importance of verbally acknowledging our own experiences alongside hers. By sharing with Marta the questions, she had opened for us in our daily lives, as well as the potential educational insights we perceived in our relational process, we deepened the trust we placed in one another. The focus was not simply on recounting what unfolded in the research landscape we were composing, but on attending to what had happened to us as a result of the stories she shared and to the ways in which each of us had begun to compose new stories in our own lives.

The time we spent in conversation could be brief, yet each encounter was total, and the learning process—as well as the “stories lived by” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000)—left a lasting mark on us. As Marta revisited her own stories and allowed them to be her teachers, we gained insight into who we were becoming researchers and educators, and how our relationship carried a cultural heritage. Marta’s way of tending to this heritage was humble and respectful, honoring the stories that others had planted (Okri, 1997). By sharing them, these stories became part of us.

We often wonder what might have happened had she not accepted the invitation to participate in the study. It is likely that the trajectory of Marta and Emma’s relationship would have been different, and they might not have experienced their walking together as a living pedagogy (Huber et al., 2013). In this way, the ongoing creation and recreation of the research relationship became a practice of knowing and thinking alongside each other, woven into the continuous transformation of their lives.

This relational and reflective approach also holds potential for initial teacher education. By engaging teacher candidates in thinking narratively with the experiences of others, particularly through the lens of mutual vulnerability, attentiveness to place, and respect for lived stories, they can develop a deeper appreciation for the relational dimensions of teaching. Such an approach encourages pre-service teachers to recognize how identity, care, and context shape learning environments, fostering an early understanding of pedagogical empathy, ethical attentiveness, and the co-construction of knowledge in educational settings.

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Notas

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³ Butler-Kisber (2002) defines the found poem as a composition from the words spoken by participants during research conversations. These poems helped Emma show something of the wholeness of Marta's ways of being made across time, place, relationships, and situations.