The Method of Empathy-Based Stories as a Tool for Research and Teaching

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Abstract

In this article we describe a qualitative research method, the "Method of Empathy-Based Stories" (MEBS) and ponder its value in classroom teaching. Our research question is as follows: What is MEBS and what are its possible uses in research and teaching? We gathered empathy-based stories written by students (N = 15) and analysed them with thematic analysis. The dominating themes in writings were the threat of climate change and various coping strategies. MEBS allowed students to describe their ways of thinking and acting, and to take part in the discussion. In general, the use of MEBS can generate hypotheses and interpretive horizons and stir questions yet to be asked. The main purpose of using MEBS in qualitative research and in teaching is to inspire qualitative researchers' and research participants' interpretive imagination.

Keywords

MEBS, Method of Empathy-Based Stories, Non-Active Role Playing, Qualitative Research Methods, Teaching

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In this article we describe a qualitative research method, the "Method of Empathy-Based Stories" (MEBS) and ponder its value in classroom teaching. Our research question is as follows: What is MEBS and what are its possible uses in research and teaching? We gathered empathy-based stories written by students (N = 15) and analysed them with thematic analysis. The dominating themes in writings were the threat of climate change and various coping strategies. MEBS allowed students to describe their ways of thinking and acting, and to take part in the discussion. In general, the use of MEBS can generate hypotheses and interpretive horizons and stir questions yet to be asked. The main purpose of using MEBS in qualitative research and in teaching is to inspire qualitative researchers' and research participants' interpretive imagination. Keywords: MEBS, Method of Empathy-Based Stories, Non-Active Role Playing, Qualitative Research Methods, Teaching

"Many only feel confused. The ground shakes, they do not know why and with what. Theirs is a state of anxiety; if it becomes more definite, then it is fear." – Ernst Bloch (1995, p. 3)

"The mission of the social sciences is not to keep a mirror in front of people's face and show them how they look, but to produce ideas and thinking." – Antti Eskola (1984, p. 29)

Introduction

There have been multiple interpretive phases in the history of qualitative research methodology. The focus and scope of qualitative research practices has changed as methodological boundaries of qualitative methods have become blurred and new methodological horizons have opened and closed in the past few decades (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 2000, 2005, 2011, 2018). However, the ethical questions pertaining to context, power and representation have remained crucial methodological issues, especially in research dealing with children or young people (see e.g., Lane, Blank & Jones, 2019). In this article, we introduce and analyse the "Method of Empathy-Based Stories" (MEBS), an innovative qualitative research method. Our aim is to describe and evaluate MEBS as a qualitative research method *and* ponder its value in classroom teaching. In what follows, we argue that the use of MEBS not only produces useful qualitative data in an efficient way, but also lets the participating individuals and researchers use their imagination as part of the research process. In addition, as we want to highlight, the use of MEBS can be integrated into classroom teaching and learning processes.

The development of MEBS began in the early 1980s in the phase of "blurred genres" (see Denzin & Lincoln 2005, pp. 17–18). In this phase, cultural representations and people's

meaning making became the interests of study and more than before, social scientists turned to humanities for alternative methodological models. In a more detailed history, MEBS stems from the methodological crisis debate of the late 1960s and early 1970s in social psychology pertaining to the function and relevance of laboratory experiments particularly popular in the 1960s (Parker, 2015).

One of the more infamous laboratory experiments, based on deception and attacked by opponents of mainstream social psychology, was carried out by Milgram[1] (1963). The study received its reputation–and questionable fame–from its results that seemed to indicate that any person can harm another under the pressure of authority. Since its publication, it has been repeated in various ways (e.g., Doliński et al., 2017), and has been criticized. The mechanistic idea of human beings was questioned (Mixon, 1972, pp. 145–147) and it was suggested that people are active agents who can reason and make decisions (Ginsburg 1979a). In ethical criticism it was stated that people should not be treated badly for the sake of science. Instead of objects of study they ought to become subjects with full human capacities such as history, consciousness and language. Methodological criticism was condensed in the imperative to treat people as human beings in social sciences.

This criticism sparked the search for alternative methods in which research participant's active agency would be respected and considered. One answer was an active role-playing method in which research participants were asked to play certain social situations (Ginsburg, 1979). In the early 1980s Antti Eskola, a Finnish social psychologist, started to develop one version of the role-playing, that of non-active role-playing, or, as it was later called, method of empathy-based stories (MEBS) (Eskola, 1988, 1997)[2]. His primary focus was to develop an *ethical* research method which would consider, value and respect people's activity, thinking and meaning making, and retaining the "logic" of experiments and experimental thinking. (Eskola, 1988, 1999; Wallin, Koro-Ljungberg, & Eskola, 2018.) Since the 1980s, MEBS has established its place among qualitative research methods in several fields of social sciences in Finland (see Wallin et al., 2018)[3].

In these times of injustice there is a need for emancipatory visions that inspire both critical inquiry that will change the world (see Denzin, 2017) and reflective teaching when studying critical issues such as global inequality (see e.g., Andreotti, 2006; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). As we suggest, MEBS is a viable method to study critical issues and futures for it relies on people's ability to *imagine different futures*, use their empathy and place themselves in the unprecedented situations (Ikonen, 2013; Nishimura-Sahi, Wallin, & Eskola, 2017). Thus, MEBS belongs to those research methods that utilizes fiction and in doing so, can reach new audiences and "reach of knowledge generated in an accessible, familiar and less convoluted format than its more traditional methodological counterparts" (Luna, 2015, p. 268). In addition, MEBS usually brings unexpected and new insights into research, sparks researcher's imagination (Wallin et al., 2018) and nourishes *hope* that keeps "our eyes open to all the real possibilities we have in this world but which can only be foreseen by the power of imagination and be carried into effect through action" (Eskola, 1988, pp. 256–261).

In this article, our research question is as follows: What is MEBS and what are its possible uses in research and teaching practices? First, we describe and evaluate MEBS as a

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[1] Participants in the Milgram study believed that the research was about effects of punishment on learning although it was about obedience. The researcher asked participants to give electric shocks to "learners" if the answer was wrong. The revealing result was that most of the participants were ready to give deadly level electric shocks. In reality no electricity was used, and the learners were actors who only assisted the researcher. (Milgram, 1963.)

[2] The method's name, non-active role playing, was used in the beginning as a tribute to earlier role-playing methods (Eskola, 1988, p. 240). Since 1990s the concept MEBS has established its place underlining "empathy" not only as an emotion and but especially as an action (Wallin et al., 2018).

[3] We are also inspired by Eskola's (1988) research work. For years we have also been using MEBS as a teaching method.

qualitative research method and examine its history. Then we describe our research setting and how we collected the qualitative data with MEBS during a geography lesson in an upper secondary school. After that we present the themes from our data: how young people cope with climate change and other threats. In the section that follows we ponder the value of MEBS in classroom teaching in the light of the data. At the end, we present our conclusion.

The History and Basics of MEBS

The basic idea of MEBS is to ask the research participants to write short essays first by picturing themselves in a situation that is described to them in a sheet of paper as a "frame story[4]." Then they are asked to imagine and write how the situation will proceed, or what must have preceded it. As an imitation of the logic of experimental thought, the key idea of MEBS is to vary the frame story in order to reveal *social, political or cultural logics* behind the given theme in question. In the frame story, either the present setting is described and participants are asked to write about how the situation proceeds, or the future setting is described and participants are asked to write about what has happened. (Eskola, 1988.) Participants can also be asked to write how they would act in another person's (target's) situation, or how the other person would act (Wallin et al., 2018).

In principle, the study of variation with respect to one factor – or "variable" – in the frame story "gives the researcher an opportunity to examine how this variation affects the respondents' perceptions" (Nishimura-Sahi et al., 2017, p. 99). But in practice, however, the control of variables in the frame stories, "in the sense that experimental psychologist talk about control, is quite simply impossible" (Eskola, 1988, p. 242), for the stories MEBS produces and uses, that is, meanings, are not controllable. Thus, the whole idea of experimental logic in MEBS needs to be taken as a metaphor and think MEBS as a *heuristic instrument* inspiring its users to cultivate their sociological and pedagogical imagination (see also Eskola, 1988). As Eskola (1988) further claims, the people giving their written replies to the different frame stories are psychologically different people because these different frame stories have their own "logic" that guides the writing and opens up horizons of imagination in unpredictable directions.

MEBS is grounded in constructivist and relational epistemologies in which the significance of context and time-bound reality are considered (Wallin et al., 2018). The methodological idea behind MEBS is encapsulated in Eskola's "realistic paradigm for the study of human action" (Table 1). However, "realism" in the name of the paradigm does not refer to scientific realism. Instead, as Eskola told us (in a private discussion August 1, 2018 shortly before his death), he decided to use that name to implicate that the paradigm he was developing was more realistic than the older, behaviouristic stimulus–response model, or even its revisited version, the stimulus–organism–response model. However, he did not want to question the laws of nature or social rules and norms but to define them as constants that people can take into account in their decision-making and actively influencing their surroundings (Eskola, 1999).

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[4] As well as frame stories (e.g., Nishimura-Sahi et al., 2017; Wallin et al., 2018) those beginnings of stories have been called scripts (Eskola, 1999; Ginsburg, 1979b), introductory scripts (Wallin et al., 2018) and orientation texts (Eskola, 1988).

Table 1. Realistic paradigm for the study of human action. Adapted: A. Eskola, 1999, p. 111.

In the activity the actor	takes into account, according to this on that logic, that	if X, then Y _____ = law, rule

Table 1 shows how laws and rules influence in people's lives, but they do not determine people's activity–people "take them into account on the basis of some form of logic". The laws and rules can be natural laws as well as social norms, but the important point is that they do not determine people's activity. The law or rule could be, for example, that food sold in supermarkets contains additives that are absorbed by the body and could possibly cause health problems during later years. However, the actor can reason that in different ways. The actor can reason either "life is dangerous in any case" or "the most important thing in life is health". In the first case the actor may end up eating food sold in supermarkets. In the second case, the actor may move to the countryside and start to farm food by using biodynamic methods. The actors cannot escape the law or rule but to a certain extent has an opportunity to choose how that effect impacts them (Eskola, 1999).

In one of the early experiments with the MEBS, Eskola was interested in studying what people considered to be threats and fears in the world. He wanted to know if there was "a permanent structure or logic underlying" in them. He developed the frame stories that resembled participants' life worlds and occupation. The MEBS stories were collected from groups such as librarians, adult educators and sport managers and coaches. Among sports people, the varying "variable" was organizing the Olympics in 1996. In one version, the games are due to be held but "after just two days of competition they have to be called off." In the second version "for several reasons, the Games cannot be arranged. Why? Try to imagine what has happened in the world and in the field of sports over these fourteen years." The third version of the frame story stated that "no one has even thought about arranging the Olympics. What has happened in the world?" In the fourth version the Olympics "are arranged and everything goes excellently. World records are broken, there are no disputes whatsoever. What has happened in the world over these fourteen years?" (Eskola, 1988, pp. 291–293.)

Eskola found out that regardless of their occupation and the respective frame story, there was a three-part "threat logic" in the respondents' written stories. The threats were either born "*suddenly* and *from the outside*" (e.g., "because World War III had broken out, because of a major nuclear accident") or slowly creeping in and threatening the event from within (e.g., doping has infiltrated sports), or were developed from "*the inner developmental logic*" (e.g., "athletes have already reached the limits of human performance"; Eskola, 1988, pp. 294–295).

It has been noticed in using MEBS that a shorter and more general frame story usually works better than a longer one (Wallin et al., 2018). For example, in a study focused on the dyadic trust development and dynamics in leader–follower relationship the varying factors were the quality of action (building / breaking) and gender of the leader (male / female), and the following frame story was used: "Imagine that you are working as a summer trainee accounting assistant at a local company. Marketing manager Mr. Peter Snowhill has behaved in a trust building manner toward you. Describe what happens" (Ikonen, 2013, p. 21, pp. 85–86, p. 137).

The use of MEBS is time efficient. Usually it takes only 15–20 minutes for the participants to write their MEBS stories, but it is good to reserve about 30 minutes for writing so that everyone has the opportunity to write without a rush (Eskola, 1988; Nishimura-Sahi et al., 2017; Särkelä & Suoranta, 2016; Wallin et al., 2018). In addition to classroom or other in-

person setting, the stories can be collected via email or social media (Wallin et al., 2018, p. 5–6).

The stories are usually rich in their meanings. It has been suggested that ten or so MEBS stories per frame story are enough to reach a saturation point after which there is no need for more stories. "Saturation point" refers to a point at which the MEBS stories begin to repeat themselves and their basic meanings are revealed. (Eskola, 1988; Nishimura-Sahi et al., 2017; Wallin et al., 2018.) Usually participants are asked to write one MEBS story to ensure the quality of the data (Wallin et al. 2018). The exception to the rule is, for example, Posti-Ahokas's (2013) study in which the participants were asked to write two MEBS stories based on two different frame stories.

The first author is working as a geography teacher in Finnish upper secondary school and the second author is Professor of Adult Education at the university level who has experienced with MEBS since 1990s. As teachers we both are interested in studying how MEBS can be applied to our teaching and at the same time as a tool for gathering qualitative data. Thus our aim was to combine methodological and pedagogical interests, and provide the students in upper secondary school an opportunity to develop their social imagination.

Collecting Qualitative Data with MEBS

We collected MEBS stories from 15–18 years old students in upper secondary school in the Helsinki area, Finland, during the autumn semester 2018 as part of their geography course "The World in Change" in order to find out how they interpret today's world. According to the Finnish National Core Curriculum[5], this is the only compulsory course in geography in Finnish upper secondary schools. It familiarizes students with natural and environmental risks, and questions of global development (see Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). All the students participated in MEBS writing as part of their lesson activity, and fifteen of them decided voluntarily that their stories could be used as our research material. These students gave research permit with their own and their parents' signatures. No background information was asked from the students. This is an established practice that ensures participants' *anonymity* in MEBS (Ikonen, 2013) and highlights the fact that in MEBS the research interest is not in individuals but in their sense- and meaning-making.

One of us (first author) participated the first lesson of the course and ran the task with the teacher of the course. The students were given a general introduction to MEBS. They were told that MEBS is a writing method that may allow us to get know something about people's thoughts, ways of thinking and actions in certain situations. They were asked to use their imagination and empathize with the situation in the frame story. It was underlined that MEBS was not a test, and there were no wrong answers. The students had 30 minutes to write their stories followed by a discussion based on the theme of the frame story.

After the introduction each student got an A4 page with one of the following frame stories printed on it (in the papers that were distributed, there were no italics as in here to address the differences).

> An upper secondary school student read a well-known writer's interview where the writer said the world is upside down and no one knows how things are and in what direction they change. The student *started to think about it*. Empathize with the student and write a short story about *why the student started to think about what the writer said*.

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[5] In Finland all primary and secondary schools follow the same National Core Curriculum, a document which gives general frames of educational contents and pedagogy, and is negotiated by many concerned parties including educational experts in educational administration, universities and schools.

> [...] The student *agreed*. Empathize with the student and write a short story about *why   the   student   agreed   with   the   writer.*

> [...] The student *disagreed*. Empathize with the student and write a short story about *why   the   student   disagreed   with   the   writer.*

> [...] The student *started to think about it and decided to act*. Empathize with the student and write a short story about *what kind of action the student started*.

The frame stories were designed in the light of our research questions and ensured that there was only one variable in the frame story (cf. Wallin et al., 2018).

During the lesson an ethical aspect to consider was the possible emotional stress and cognitive dissonance that MEBS writing could cause (see Eskola, 1988)[6]. In order to avoid the possible emotional stress and cognitive dissonance among the students, resulting from our rather dystopian frame stories, the theme of hope was brought up in the classroom discussion after the writing. In doing so, we tried to balance the frame story's assumed pessimism.

After the collection of the material, the students' writings were combined in a single file (10 pages, Times New Roman, 12 point, space 1.5) and every piece of writing was numbered from 01 to 15. MEBS produces flexible textual material for analysis and there are many options to analyze MEBS stories as the repertoire of approaches and techniques used in qualitative analysis are diverse and nuanced (see Flick, 2014; Janesick, 2016). Although the opportunities for the analysis of the MEBS stories are many, the basic alternatives are as follows: theory-driven analysis, imaginative analysis, and thematic analysis. In the theory-driven analysis a researcher uses a theory or a methodological viewpoint (e.g., discourse analysis, conversational analysis) through which one filters the MEBS stories. In the imaginative analysis, MEBS stories are fuel for thought, a reflective surface to a researcher's sociological imagination with which one interacts. The imaginative analysis can result in multiple forms of experimental and critical interpretations of the data (see e.g., Denzin, 1997; 2009; Jacobsen, Drake, Keohane, & Petersen, 2014). In the thematic analysis a researcher is interested in finding and organizing the MEBS stories into themes that encapsulate the essential meanings in relation to a research interest. Often the aim of thematic analysis is to organize the qualitative material for some practical purposes, as in our case.

For the purposes of writing about MEBS as a research method *and* using MEBS stories in the classroom we chose a basic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules 2017; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Brown, 2017). In its practicality it fits well for the analysis of MEBS stories as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis comes close to qualitative content analysis in that both help to reduce the analyzed material and require "the researcher to focus on selected aspects of meaning, namely those aspects that relate to the overall research question" (Schreier, 2014, p. 170). When reading the texts, we concentrated on entities in the way Chenail (2012a) has underlined: the aim of our analysis was to find meaningful parts and elements from the MEBS stories. Without disturbing the quality of the data, we first reduced the amount of written data to smaller proportions and pieces that were easier to handle and understand. Then we developed two main themes and several sub-themes

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[6] Eskola describes an experiment in which his student collected data from her volleyball team members. The team was doing well in the national league and the next match was supposed to be an easy one to win. The student asked her teammates to imagine that they would lose the next game. Writing a MEBS story about losing was not easy for players but when the next game came the team lost it. The incident sparked a discussion: did MEBS affect the players psychologically? (Eskola, 1988.)

from the empirical data without forgetting that our analysis was influenced by the theoretical discussions pertaining to the turbulent world (see Bauman, 1995, 2000; Beck, 1992, 2009). In sum, we constructed our themes by separating and connecting the qualitative data and searching theoretical links (cf. Belotto 2018; Chenail, 2012b).

One of us (first author) returned to the classroom with our raw analysis and discussed it with the students who wrote their interpretations of the state of the world. Their views were of great help in finalizing the thematic analysis which had an *educational purpose* from the beginning (see Freire, 1993). In principle, power differences could be levelled off in research as well as in society by choices that support the participation of all (Grant 2017; Holm & Lehtomäki 2017). However, despite the students' participation they were still unequal partners for we (the researchers) were in the driver's seat in deciding on the methodological choices and conducting the analysis.

Analysis of MEBS stories: How to Cope with Climate Change and other Threats

In this section we present the MEBS stories written by the students. In our analysis we formed two main themes from the data: young people's observations about the world, and their coping strategies. Both themes include several sub-themes. We divided the first main theme into four sub-themes and named them as follows: climate change, power elite, confusion, and the options provided by formal and informal learning. In the second main theme we constructed five sub-themes: knowing, the propaganda machine, building one's own views, knowledge-based hope, and small environmental acts[7].

Young People's Observations About the World

Climate Change as the Most Serious Threat. Young people seemed to be very aware about climate change as part of the environmental and human crisis: "At the moment, we were inevitably heading towards climate change, which will cause terrible problems on earth, such as refugees, droughts and extinction of animals" (10).

Climate change was mentioned in most of the writings and described as the most serious threat. It seems to be one of those "laws or rules" no one can escape today (cf. Eskola, 1999). In addition, its causes and consequences were brought up, and it was connected also to other risks. Wars, poverty and inequality were other problems people are facing. Also it was mentioned how people are in different positions in facing the risks; the frame story's writer and upper secondary school student are alive, so they are not the ones that suffer most.

Power Elite (and Parents) Has the Power. Young people underlined that most of the world's problems are caused by elite:

> Most of the chaos of our lives is caused by human kind. But no one who is 17-year-old can cause tension between countries. So who are the responsible ones? [...] The privileged people in congresses and governments. [...] majority of the people in the American Congress have been males, and many of them has the wealth of millions. (08)

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[7] In Finnish there is only one third pronoun (*hän*) and it does not include the sex or gender of the person. We did not bring it up in the frame story and neither did any of the students, so when needed, we use the pronoun "one."

Power was especially connected to politics and wealth, but also to sex and color. According to young people the most powerful people are in the White House. Also, they described how the power should also mean responsibility. However, young people wrote how they cannot call powerful people to convince them about the danger of climate change. On a smaller scale, it was brought up that at young age, you do not always have power even in your family to change things – when you cannot change the habits of your parents, how could you influence the world.

Confusion. Young people were confused – what is the world like and how it is going to be:

> My head is as confused as the world at the moment, and I do not know what to say or how to react. The world's peace and living conditions are literally at stake, and most obviously no one knows how this will end. (03)

Confusion was connected to students' own life, the state of the world and the reliability of information. An element related to formal school was final exams:

> The study advisor wants to know if I will participate in the final exams during the autumn. I do not know. I do not have enough courses from any subject. Maybe physics, but I took it just because everyone said it is really useful and it gives you lots of points when applying in the university. But I do not think I am good enough to do A-levels in physics. (06)

Final exams clearly caused pressure and caused confusion for young people when they were thinking about their future and the significance of final exams related to options in education.

Possibilities of Formal and Informal Learning. The role of knowledge, whether it is formal or informal, was appreciated by young people:

> Before [...] teaching methods were not very diverse. People were not taught that much about a number of issues, such as global affairs, world's history and its future. [...] Since there has been Internet people have been able to read various sources of information on the Internet [...] and how we see things different. Even you can share your own opinion with the world and raise the debate. (11)

Together with the development of the schools, the opportunities provided by the internet were raised. The internet allows people to search for the knowledge and various opinions, but also to share one's own view[8]. The truth and opinions cannot always be separated.

Young People's Coping Strategies

In the world of environmental crisis full of confusing information, we found various coping strategies of young people from their MEBS stories.
Someone Must Know How Things Are. Quite surprisingly, while we wanted to emphasize in the frame story the world being upside down, young people also paid attention to the other aspect in the frame story: that no one knows how things are and will be. "The world is upside down but for sure someone is aware of it" (02) and "for sure the people who

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[8] In geography as well as in various other subjects, research skills are one of the core contents (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). If students used MEBS by themselves, research ethics is an important topic to discuss – and crisis debate from the 1960s may continue in the classroom (c.f. Harré & Secord, 1972; Mixon, 1972).

have a lot of power know exactly what they are doing at the moment, and where the world is going" (09) state how one coping strategy is to believe that someone, at least the power elite, knows how things are. The role of the media was described as a way for ordinary people to reach information from all over the world more than ever before, and that reflects how we all know in a way how things are. However, getting older and further from family might break down the trust that adults know how things are:

> When we were all little and looking up to our parents, we all had immeasurable trust that they know everything, didn't we? I know I did. [...] Yet somehow ironically, as we grow older and older [...] we become increasingly aware that that's far from the truth. We barely know anything really. A closer look at life and it all gets messy and chaotic. [...] Isn't it an illusory coping mechanism for us to think that the world has order and we can predict it? (07)

Despite of the understanding that the coping strategy has its weaknesses, it is important. The following lines underline the similar trust:

> The upper secondary school student feels that one is entering the world from a safe home and school environment. [...] There is the entire world that is like a complex mystery that is revealing little by little. The thing where the student can build up his every day and studies is the idea that things are working in this complex world, and everyone has a place. (04)

Coping strategies were described as being important especially for young people who are losing the safety of families when entering the complex world.

See Behind the Propaganda Machine. When things seem to be going wrong, there must be someone or something that is sowing the seeds of fear and trembling. That is the propaganda machine:

> The propaganda machine pushes out fear and uncertainty to the people, but especially the young people forget it, and they start listening to Elvis [like in the 1950s in the USA]. I guess that today's upper secondary school student just forgets the thing, and after all, it does not bother. At least I would not be bothered, whoever is the powerful person who is claiming certain things. I would live in the moment and look what the future will bring. (01)

Despite the difficult aspects in the world it is possible just to concentrate on one's own life. Things brought up by propaganda machines do not bother upper secondary school students who couldn't care less. The world might be at stake of the political crisis, or at least powerful people's provocation in the social media reflects that. But students forget the propaganda machine and keep on going. They live in a moment and turn the music on.

Building One's Own Views. Everyone who can observe the world, will get hints about what is going on: "In the end, the upper secondary school student decided that he will make his own view about the world based on his own observations" (05).

In the era of confusion, it is not easy to trust the media and separate truth from propaganda. But it is possible to look around and build one's own views. Despite the impossibility of predicting the future, most of the things happening will not surprise you if you pay attention to what is going on.

Keeping Up the Knowledge-based Hope. In between the threats, misery and confusion, young people found various examples that give them hope.

> I believe in the bottom of my heart that the new generation has a lot of potential for developing the world, because I believe [...] technology and knowledge of different perspectives, such as religions, history and many psychological aspects, not to mention cultures – bring understanding to the world. Technology and knowledge make it possible to create new innovations [...] and well-being, besides many other things, will grow significantly. These factors allow generations now and in the future to develop the world, I really believe in peace when general living standards develop. (11)

People's prior knowledge may cause pessimism, but knowledge is connected to action, and that brings hope. Climate change and other worrying facts like the threat of nuclear weapons are on the table. But all the information had to be respected and used. "The world is not upside down if people are aware of things and will do something" (10). The writer of the frame story was criticized about moaning instead of doing things that make a difference.

Small Environmental Acts. Young people brought up how small environmental acts are possible for everyone:

> When parents came home, the upper secondary school student told them one wanted to become a vegetarian. Cultivation and intensive farming put pressure in the world and drive animals to live in extreme conditions. [...] The student fixed an old bicycle with their dad. One would bike to the school when the weather is nice. If it was snowing or raining, the student would travel by bus. [...] The student searched for information about Amnesty, UNICEF and other human rights organizations. One learned how and when it is possible to do charity work to support these organizations. (13)

Environmental aspects were connected to human and animal rights as well. But even in the family circle it is impossible to change family's habits if the others will not get involved:

> At home, I could not stop eating meat if the rest of the family were not involved in the idea. I could suggest that we would prefer vegetarian food. Hmm... what else could I do? Recycle better rubbish, do not buy unnecessary goods, do not waste water ... There are lots of things that can be done to slow down climate change. (12)

The young people's examples might inspire not only the family but also other young people:

> The upper secondary school student told his friends about the interview. They discussed how they could slow down climate change. [...] During the following day, the student's friend suggested whether they should go shopping after the school. The friend remembered the student's story from yesterday and suggested that they would go to the second hand shop for a change. Neither of them had been "shopping" at second hand store but the idea turned out to be really good. (14)

The ability to inspire others was mentioned but it was seen evident that all the acting is voluntary. Also, it was brought up how environmental acts are not sacrifices but, for example,

second hand clothes can even be treasures. Climate change is a phenomenon – a "hard" fact of reality – that cannot be wished away. In the MEBS stories written by students it was brought out that even though the climate change is an undeniable fact, people can still voluntarily choose how they react (cf. Eskola, 1999).

MEBS Connecting Students' Thoughts and Teaching

As mentioned, the first author brought the preliminary analysis back into the classroom for a discussion with the students who wrote MEBS stories as part of the geography course. When shifting from analysis of MEBS stories to teaching practice, the question is, how to use MEBS in the classroom. We claim that using MEBS in teaching resembles the first stage of Freire's (1993) search for "generative themes." Freire suggested that educators need to know their students, and learn how they see and interpret the world. Thus, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he developed a participatory field work technique to collect the words people described and used in their daily lives and other information about their living conditions. These observations formed generative themes which were coded and used as building blocks of a "thematic universe" of the people. As Freire writes: "The task of a dialogical teacher (...) is to "re-present" that universe to the people from whom she or he first received it – and represent it not as a lecture, but as a problem." (Freire, 1993, p. 90.) In this way, Freire thinks, critical consciousness and reflection can eventually come to existence.

Bringing the thematic analysis back to the students who had generated the MEBS stories in the first place enabled the students to reflect on their own ideas and the studied questions. In this manner it was possible to follow Freire's – and Eskola's – maxim that researchers and participants should be equal partners in research and learning (see also Denzin, 2017; Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2012). The students were inspired in reflecting on their MEBS stories aloud in the classroom and they were not treated as passive receivers of information, but active participants in creating both their teaching material and learning environment. In our case, we made the thematic analysis ourselves, but nothing prevents us from doing it with the students, or even by the students themselves who could thus practice their *own research skills*[8]. When research is done with children or young people, contextual and relational issues of power dynamics and representation of student voice cannot be masked by using concepts like "co-researcher" (Lane et al., 2019).

MEBS was used as a *teaching method* that encourages every student to take part in *discussions*. Every student had a piece of writing to discuss, and the discussion was eased by offering students ready topics to start with. Students were told that all the writings were excellent and appreciated. The discussion in small groups was vivid and worked well with the whole class. In the discussions students mentioned that it was easy to think and write about negative aspects of the world[9] – that is in line with results from previous MEBS studies (e.g., Eskola, 1988; Särkelä & Suoranta, 2016). However, it was more difficult to try to imagine positive sides or coping strategies for living in the chaotic world. One reason for the difficulty could be the frame stories themselves. In discussions students pointed out that if their frame story had been different, their stories might have been different too.

What is noteworthy in the students' MEBS stories is that their awareness of environmental issues resembles the consensus of the scientific community, the press, and the public. As Rosling, Rosling and Rosling Rönnlund (2018) have pointed out, relating to climate

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[9] It is interesting which themes were present or absent in certain contexts. For example, action was always mentioned if it was part of a frame story, but it was also brought out without asking. Confusion was present in the MEBS stories regardless of its presence in the frame story.

change, scientific results have reached the public at short notice. In contrast, nuclear threats or questions of peace are barely mentioned in the MEBS stories' themes; they are not among the topics of public debate. It seems as if only the climate question has really broken into our collective mind and is recognized better than any other threat in today's world even though nuclear war is one of the biggest global threats at present (Patomäki, 2018).

As urgent as the issues of climate change are, the task of a critical educator is also to try to broaden the students' scope of risk consciousness, and at the same time stay as constructive and solution-oriented as possible. In our view, MEBS helps educators to be constructive, because the MEBS stories provide hints about those *possible ways of thinking and action* – different cultural, social and political logics as the students see them (cf. Eskola, 1988; Nishimura-Sahi et al., 2017; Wallin et al., 2018). In this respect, the MEBS stories represent an array of "real utopias" which are not-yet realized alternatives of the state of events, but which are nevertheless achievable. As critical teachers we take the following words of Erik Olin Wright (2012, p. 3) into our hearts: "A real utopian holds on to emancipatory ideals without embarrassment or cynicism but remains fully cognizant of the deep complexities and contradictions of realizing those ideals".

This approach of real utopianism is desperately needed when the questions of power are dealt with in the classroom. The way the students described the global elite's power versus ordinary people's restricted opportunities to act in an environmentally sustainable manner demands that a teacher recognizes, first, how power works and, second, how is it possible to transform power and act politically in an effective way. The teacher must be able to distinguish between big (agreements between nation states) and small (individual-based) solutions, but not to neglect either. The macro-structures and the everyday micro-dynamics of our lives should be acknowledged as separate spheres, and yet it is important to keep both in mind when dealing with global issues. In other words, it is important to realize that global threats need to be challenged at many levels, not only by individual choices but also in seeking transnational treaties (see e.g., Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2009). This is one option to ease the students' cognitive-moral anguish. Thus Andreotti (2006, p. 47) has a point when she argues that there is a need for understanding that "we are all part of the problem and part of the solution" instead of thinking that only some people – politicians, the power elite – are part of the problem and others' role is just to put pressure to the structures. As we write this a 16-year old Swede, Greta Thunberg, has took the lead in proving that young people matter in fighting against climate change, and that they have the power to act (Thunberg, 2019).

Information about students' ways of thinking – how the world is and how to cope with it – is valuable in many ways for educators. The information given by MEBS can be used to evaluate and develop teaching. The use of MEBS in the classroom is a valuable and effective way for an educator to get to know what students already know. Educators can take their expressed ideas into account when planning the lessons, and they can be meaningful starting points for teaching and studying. This sort of MEBS-mediated dialogue builds a *connection between the students' living world and the contents studied*. It can ease students' climate anxiety and motivate them to get involved in studying the subjects. The connections between classroom teaching and climate activism should also be encouraged.

All the logics described in the writings can be seen to be quite conventional. That reminds us how important it is for us as teachers to stimulate students *to think differently,* and imagine different possible developments, even futures (cf. Eskola, 1988; Andreotti, 2006). MEBS is helpful in this task and its use supports the general aim set in the Finnish National Core Curriculum: to develop a student's own relationship with the past and look into the future (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). By using MEBS, a teacher can create opportunities for an experimental attitude and open up spaces of freedom, not-yet realized, but already in the world as potentials. By "not-yet" we refer to something which is uncertain and

unsolved, but which, for that very reason, already exists in the social world as possible in the form of anticipation. "Not-yet" means that there are things to be changed "through work and concretely mediated action," that is, "*militant optimism,*" and that the social world as a process is always in the state of openness and imperfection (Bloch, 1995; Moisio & Suoranta, 2007).

When writing MEBS stories, all the participants *put themselves in the place of another person*. By using MEBS that ability can be practiced, although writing the stories will not always evoke empathetic feelings (cf. Wallin et al., 2018). The ability to be empathic and act empathically are highlighted in the Finnish National Core Curriculum: "General knowledge and ability mean that individuals and communities are capable of making decisions with the help of ethical reflection, putting themselves in the place of another person, and consideration based knowledge" (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016, pp. 12–13).

Conclusion

In this article we have described and evaluated MEBS as a qualitative research method and pondered the options it provides and its value in classroom teaching. MEBS inspired us to use our sociological imagination and connect it with classroom teaching. The students' MEBS stories enabled us to get to know how they see the world now. In addition to the threat of climate change as the dominating theme in students' MEBS stories, they described various coping strategies in the current world of uncertainties. Their main message seemed to be that they can still act as critical change agents in saving the planet. The use of MEBS in the classroom helped in planning and directing teaching and encouraged students to participate in the classroom discussions.

The validity of the data students produced was discussed with them: how trustworthy and prevalent MEBS stories are, and how MEBS is criticized about producing stereotypes. It was pointed out that MEBS is not meant to produce statistically-generalizable results, but culturally-shared meanings and useful insights to the topic (Nishimura-Sahi et al., 2017; Posti-Ahokas, 2013; Wallin et al., 2018) or sequences of events that have not yet happened but which could happen. MEBS stories may not be useful as descriptive facts but are useful in developing insights and new theories as well as nurturing researchers' and participants' often sluggish thinking, and encouraging them to reflect on their experiences, theoretical resources and sociological imagination (Eskola, 1988). The same holds true in teaching as hooks states: "Since much of the work in a given course is the sharing of facts and information it is easy to discount the role of imagination. And yet what we cannot imagine cannot come into being." (hooks, 2010, p. 59.) Hooks uses spontaneously written paragraphs to stir her students' collective imagination. Correspondingly MEBS can be applied in the classroom "to lead us to new thought and more engaging ways of knowing" (hooks, 2010, p. 62).

In MEBS participants as research partners can take the role of another person and make their voices heard through it. Sometimes, when dealing with young people or difficult topics, role taking can be less painful than writing and performing in one's own name. This is an ethical question which should be taken seriously in every qualitative research setting. Instead of asking students to write MEBS stories, they can also be asked to explain – or perform – how they imagine the described situation (cf. Eskola, 1988). In Ginsburg's (1979b, p. 127) research "the scenario to which an audience responds may be a live performance, a videotape or ciné film, still photographs, or a written description." MEBS can be combined with other active teaching methods and performance pedagogies such active role-playing, theater, performances, discussions, or future workshops.

As "[q]ualitative research exists in this time of global uncertainty" (Denzin, Lincoln & Giardina, 2006, p. 769) we want to see the use of MEBS as part of the ongoing development of global critical research and teaching agenda in which it is believed that "[c]ritical,

interpretive qualitative research creates the power for positive, ethical, communitarian change" (Denzin, Lincoln, & Giardina, 2006, p. 779). As we continue to ponder the uses of MEBS we wholeheartedly agree that all qualitative researchers should unite and "create a safe space where writers, teachers, and students are willing to take risks, to move back and forth between the personal and the political, the biographical and the historical" (Denzin, 2015, p. 46; see also Denzin, 2010). MEBS is among those research and teaching tools which can be used for that urgent ethico-methodological purpose.

As we started our research and teaching experiment, we had an idea of the world being upside down–and in their writings students agreed to a great extent–but what we did not anticipate was our students' resourceful and imaginative coping or even survival strategies. It was encouraging and hopeful that the students wanted to come along and started to use their imagination. Their enthusiasm and seriousness were the most important lessons we learnt in our MEBS sessions. It was heartening to see how courageously the students used their imagination in a world in which it is almost forbidden to imagine. Their message was that a new ecologically and socially just world is both viable and necessary for survival. This brings us to the main lesson we learnt during the research process: We claim that the principal purposes of using MEBS in qualitative research and teaching is to *inspire and provoke qualitative researchers' and research participants' interpretive imagination*.

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