



The storycrafting method: A systematic review

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ABSTRACT: In most cultures, telling and listening to stories is an important part of childhood and adulthood. Storycrafting is one way of producing stories by giving the storytellers (children) the possibility to freely express themselves. The method was developed focusing on giving children extended tools for participative and democratic dialog with adults. Our systematic review aims to describe how the storycrafting method has been used in research and the extent of method evaluation. A PRISMA flow chart is presented, demonstrating the search process and the seven (7) articles meeting our search criteria after searching the following databases: Academic Search Complete, PsycINFO, Cinahl, Web of Science, and ERIC. The results conclude that the body of research in the field of storycrafting is limited and versatile. The study provides an overview of the conducted studies and suggestions for further research are discussed.

Keywords: *storycrafting, children's narrative, child perspective, storytelling*

Introduction

In the last decades, there has been an ongoing discussion on the importance of children's participation and how to define participation, what it means, and how it is implemented in practice (Heiskanen et al., 2021). Based on the United Nations General Assembly's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), children have a right to express themselves, hold opinions, and be heard and understood for the unique individuals they are. For achieving participation there is a need for sufficient acknowledgment of children's contribution to society, and their daily attempts to create mutually reciprocal

relationships with others (Horgan et al., 2017). These attempts are ways for children to actively engage themselves, reflect, and explore together with others, and are considered effective ways of learning (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2014a, 2014b; 2022; Rogoff et al., 2018; Säljö, 2014).

One prominent part of children's learning is communication. Studies regarding different ways of supporting language development often focus on specific activities in the daily routine in early childhood education and care [ECEC] (Cárdenas et al., 2020; Degotardi et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2019). Book reading, storytelling, and children's narratives are common daily activities in ECEC and are seen as good ways of supporting children's language (Cárdenas et al., 2020; Deshmukh et al., 2019; Maureen et al., 2020, 2021; Stadler & Ward, 2005). Stories are more than gaining children's attention or just for relaxation (Maureen et al., 2020, 2021).

The impact of stories appears to be underestimated in many contexts. Telling stories helps lay the foundation for cognitive skills such as cause-effect relationships, social skills, and literacy, as well as helping the children to get their voices heard (Puroila et al., 2012; Stadler & Ward, 2005; Veneziano & Nicolopoulou, 2019). 'Although – or maybe because – young children's narratives are often fragmented, disorganized and multifaceted, they offer a rich ground for a researcher to learn from children's experiences and their life-world' (Puroila et al., 2012, p. 202). Storycrafting is a Finnish method developed for constructing more equal and interactive relations between professionals and children (Karlsson, 2013; Lastikka & Karlsson, 2022; Riihelä, 1991). The storycrafting method was initially developed as a complement to structured tests to help with the understanding and listening to children's thoughts, reasoning, and descriptions of their lived experiences as they describe them (Riihelä, 1991). The storycrafting method includes five essential stages: telling the story, writing down the story in presence of the child, reading the written story aloud, incorporating the narrator's possible corrections, and reading the story aloud to other listeners or publishing it with the narrator's approval (Karlsson, 2013; Lastikka & Karlsson, 2022). Storycrafting has been practiced for 30 years and it is of public interest to examine the range of use of storycrafting as a method.

The storycrafting method

The storycrafting method was created and first developed by Riihelä (1991, 1996) within several projects connected to childcare and school settings, and with a focus on giving children extended tools for participative and democratic dialog with adults. Riihelä (1991) originally aimed to find new approaches to making the relationship between the child and school psychologist less structured and more open for the child's own thoughts and descriptions of her or his own life. Through different projects, Riihelä found the

methods of interviewing children too structured and decided to experiment with more inclusive methods, guaranteeing children rights and chances to express their points of view in their very own way (Karlsson, 2013; Riihelä, 1991). The project most comprehensively developing the method, including giving it the name “storycrafting”, was the Storyride network project. It started in Finland in 1995, coordinated by the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare [STAKES].

Storycrafting is not to be mixed up or equated with storytelling. Even though there are similarities between storycrafting and traditional storytelling, there are distinct differences between these two terms as well (Riihelä, 2002, 2003). Both terms are connected to the art of telling and listening, however, storycrafting follows a clear methodology. Its focus lies on the documentation of the story as correctly and dynamically as possible to enable it to be accurately retold and saved. There is no evaluation of the content of the story nor the way it is dictated (Riihelä, 2002). Furthermore, storycrafting has clear guidelines for implementation. Storycrafting is performed in a series of steps (Karlsson, 2013; Riihelä, 1991, 2001). First, the narrator (child) is asked to tell the story. The story is being told without the storycrafter (adult) asking, commenting, or demanding any further explanations from the narrator. The storycrafter writes the story down verbatim, using the narrator’s own words and sentence structure. Thereafter, the storycrafter reads the story out loud and the narrator may initiate some corrections, whereafter the story is incorporated with possible changes. Finally, the storycrafter reads the story out loud to other listeners, forwards it, or publishes it if the narrator gives her or his permission to do so.

There are other methods for investigating children’s narratives, but they are often strictly defined by the researcher, and the children are frequently considered as research objects instead of subjects with their own perspectives (Puroila et al., 2012). For example, the child may be instructed to tell a story based on her or his own experience or a specific theme or situation, to repeat a story, or describe a picture to the researcher (Rutanen, 1999, referred to by Karlsson, 2013). In contradiction to storycrafting, traditionally, methods used for interviewing and interacting with children focus on the adults asking questions. Furthermore, it is important to remember that simply writing down a story is not storycrafting - storycrafting is always based on dialogue, interaction, and the storycrafters’ willingness to genuinely listen to the story and thoughts of the child (Lastikka & Karlsson, 2022). Storycrafting does not intend to direct the children towards answers that adults are anticipating, which by extension risks creating misleading information and the adult missing important facts (Puroila et al., 2012; Riihelä, 1996, 2001). Storycrafting places its focus on the relationship between the attendants of the activity (Riihelä, 2001). When professionals genuinely listen to children during the storycrafting process, children get a feeling of empowerment (Lastikka & Karlsson, 2022)

Storycrafting in practice

As mentioned earlier, there are five stages in the storycrafting method: telling the story, writing down the story in presence of the child, reading the written story aloud, incorporating the narrator's possible corrections, and reading the story aloud to other listeners or publishing it with the narrator's approval (Karlsson, 2013; Lastikka & Karlsson, 2022). These five stages are equally significant since in each stage the story emerges simultaneously between the narrator and the storycrafter. Furthermore, Lastikka and Karlsson (2022) raise elements that are important for achieving reciprocal participation and listening. First, there is the importance of narrating freely, which means that children tell a story of their choice and personnel write it down exactly as it is told, without correcting the story, asking questions, or making suggestions. Secondly, when learning is participatory and active, there are elements of creativity, imagination, learning, and play added to the process. Thirdly, the use of a dialogic nature of the method through active and reciprocal listening includes a shared story and appreciation of children's ways of perceiving their lived experience. Fourthly, being genuinely interested in listening gives children a voice and lets them decide the topic, how, and when they want to tell their story. Finally, the focus is on reciprocal and dialogical listening, which lays on the foundation of everyone having something interesting and crucial to say regardless of qualifications. To summarize, personnel's part in storycrafting is to listen, really listen, write down the story without changing anything in it, and reading it out loud to the narrator and others if they are given permission.

Storycrafting is suitable for all children, including refugees, immigrants, and children with special educational needs, even though most studies are conducted within a majority population (Lastikka & Karlsson, 2022). Through storycrafting, personnel gain a deeper understanding of children's lives, and the atmosphere around storycrafting enables learning from others (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015) and has positive effects on relationships (Lastikka & Karlsson, 2022). As children tend to form a narrative culture of their own, which often invites and finds understanding in other children (Puroila et al., 2012; Riihelä, 2003; Rutanen, 1999), storycrafting might be conducted in groups of children, as well as individually. Furthermore, referring to Riihelä (2001), storycrafting can be used for several purposes and practiced in many different settings, e.g., day-care settings, schools, or health care. Karlsson (2013) proposes that storycrafting may even serve as a research method or facilitate international cooperation. Piipponen and Karlsson (2019, 2021) and Piipponen et al. (2021) use storycrafting for encountering international cooperation.

Aim and research questions

In the current study, we aspired to find out how widely spread the storycrafting method is after three decades of research and practice, and in which fields the method has been studied and evaluated. This knowledge would be significant for future research and implementation of the method.

The aim of the study is, therefore, to depict the scientific evaluation and the range of the use of storycrafting as a method. The following research questions guide the study:

1. To what extent have scientifically evaluated articles about the storycrafting method been published in peer-reviewed journals (Level 1–3 according to the classifications of Finnish Publication Forum [JUFO], 2021) in the years 1991–2021? Where (geographically), and with which target groups have the studies been conducted?
2. For which purposes have the storycrafting method been used in these studies?
3. Has the storycrafting method been critically evaluated in the studies and what are the conclusions of these evaluations?

Materials and methods

Search criteria

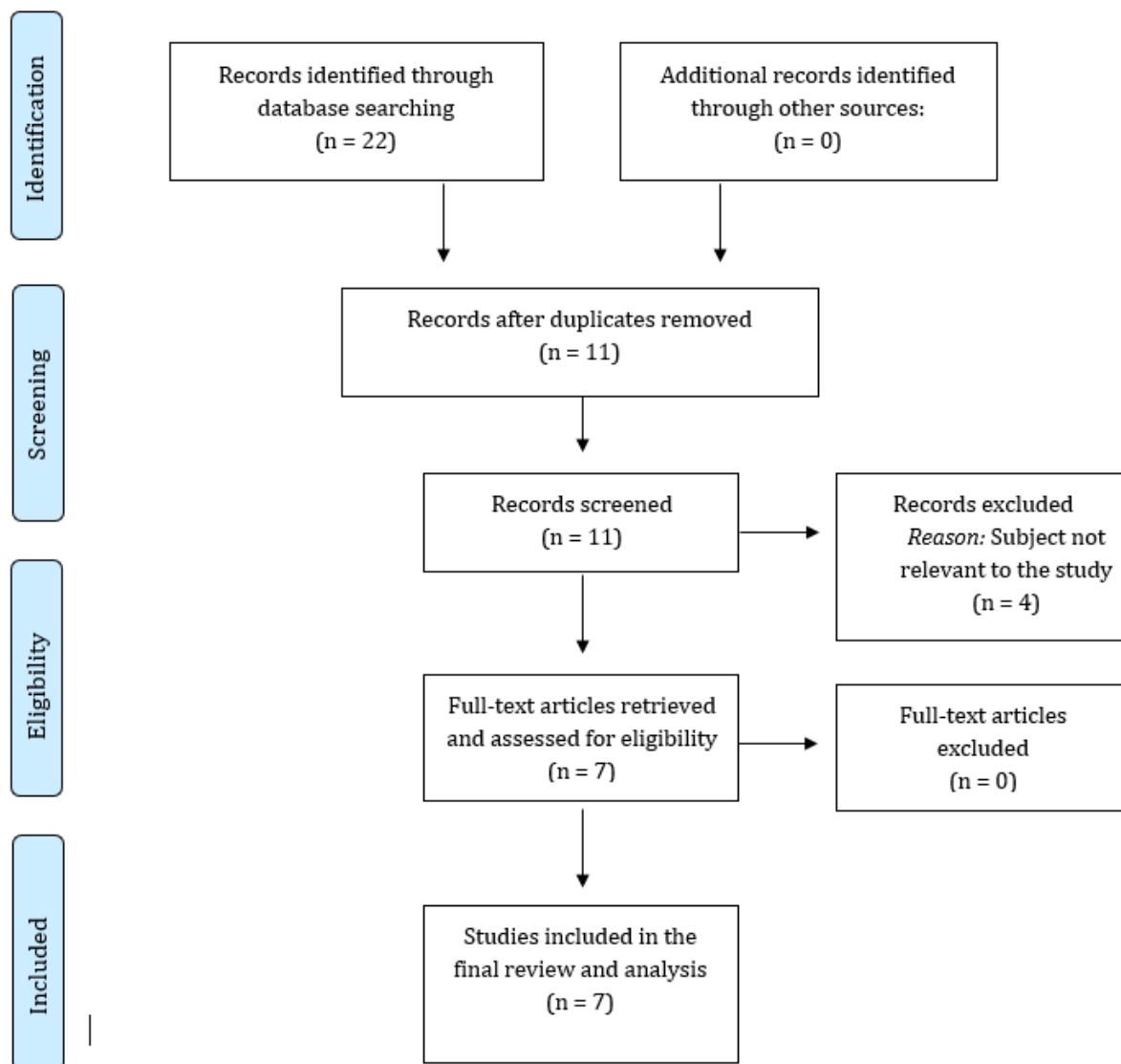
The search terms included all three official translations of the studied concept originally used by Riihelä (Karlsson, 2003; Riihelä, 1991): ‘storycrafting’ (English), ‘sadutus’ (Finnish), and ‘sagotering’ (Swedish). The time frame set for the conducted studies was from the year 1991, when the storycrafting method was first mentioned in publications (Riihelä, 1991), through June 2021. The age span was kept open to ensure all requested studies would be included. Based on the Finnish scientific community forum’s classification to support high quality in the assessment of academic research [JUFO] (2021), the authors agreed on including only articles published in journals reaching at least JUFO level 1. This ensured the journal had met the criteria for, at a minimum, the basic level of scientific quality determined by the expert panels. No further limitations were performed.

Search procedure

The systematic review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Analyses [PRISMA] guidelines (Page et al., 2021). Journal publications were identified by searching the following databases: PsycINFO (APA), Academic Search Complete (EBSCO),

CINAHL Complete (EBSCO), ERIC, and Web of Science (Clarivate Analytics). The articles were searched in full-text and the Boolean operator OR was used to separate the search terms. The authors agreed on which articles were to continue to the full-text screening by ruling out publications using the word storycrafting in irrelevant contexts, thus not referring to the storycrafting method developed by Riihelä (1991). In addition, we chose to search the university portal of the developers of the storycrafting method, Riihelä and Karlsson, University of Helsinki, for possible further publications. Subsequently, the search results were transferred into separate folders in Refworks and compared for duplicates. The chosen articles' reference lists were eventually screened by title, to make sure the search was comprehensive. The search procedure was conducted in February-July 2021. A flow diagram was created to present all steps of the process (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 PRISMA Flow diagram of search results



Ethical considerations

Even though researchers conducting a systematic review use publicly accessible documents as evidence, ethical considerations of how different stakeholders' interests are represented in a research review have become important. This mostly because systematic reviews have become more used in influencing policy, practice, and public perception (Suri, 2020). Furthermore, it is important to guarantee that no studies with ethical insufficiencies are included in the study (Vergnes et al., 2010). The present study follows the research ethics principles in Finland (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity [TENK], 2019). Each study was checked for ethical insufficiencies before being included in the results, and the studies included in the review are referred to properly in all parts of the text.

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Results

In total, seven (7) peer-reviewed articles between the years 1991 and June of 2021 met our search criteria. The PRISMA flow chart (Figure 1) illustrates the inclusion and exclusion process. The results of the searches display few scientific articles in which the term storycrafting is mentioned. Except for the seven (7) articles detected on the requested topic, the current study revealed three (3) articles in which the term was used without any reference to the storycrafting method, but in the contexts of news writing, software development, and puppetry (Huard, 2000; Mueller, 2006; Yilmaz, 2016). However, one (1) of the excluded sources consisted of a conference paper, referring to a study using the storycrafting method (Hyvönen & Juujärvi, 2004). Unfortunately, the ongoing study referred to in the conference paper was not detected in any of the database searches.

The seven (7) articles included in the final analysis (see Table 1) were published in journals covering the area of education (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019, 2021), early childhood education (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015; Riihelä, 2002), nursing (Takatalo et al., 2016), interdisciplinary childhood studies (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014) and multilingual/multicultural development (Piipponen et al., 2021). The years of publication ranged from 2002 to 2021. However, from 2003 to 2013, no published studies were found. All included studies were, at least partly, conducted on Finnish children. Two studies included school children in Belgium (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2021; Piipponen et al., 2021), two included a Scottish school (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019; Piipponen et al., 2021), and one reported including an 'international European school' (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019). The age of the children varied between 1 and 12, with one study focusing on ages 1–6 (Riihelä, 2002), two on preschool children aged 6–7 (Aerila & Rönkkö, 2015; Takatalo et al., 2016), one on age 7–8 (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014) one on age 9–10 (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019), and two on age 10–11, with a few 9- and 12-year-olds included (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2021; Piipponen et al., 2021). A majority (5) of the reviewed studies used the storycrafting method as one of several methods of gathering research data. In the study by Riihelä (2002) and Hohti and Karlsson (2014), storycrafting was combined with observations of the children in their daycare (Riihelä, 2002) and classroom (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014) settings. In the studies by Aerila and Rönkkö (2015), Piipponen and Karlsson (2021), and Piipponen et al. (2021), storycrafting was combined with children creating drawings and crafts.

The major themes describing the use of storycrafting as a method

The findings of the reviewed studies indicate the storycrafting method being used in somewhat different research fields (Table 1) and with different outcomes.

TABLE 1 Overview of included articles in the present study

| <i>RESEARCHER/S</i> | <i>YEAR OF PUBLICATION</i> | <i>LOCATION</i> | <i>NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS</i> | <i>AGE OF PARTICIPANTS</i> | <i>USE OF STORYCRAFTING</i> |
|--|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Aerila, J. & Rönkkö, M. | 2015 | Finland | 10 | 6–7 years | The combination of how storycrafting, literature, and aesthetics can promote learning is explored. |
| Hohti, R. & Karlsson, L. | 2014 | Finland | 15 | 7–8 years | Storycrafting is a complement to observations in order to make children's voices heard. |
| Piipponen, O. & Karlsson, L. | 2019 | Finland and Scotland | 98 | 9–11 years | Intercultural meetings between students are promoted through storycrafting. |
| Piipponen, O. & Karlsson, L. | 2021 | Finland and Belgium | 49 | (9) 10–11 (12) years | A mutual narrative culture is created between children during an intercultural storycrafting- and drawing exchange. |
| Piipponen, O., Karlsson, L. & Kantelinen, R. | 2021 | Finland, Belgium, and Scotland | 133 | (9) 10–11 (12) years | The process of how reciprocal encountering is developed between children in Finland, Belgium, and Scotland, through the exchange of stories and drawings, is examined. |
| Riihelä, M. | 2002 | Finland | 20 | 1–6 years | Storycrafting is used to make children's and adults' dialogue more democratic, and to study children's own ways of producing knowledge. |
| Takatalo, M., Axelin, A. & Niela-Vilén, H. | 2016 | Finland | 19 | 6–7 years | The focus is on children perceiving their oral health through storycrafting. |

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The purpose of using storycrafting as a method

Regardless of the included articles in this study being few, the purpose of *why* the researchers have chosen to use storycrafting as a method varies, from supporting the children's learning experience to promoting oral health, and creating mutual understanding in order to cross cultural borders. The studies all have in common describing storycrafting as *a democratic way to produce knowledge*, considering *the child's perspective*.

A democratic way to produce knowledge

Through using the storycrafting method as a central expedient in collecting children's thoughts and collaborative behavior in a daycare setting, Riihelä's (2002) findings show a complex picture of children's communal play and ability to produce knowledge. Storycrafting was chosen partly for being a democratic tool between the children and the adults involved, and partly for accessing the children's own ways of producing knowledge. Piipponen et al. (2021) argue that when teachers value children's contributions instead of evaluating children's stories and drawings, the focus of the exchange shifts towards the process of encountering instead of analyzing the learning products. This aligns with the thoughts of Aerila and Rönkkö (2015) who claim that by supporting different methods for sharing knowledge teachers support children's expressions of knowledge.

In the study of Aerila and Rönkkö (2015), storycrafting was used as part of an art-related learning process, in which anticipatory stories were combined with creating crafts. The researchers argue that storycrafting may be useful in both collecting research material and improving children's literacy. The study indicates that the combined learning process could be beneficial when working with preschool children and especially children with limited writing skills. This aligns with Riihelä (2002), who stated that the storycrafting method is useful for all target groups and has been used with children as young as eight months old.

Consciously taking the child's perspective

Giving the children space and the possibility to freely create their own stories gives them a feeling of being in charge of the process. Riihelä (2002) argues that storycrafting suits everybody irrespective of personality: shy children are encouraged to listen to others' stories first and later tell their own, and lively children find material in the story world with which they can express and entertain their listeners. Hohti and Karlsson (2014) found storycrafting to be an efficient participatory tool for eliciting all children's perspectives. Hohti and Karlsson (2014, p. 558) conclude: "Children's voices are not unitary and complete in themselves, but emergent and contingent on the discursive, social and material/physical resources available." By highlighting the child's perspective in their

findings through quoting extracts as much as possible, Piipponen and Karlsson (2019) bring children's voices to the fore and acknowledge them as knowledgeable partners.

Storycrafting can be used as an effective learning tool if play and imagination are based on children's understanding (Takatalo et al., 2016). Aerila and Rönkkö (2015) claim that teachers can support children's expressions of knowledge by supporting different methods for sharing knowledge. Takatalo et al. (2016) used storycrafting to clarify children's perspectives on their oral health. Based on the stories told in the storycrafting sessions, the authors drew the following conclusions: children are active influencers of their oral health habits, and consequently, methods including play and imagination could be more frequently used in oral health care.

Mutual understanding

The three most recent studies (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019, 2021; Piipponen et al., 2021), used the storycrafting method in intercultural research including school children. In the first study (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019), Finnish and Scottish pupils exchanged stories with pupils from an international European school. The storycrafting method was chosen because of its ability to reduce power differences between the teller and the scribe, and because it "creates an atmosphere where different voices are heard and valued" (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2019, p. 595). The authors' analysis concludes that the storycrafting method offers an alternative approach to intercultural learning by creating mutual, dynamic experiences for the participants. The second study (Piipponen & Karlsson, 2021) examined a storycrafting and drawing exchange between children in Finland and Belgium. The findings exhibit a shared narrative culture among the children indicating that aesthetic and narrative methods could be recommended in intercultural learning. The most recently published study (Piipponen et al., 2021, p. 1) aimed to identify "the process of developing classroom culture that promotes reciprocal intercultural encountering in the primary school" and concluded that this is most likely to be achieved if a democratic, experiential and inclusive approach is supported in the classroom environment. The studies highlight the importance of children being able to create their own stories with their own words. This allows children to explore and test their, and others, way of expressing themselves as well as their sense of humor in an accepted and allowing context.

Critical evaluations of the method

As the outcome evaluations above conclude, all reviewed studies argue that collecting research data through storycrafting was beneficial for their results, and gave their accounts of why the storycrafting method was chosen as a main or combined method. However, the discussion concerning the critical evaluation of the method is limited: the main focus of the studies lies on the exploration of the method rather than on the

evaluation of it. However, Hohti and Karlsson (2014) brought up the issue of the researcher's own expectations tending to color the analysis of the children's stories in discussing whether, how, and which children's voices were being heard. The authors ask if they, as listeners, were able to be conscious of the discourses without having preconceived notions, which aligns with the concern around ethical considerations that Suri (2020) raises.

Discussion

Our findings display that the modest sample of scientific articles describing the use and evaluation of the storycrafting method range between somewhat different fields and age groups, with primary school children being the focus in most of the studies (as demonstrated in Table 1). The reviewed studies were mostly conducted in Finland. Two (2) of the studies included a Scottish school, two (2) included a Belgian school, one (1) included an international school with unspecified location. Five (5) out of seven (7) of the studies were carried out by at least one of the pioneers of the storycrafting method, Riihelä (1) and Karlsson (4).

The purposes of the studies varied. Riihelä (2002) focused on small children as producers of knowledge and as social beings, as Aerila and Rönkkö (2015) focused on children as active learners and creative producers of knowledge. Hohti and Karlsson (2014) used a narrative ethnographical approach where the main purpose was allowing children's voices/perspectives to be heard and analyzing the way of listening to them. Takatalo et al. (2016) also aspired to hear children's viewpoints, and their study differed from the other studies in the systematic review by focusing on a very specific research area – oral health. The common aim of the studies of Hohti and Karlsson (2014) and Takatalo et al. (2016) seems to be closely tied to the one of Riihelä (1991) when first developing the storycrafting method: to offer children useful instruments for creating participative and democratic dialog with adults (Riihelä, 1991). Three studies (Piipponen & Karlsson 2019, 2021; Piipponen et al., 2021) were culture-related and partly connected to each other. Their comprehensive purpose was to investigate how shared narratives influence the encounters between school children from different cultures and to emphasize the importance of community orientation for forming a shared narrative culture. Piipponen et al. (2021) argued that children can find a shared understanding of how to make friends, and for mutual and inclusive relationships, through storycrafting despite the distance or language differences between the groups. All studies in the current review shared the desire to use the storycrafting method as a democratic tool in producing knowledge about the children's world of ideas, all strongly considering the child's perspective, participation and right to express her or his thoughts (in accordance with United Nations General Assembly 1989; Heiskanen et al., 2021).

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The main trustworthiness issues in the preparation phases of a study are identified as the data collection method, sampling strategy, and the selection of a suitable unit of analysis (Elo et al., 2014). Transferability, conformability, and credibility in reporting the results are crucial stages as well. The current systematic review followed the PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021) and TENK (2019) ethical guidelines through the process, thus the results can be seen as trustworthy. However, the number of articles detected based on our search terms were limited. The inclusion of more databases in our searches could possibly have increased the search results. In terms of findings, more geographically spread research and studies comparing the use of storycrafting between nations and cultures would be beneficial in future research. Furthermore, an important issue would be to demonstrate the use of the method with several target groups, as Riihelä (2002) stated the method as useful in working with all children, regardless of features, age or background. The benefits of the method when used, for example, with children in therapy or with children with special needs, would be significant to further investigate. Also, the comparison of the storycrafting method with other methods, e.g., the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2011), would be highly relevant to examine.

The storycrafting method is founded in Finland and has not, according to the research findings, reached much interest in the scientific area elsewhere. The Finnish education system lays a strong foundation for inclusion and participation for all children in daily activities (EDUFI, 2014a, 2014b, 2022). Furthermore, “bedtime stories” is a part of Finland’s living cultural heritage and being identified and documented as part of UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Finnish Heritage Agency, 2023). The strong democratic tradition of giving children a voice (Alasuutari, 2014; Council of Europe 2011, p. 82–86) combined with the tradition of valuing storytelling for children might serve as a foundation for the development of storycrafting as a method, as well as a possible explanation for the overrepresentation of the research concerning storycrafting conducted in Finland.

Conclusions

By presenting the gathered research on the use of storycrafting, this systematic review gives an important understanding for how, when, and for which aims the method has been used so far. The studies included in the review contribute to several important research fields connected to the everyday life of children, their rights and participation, and the importance of storytelling and narratives, especially shared narratives.

The present research concerning storycrafting as method is not critically evaluated by the researchers in the included studies. The limited amount of research available and the distinct focus on theory development limited to Finland implies that generalisations about the outcomes of the method must be avoided at this stage. The review demonstrates that even if storycrafting, according to Riihelä (2002), is suitable for all children, the

suitability of the method compared to other methods developed to include children as active participants does not seem to have been evaluated. Likewise, future studies could benefit from comparing the different ways of practicing storycrafting in order to find the optimal (as well as less optimal) usage areas for the method. Studies concerning the overall evaluation of the method as well as the expected outcome of using the method are needed as well. By evaluating the method's suitability for different purposes, on different target groups, and compared to other methods, the storycrafting method certainly has the potential of benefiting more children worldwide.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the Aktia Foundation that funded the first researcher in present study, making this review possible.

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