

In the Midst of Stories: Is Seeing Believing?

In this chapter, I make a methodological inquiry into some issues and challenges in my narrative inquiry into Chinese families' lived experience on landscapes of schools in transition from China to Canada. When I first walked into the midst of the research field, the issue of truth in narrative became a methodological challenge to me as I was bouncing in between the boundaries of educational research. By understanding story as the phenomenon, and narrative as the inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), two questions arose in my mind while I was located in a place of stories: "Who tells whose stories and why?" and "Which is true, 'To see is to believe', or 'To believe is to see'?"

The issue of truth in narrative research has received attention with diverse views (Carter 1993; Elbaz-Luwisch 1997; Phillips 1994, 1997). Living in the midst of stories with these two questions in mind, I explore and understand the complexities of the issue of credibility that counts most for educational research.

WALKING INTO THE MIDST OF STORIES

Who Tells Whose Stories?

It was already 9:00 a.m. by the time we reached the entrance to the school building. The loudspeaker was playing "Oh, Canada". Two boys and one girl, Asian-looking from behind, were standing right in front of us by the door.

Teachers were standing in the hallway by their classrooms. I was impressed by the children who learned to show their respect to the national anthem by standing still when they heard “Oh, Canada”. My eyes were drawn to the colourful little hands on the wall to my left. It must be the shapes of real hands of children, for there were also names signed in those little hands. When the music stopped, there were announcements on the loudspeaker. People started moving around. We went inside the building. I saw four Chinese characters, 亲
子中心 Qin Zi Zhong Xin, on the door to my right. It was the Parent Centre. A Chinese grandpa was standing by the door. He told me that in the past there were only Cantonese-speaking children at the school but now there were more and more Mandarin speakers.

This was the first day of my entry into the research school. It was a time when Citizenship and Immigration Canada showed that Mainland China had ranked the first of the top ten source countries for three years, with an ever-increasing number of people immigrating to Canada every year.

At the beginning of my inquiry, I looked for Chinese parents in the category of “Independent Immigrants or Skilled Workers”, people with higher education and good professional skills. I was disappointed when most parents and grandparents I met at the Parent Centre were from the villages of Guangdong (Canton) and Fujian, two coastal provinces in China that have had a long history of people seeking better life opportunities overseas. Most parents or grandparents spoke Cantonese and came to Canada in the category of “Family Reunion” (CIC 2001, 2004). A few Mandarin-speaking parents were from Fujian, which was known to the public from the media for having “boat people” (Li 2001) coming to Canada or the United States illegally. They spoke Fujian dialects among themselves. Both Fujian dialects and Cantonese sounded like another language to me, so I felt foreign among the Chinese families who spoke Cantonese or Fujian dialects among themselves at the Parent Centre. Therefore, during my early visits, most of my conversations were with Carmen, the school staff member who worked with the families and children at the Parent Centre, and Freeman, a Chinese grandfather who had volunteered at the school, mostly at the Parent Centre, for more than 10 years.

My conversations with Carmen and Freeman were the major entries of my initial field notes at the Parent Centre. I heard stories about someone taking snacks home in a doggie bag, about parents not helping when it was Snack Time or Circle Time, about some grandparent spanking a child or another grandparent totally ignoring a child’s misbehavior.

I was bothered by the stories I heard about these newcomer families at the school.

I was seeking a bridge that would link the West and the East, with newcomers bringing good values from the East and contributing to the multiculturalism in Canada. Therefore, I was looking for Chinese families who were well educated and well established in China in their life and career before they immigrated to Canada, and ideally who had children more than 10 years old. I believed that families belonging to this category would have developed a sophisticated understanding of the Chinese educational philosophy and values as well as the Chinese educational system. They would, I thought, be able to elaborate their views when comparing Eastern and Western educational systems. For months, I came back from the school telling Professor Connelly that I could not find the participants I wanted for my studies in the Parent Centre. I told him about Carmen's frustration and Freeman's concerns. I said I could not see these grandparents and parents as potential participants for my studies. Also, most of them did not have any higher education, and some had had little or no schooling experience in China.

Listening to my briefings of what I "observed" in the Parent Centre, Professor Connelly said to me, "When a husband or a wife came to complain about the other person, he or she doesn't tell me much about the other person. He or she is telling me about him or herself. Don't judge: Carmen is frustrated . . . parents are not helping. Is Carmen frustrated? Are parents not helping? You don't know. Is Freeman frustrated? Why does Freeman feel bad? You are not telling me much about the parents in the Parent Centre. You are telling me about you yourself, your own values". Professor Connelly advised me that I take an inquiry attitude into the research field, instead of my strong beliefs as to what I was trying to do for my research. I thought I understood. I did not realize, at the time, that this incident was the beginning of my inquiry into the issue of truth in narrative.

"To See Is to Believe" or "To Believe Is to See"?

Tuesday, November 12

Mr. Anderson, the Newcomer Support Class teacher, suggested to Carmen that he bring his Grade 7/8 students to have a Buddy Reading program with the little ones in the Parent Centre on Monday afternoons. Mr. Anderson was busy

yesterday afternoon so they changed the time to this afternoon. Around 1:30 p. m., Carmen called out, “Tidy up! Tidy up time!” Several grandparents were talking on the couch. Michael’s mother was putting puzzle pieces together with Michael on the carpet. Two boys were running across the room one after another. It was very noisy in the room. Nobody seemed to pay attention. Carmen looked around; then she asked Freeman to tell the parents to help tidy up. Freeman got up and went over to tell people in Cantonese and Mandarin that it was time to tidy up. The carpet was full of toys and puzzle pieces. I went to help and heard Michael asking his mom in Chinese, “Why should we tidy up now? It is not time, yet.” Michael’s mom told me that usually it was not the time yet to tidy up. They usually tidied up around 2 p.m. Children were used to the routine. They didn’t know that today they had to tidy up earlier because the Buddy Reading Program was switched from yesterday to today.

At Circle Time, I noticed the grandparents and parents tried to follow Carmen when she was counting in English. They were trying to learn English from Carmen as she taught the little ones. Julian’s grandma said she found Chinese actually more difficult to learn than English, as there were more complicated characters in Chinese. She said Julian didn’t like to write Chinese words at home. He was a little bit naughty. I looked at Julian. He was playing with Danny. Danny hit Julian with his elbow. Julian hit back. “No, Julian!” Julian’s grandma said. Danny’s grandma was sitting on the sofa watching without saying anything. Danny did not sit quietly like the other children who listened to Carmen when she started reading to them. Danny made a lot of noise. Carmen had to stop to discipline him. Yong Sheng and Yong Ming’s mother got up to take Danny away from the circle and took him in her arms, trying to calm him down and keep him quiet “OK, let’s do our last song. ‘Twinkle, twinkle little star’”

Yong Sheng and Yong Ming were singing loudly along with Carmen and following every movement Carmen made along with the song

Wednesday, November 13

In the afternoon, Carmen spent most of her time tidying the room and sorting out the toys because they were all mixed up. She had different buckets to contain different toys, such as wild animals, farm animals, dinosaurs, fish, cars, little people, etc. She also sorted different colorful pieces according to their shapes or purposes. I didn’t grow up with these toys, so I had to check with Carmen which pieces should go into which buckets or containers. It took us a long while to sort out all of the toys and put them into the right buckets or containers. Carmen said she would wash these toys once in a while to make sure they were clean for

children to play with. Yong Sheng and Yong Ming, the two little brothers, were helping as well. Yong Sheng, the five-year-old boy, with tiny little glasses on his nose, looked very cute. He was a better helper to Carmen than me as he knew mostly where the right place was. For example, he knew where to put the baby stuff, and where to put the kitchen utensils. I didn't know, at first, that at the Parent Centre there was a baby's corner with toys particularly for babies and a tiny kitchen place for children to play with toy kitchen stuff. Yong Sheng was there helping Carmen all the time. Like myself, some parents tried to help but seemed to get lost and did not know how to help. Jeff's Grandpa helped a little while. But he looked confused. He didn't know which toy should go to which bucket, so he stopped.

Carmen said it was really a lot of work for her at the Centre every day and she asked Freeman to tell the parents to help. I noticed someone was vacuuming the carpet and Yong Sheng and Yong Ming's mother was sweeping the room. Someone was doing the dishes

Multiple Stories the Toy Boxes May Tell

Almost every Wednesday afternoon, Carmen would pour out all the toys mixed in different containers onto the carpet and sort them out before she returned them to the right containers according to type or category. I helped her whenever I was there. As I had difficulties figuring out which piece should go to which container, I came to understand why many parents did not seem to help with toy sorting. I had been told to bite my tongue and not to give suggestions in the research field. So I did for many weeks, but eventually I suggested to Carmen that it might be a good idea to ask children to draw a picture of the toys and put them outside of each bucket so that parents would know which piece should go into which container. Carmen thought it was a good idea, so she glued some pieces outside each bucket. It helped, but not much. Parents and children still mixed them altogether without checking. One day before the Circle Time, when I was trying to figure out which bucket was for the toys in my hands, one mother said to me, "Don't bother. The children will make a mess again in just one minute. We just put them away and make the room tidy for the Circle Time." Her hands were moving up and down very fast and putting away the toys from the carpet. In a minute she cleared the carpet for Circle Time. Still, Carmen repeated sorting out the toys every Wednesday afternoon. After many weeks, I could not help asking Carmen why she bothered to repeat this tedious work every week since

the children would mess the toys all up in a minute. She said she thought it was important for children to be able to sort out things according to colors, shapes, purposes, or categories. The children would learn to make distinctions between colors, shapes, or categories and learn how to say the word for each toy. She thought it was also a way of learning skills that would be important in their lives; for example, to be well organized and tidy. Carmen said she did not grow up with some of the toys, but she used to work in a toyshop, so it was very easy for her. She understood it was difficult for parents to know exactly what was the right way to do it. “There is no right way. It is just my way.” Carmen laughed. “Because I bought every single piece, so I have the idea where each one of them should go.” I laughed and then remembered that the other day I had no idea that a red square shape with some white stripes on it should go to the bucket with farm animals until Carmen explained to me that the piece was a barn door and that was why she put it together with farm animals.

Intersecting Diverse Cultural Histories in Learning

Simple as these everyday routines seem to be, I found I was in the midst of stories of people with different cultural histories and lived experiences. Carmen’s “taken-for-granted, habitual ways” (Connelly and Clandinin 1988, p. 81) of doing her routine work at the Parent Centre actually reveal her concept of learning and her notion of curriculum. She is consciously and unconsciously constructing and enacting a hidden curriculum that can be related to Dewey’s (1938) notion of learning through direct experience. However, it is also because of that the Chinese grandparents/parents in the Parent Centre, who do not share the same lived experience as Carmen, did not seem to be able to make meaning of the weekly toy sorting as a learning process for their children intended by Carmen in her “hidden curriculum” (King 1986; Jackson 1992).

Hence, in the single room of the Parent Centre at Bay Street Community School in downtown Toronto, Carmen and the Chinese families, with their diverse cultural histories and lived experiences, meet and interact in their intersecting narratives, bouncing in-between cultural borders or boundaries, while constituting a shared cross-cultural lived experience.

These people are both characters in, and narrators of, their diverse stories. I, as a researcher, am also “both a character in, and the narrator of, the story” (Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Conle 1999) of the multi-cultural life and interactions in the Parent Centre between Carmen and

Chinese families, as well as families of other ethnic backgrounds, and between all families with diverse narrative histories. I came to understand that story as a mode of thought (Hardy 1968), a mode of thinking (Bruner 1996), and a mode of knowing (Carter 1993) in such multiple and complex forms that it constitutes and reveals multiple layers and dimensions of life. In other words, life is a story. While I am telling stories about events happening among people of diverse cultural histories at the school, what I am doing is not merely storytelling. It is life, an experience I live together with the people that I bring under study.

LIVING IN THE MIDST OF STORIES

Thinking Narratively

In the previous sections of the chapter, “Being in the Midst of Stories and Walking in the Midst of Stories”, I intended to say that, in educational narrative studies, it is important to make meaning of the intersecting narratives of people with diverse cultural histories and lived experiences in seemingly everyday routines. To do so, someone who wishes to become a narrative researcher needs to learn that an inquiry sense is key in his or her mode of inquiry into people’s life, and it is important to think narratively and be part of the living rather than simply telling about people’s life in defined terms or categories.

With a sense of inquiry aimed at understanding the multiplicity and complexity of stories, I began to think of the question “Who is telling whose stories by whom, and why”. I reflect on my early ideas about having “well-educated” potential participants in my research. How shall we define “well-educated”? Who has the right to define whom? Who is well educated and who is not? Are those who do not have regular schooling or do not have higher education not “well-educated”? The presumptions I had about what education should be like were associated with my educational beliefs and values in the definition of “truth” about knowledge and education as the quest for grand theories, themes, or systems in the academic disciplines that will provide us with “final understandings” of how the world works, how human beings behave, and, “finally”, how these “final understanding” will guide us to “social harmony” (Jones 2002, p. 111). I was looking for people who would fit into my defined categories and whom I would be able to study in my defined terms. My presumptions of “being well-educated” were only related to formal

schooling, but ignored what was educational in people's lives, "life stories people have lived about their childhood, their relationship to their parents, siblings and other people, their immigration to a new country . . . endless life stories that may peripherally be connected to the school system but not intimately connected" (Connelly & Beattie, 1992, p. 130).

With a sense of inquiry developed by living in and thinking narratively of Chinese families' immigrant experience from the past to the present and their hopes for the future, I am able to "see the family as fluid and constantly being negotiated and reconstituted both spatially and temporally" (Creese et al. 1999, p. 3) on cross-cultural landscapes in transition. By living in their stories, I am able to see people with a narrative perspective and in their own terms, not as what I thought they were in my mind, or what I was told they were in others' stories. Rather than complaining that I could not find the right people as participants for my studies, I found that every person I met and every conversation we had constitutes a fascinating narrative with significant educational values. With the sense of inquiry I acquired in my lived experience with my participants moving in and out of the school landscapes in transition, I see *what I see* and hear *what I hear* with a narrative perspective instead of seeing *what I think or believe what I see* or hearing *what I think or believe what I hear*. That is, by living in the midst of stories, I start to see an event as an expression of something happening over time, instead of thinking of it as a thing happening at that moment.

This narrative perspective guides me consciously and unconsciously to the narrativized telling of the day-to-day and moment-to-moment life fragments captured in my inquiry.

The story of toy sorting turned out to be more complex than mere daily routines in the Parent Centre, or a story about "parents not helping" in the process of narrativization. As well, untold stories of "the granny with a doggie bag", which would otherwise have remained frozen as a negative fragment about the granny, became much more complex than it was in the narrativized telling. Narrativization helps to avoid telling a single story by itself and helps to prevent interpreting or retelling a story in defined terms and categories. The following stories about "the granny with a doggie bag", interwoven one after another, reveal the complex multigenerational relationships in which the granny lived: she had been an indispensable caregiver to Danny's father, her grandson, and she was then a caregiver both to Danny, her great grandson, and to her granddaughter Daphne, her daughter's daughter

at the Parent Centre. These otherwise untold stories about the granny reveal the complexity and multiplicity of stories embedded in the multiple dimensions of people's life.

Untold Stories in the Story about "The Granny with a Doggie Bag"

One and a half years since I first walked into the Parent Centre, a place of stories, many children had reached school age. Yong Sheng and Danny became Grade-1 students in September. I still saw Yong Ming and Julian in the Parent Centre as they would go to kindergarten for a half day in the morning and come to the Parent Centre in the afternoon. Danny's great grandmother, one of the grandmothers who were seen putting snacks into a doggie bag, now came to the Parent Centre with her granddaughter Daphne, her daughter's daughter. Several times, while at the Parent Centre, I saw the granny teaching her granddaughter Daphne to read and write Chinese. I was amazed at her beautiful Chinese handwriting. Julian's grandma said that the granny was born into a rich family. I wondered if she had attended a private school as daughters of some rich families in China did in the old days before girls were allowed to attend schools. "No, she didn't go to school", Julian's grandma said. "How did she learn to read and write then?" Julian's grandma shook her head. The granny seldom talked. She was either attending to Daphne or sitting there lost in her own thoughts. She often dozed off in the tiny chair beside Daphne. During the Circle Time, she moved to the couch with Daphne, sitting in front of her. She fell asleep when Carmen started singing with the children. The granny spoke only a sub-dialect of Cantonese which only a few other grandmothers could understand. Her life remained as fragmented stories to us. A mother told me that Danny was actually the granny's great grandson. She brought up her grandson, Danny's father, and now, in her 80s, she is taking care of Danny, the great grandson, while also looking after the housework for the family. Daphne, the granny's daughter's daughter, often fell asleep during the Circle Time. The granny carried her in her arms. Looking at the 80-year-old granny with her 3-year-old granddaughter in her arms, I wondered what miraculous energy burst out of her tiny aged body that was often bent at a 90-degree angle.

One afternoon, I walked into the Parent Centre, and saw quite a few grandmothers and mothers sitting around the big table talking. They said hello to me but all looked solemn. I noticed that the granny was sitting among them. Half of her right cheek was black and blue. The granny looked sad and confused. The grandmothers and mothers listened and sighed. One grandmother who could speak Mandarin told me the story. The granny was hit by Danny, her great grandson. No one knew what exactly had happened. One fragment of the

granny's story, somewhat related to the granny's black-and-blue cheek, was that Danny's mother, the granny's granddaughter-in-law, often blamed the granny for eating too much. She often complained to the granny that she did not understand why the granny at her age still ate so much. The granny came to the dinner table often to see only leftovers from the family after she finished the housework. All the grandmothers and mothers sighed with the granny. Yong Sheng's mother said angrily that she knew that woman. Over one year ago, Danny had a serious skin allergy. Carmen asked him to stay at home in her concern about other children in the room. Danny's mother came to the Parent Centre shouting at Carmen. Freeman tried to explain on behalf of Carmen. Danny's mother turned around, shouting at Freeman. I remembered Freeman had told me the same story a while ago.

"Why wouldn't the granny go to live with her daughter?" I looked at the deep wrinkles in the granny's saddened face, wondering what stories each of those wrinkles would tell about the granny's life. Yong Sheng's mother said that the granny's eldest son, Danny's grandfather, had a good business at home in China. He asked the granny to go back home to Guangdong, but the granny would not listen. She brought up Danny's father and she is now taking care of Danny, her great grandson. It looked as if she felt Danny's family could not do without her.

The week before Christmas, the granny came into the Parent Centre with two grandchildren who came to visit her from Paris where another daughter of hers lived. All the wrinkles on her face expanded comfortably like a fully blooming chrysanthemum.

No one knew exactly why the granny chose to stay with Danny's family even though she seemed to be so mistreated while she had many better choices.

Intersecting Narratives of Diverse Experiences in Living

The granny's life is most likely to remain a puzzle. My "narrativization" of the fragmented stories about her helps to give a narrative understanding of the story about "the granny with a doggie bag" and pulls out more narrative threads that put together stories that would otherwise remain fragmented, frozen or untold.

Obviously, many more stories embedded in the story about "the granny with a doggie bag" are personally and socially complicated. However, coming back to the point of telling the story about the granny with a doggie bag, I recall what Rosanna's grandma murmured to me, "What a waste!" when

looking at the leftover cookies dumped in the garbage bin after the Snack Time while I was standing by the sink washing the dishes.

I understand the untold stories, unstated in her comments, thinking of grandparents of her age who had experienced starvation during the Japanese invasion, the Chinese Civil War, and the Great Leap Movement consecutively in China in the early half of the twentieth century. In the meantime, by “living” in the Parent Centre for over two years, I also understand why Carmen has been so careful as to make sure nothing the children eat, drink, or play with is unclean or unhealthy, after we have been faced with the crises of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), bird flu, mad cow disease, and West Nile virus.

Just as narratives of diverse cultural histories intersect in making meaning of toy sorting, narratives of diverse lived experiences intersect and interact in the story about “the granny with a doggie bag”. These intersecting narratives of people’s diverse lived experiences are no longer simply storytelling of an event. They tell people’s diverse lives from the past to the present across cultural and spatial borders on landscapes in transition. They tell both personal and social dimensions of people’s lived experiences from the past to the present, the transition and interactions of people’s lives across social and cultural boundaries, their adaptation and frustration in their life on landscapes in transition, and their values, traditions, and habits that they hold on to or let go. Above all, the intersecting narratives of people from diverse cultural narratives on landscapes in transition reveal the multiplicity and complexity of narrative and storytelling. Accordingly, in narrative educational studies, it is important to develop a sense of inquiry into people’s storied life by living in the midst of stories temporally, personally, socially, and spatially. Living in the midst of stories with a sense of inquiry enables a narrative inquirer to consciously and unconsciously narrativize fragmented stories of people’s life and to understand narratively the continuity and wholeness of an individual’s life experience in narrative unities and discontinuities.

DOUBLE AGENDAS IN MY INQUIRY

Conle (2000) distinguishes “narrative inquiry” from more traditional didactic and strategic uses of narrative in education by pointing out that its open-ended, experiential, and quest-like qualities are useful in the two areas of research and professional development. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2000), narrative is both the phenomenon and the

method in the social sciences because experience is what narrative inquirers study and narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it. Narrative inquiry as a methodology derives its strength from narrative inquiry as phenomenon in which *story* is the phenomenon and *narrative* is the inquiry (Connelly 2001; Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Using this narrative approach, I have double agendas in my inquiry. On one hand, I present Chinese families' lived experience on cross-cultural landscapes of schools in transition, the phenomenon under study: Chapters 3 through 7, in narrative form, are structured in episodes and scenes. On the other hand, I try to bridge cultures not only between the East and the West, but also between the culture of the reader and the narrative culture of the text in a narrative inquiry sense. Hence, in the following chapters I present the core family stories in the way life they evolved during my inquiry journey. I would like to invite you to read the episodes of these Chinese families' lived experience in their own terms. The family stories are, to a certain extent, inter-related and embedded in one another. I hope to accomplish my double agenda in the inquiry journey: the inquiry into the stories of /about my participants; and, the inquiry into the narrative process of my thinking and understanding of the phenomenon under study.