SHARING STORIES

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> There is a story I know. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it's the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the telling of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away. (King 2003, p.1)

In 1980 I traveled to Grouard, a small community on the north shore of Slave Lake in the southern part of northern Alberta, to teach classes in Early Childhood Education, a summer program run by the Northlands School District and Grande Prairie Regional College. The landscape of low rolling hills, the enormous sky and the long summer days, were unfamiliar to me. I was from British Columbia by way of California and New York City and had never been to Alberta. Low hills were dominated by dramatic skies always in motion--white clouds piling higher and higher or growing darker and heavier or disappearing altogether to leave a blanket of blue. The days lasted forever, ending only to begin again.

Northern Alberta is the home of Metis and First Nations peoples who have roots that stretch back hundreds and thousands of years. Some of these First Nations peoples could be Athapaskan, Cree, or Dene. The Metis people, as one of the students told me, were said to have originated "from the unions of the most beautiful Indian women and the most handsome French traders." Small communities or reserves of Metis or First Nations people are found throughout

this area on ancestral lands now defined by treaty agreements. During the late seventies, the Northlands School District added kindergartens to many of the schools in these communities that were on-reserve and they hired women from the community to be the teachers. To meet the job qualifications, these women took the Grande Prairie College program. Other students from small towns in Alberta also joined the classes, as it was an opportunity for them to get some of the ECE credits they needed for working in kindergarten or childcare.

Grande Prairie Regional College had a two-year, on-campus, competency-based program. To meet the needs of students in the North the College developed a combination of distance courses, weekend workshops, and summer intensive sessions through which to deliver the program. During a summer intensive, a course was taught in one or two weeks by meeting everyday for several hours.

Before heading to Grouard, I had asked a member of the Faculty of Education at University of British Columbia (UBC), if there were any information or understandings he could give me about teaching the women who would be in my classes, women who lived in northern Alberta, in small towns or on-reserve communities**.** I don't remember being given much information; perhaps Early Childhood Education did not appear complicated enough to warrant other approaches, perhaps little was understood about the aboriginal communities in Northern Alberta, perhaps I didn't ask the right questions.

Teaching Social Studies

During that summer in 1980, I taught a weeklong intensive called "Social Studies." The competencies for the course focused on activities to introduce children to their communities and the resources within the community, and suggested activities like trips to the bakery and police station or teaching about the circus. Teaching about a circus seemed like a remote possibility in

Northern Alberta where rodeos, hunting, trapping, and large, vast spaces predominated. Many of the Early Childhood programs where the women taught were located on Cree-speaking reserves. To get to Grouard, many of the students had to drive south for seven, eight, or nine hours over muddy or gravel roads.

My class consisted of seven women who had taken several early childhood courses already. Since we were a small group and many of the students knew each other from other summers and other conversations, our discussions flowed easily from families to classroom issues to children. I tried to make "social studies" local with no real idea of what that really meant. I had only a vague, uncomfortable idea about hunting and what it entailed, and I had never gone to school in a covered wagon, which was put on runners in the winter. The women guided me and we substituted "rodeos" for "circuses" and "baking bread ourselves" for "going to a bakery".

We had had fun during the week discussing ideas, analyzing classroom problems, laughing about silly things children do. One woman spoke of a boy in her class who gave the adults and children in the class the finger whenever he became angry. I asked her what she did when he made that gesture. "I told him I would cut it off if he kept doing that!" I asked how it had worked, thinking to use this example as a focal point to discuss other ways of guiding children. "It worked great!" she replied. The class laughed; I left it at that.

With only seven in the class we moved along quickly and happily through the set reading and finished the course learning goals before the last class on Friday. Friday was an extra day and I planned another activity. So on the last day of the social studies course, I invited each student to speak of her own life. I imagined that we would move from narratives of personal lives to themes relevant for social studies' curriculum in an early childhood classroom. I

explained my idea to the students, thinking that we would have an hour or so of stories, and then we would discuss how we might turn some of the events common to everyone into class activities, for example, the way in which someone's hobby, like bread-making, could become part of a classroom project. I had in mind that one person might share her enthusiasm for knitting and we might speak of how to bring knitting into the classroom or how a love of fishing could become a week's activity. I thought this last meeting would be easy and relaxing, and I thought I had it all under control.

As everyone in the class settled back, each took a turn to tell her story and everyone else listened carefully. I was unprepared for the stories, for their depth, and the way that each woman claimed her story, giving it to our group as a piece of herself. The first woman to speak was the youngest member of our class, a vibrant and beautiful woman filled with enthusiasm for working with children, wanting to make a difference in her community. When she spoke, she told of the pain of being taken from her grandparents who had made a home for her and her siblings after her mother had been killed by a relative. She spoke of the abuse and neglect she suffered in a foster home and the social worker who finally understood her situation. She also spoke of her desire to help children and her community.

Another spoke of raising ten children in a small community in the far north. Baking bread each day, hunting, berry picking and canning, all were part of keeping food on the table for her ten children. Children had always been part of her life and now she was helping raise her grandchildren. Her oldest son's wife had given birth to two sets of twins a year apart. The first set had been students in this woman's class the previous year and the next set was coming in the fall. She beamed as she spoke of how she had to make it clear to them that she had to treat them like the other children.

Each story was told in an unhurried way, full of details, hung on a coherent narrative structure. The three and a half hours of the morning flew by. I learned about the richness and complexity of lives in the northern communities; I was given glimpses of the injustices suffered by members of these communities: a foster mother putting three of her charges, young Metis girls, into the bathtub and scrubbing their "dirty skin"; a foster family taking for themselves the gifts sent by relatives to the children in their care, and messages of love and caring from aunts and uncles from the children's community never delivered. I felt the warmth with which children were surrounded. On one reserve, children came to school in the winter in a covered wagon on runners with a potbelly stove inside to keep them warm. Through their narratives I was given a gift.

It was my turn to tell my story and it was the end of the class. Everyone was usually eager to leave on Friday, as some had long drives before they arrived home. But it was my turn, and I knew that everyone would stay to listen to my story with the same quiet attention every other story had been received. Instead of sliding into my own story, I froze. I can still recall the confusion of feelings with which I experienced that morning of stories, bits and pieces of my life floating through my head in a jumble. I felt that my life was so different from those of my students, and I didn't know how I could explain my privilege, my ignorance, in a coherent narrative. I did not know how to speak my own story as these women had done, with such richness of laughter and tears and in a dignified and clear fashion. Their stories had impacted my story. I thought that everyone probably wanted to get on the road, and I could not think through my confusion. I mumbled something, took the easy way out, and said it was time to end,

This experience has stayed with me for over 20 years, and I have wondered why. During the story telling, I had been transported to another world, a world I did not know. When it was

my turn to share my story and I found that I could not or would not share myself, I felt a mixture of feelings, sadness, warmth, anger, admiration, and some shame. I felt shy and inarticulate, unable to find my voice. Perhaps my awkwardness came from feeling articulate in the "teacher role" but when I moved from the teacher role to become a participant, I could not find my voice or the courage for that more vulnerable role. Perhaps I was overwhelmed by too many emotions. I was not prepared for the depth of my students' stories, and still wonder at the power of feelings aroused by the glimpses and understandings that I was given that day. So many emotions were present at the end of that morning. I no longer remember the social studies curriculum and the readings assigned that week, but the feelings in the room, as someone told her story and others listened, have stayed with me as "gifts."

Years later, as I sat to write these stories, I was not sure where they would take me and how much I wanted to reveal, wittingly or unwittingly. Listening to my students in Northern Alberta tell their stories challenged me. At first, I thought my discomfort was due to my inadequacy to the task and no doubt that was part of it. Later, I wondered if it was my inability to shift from the role of the teacher to the role of the participant and that too might be part of it. More recently, I realized how profoundly the stories of their lives had affected me. I did not know where to put the grief aroused by the first story of a young girl taken from her family and community and placed in foster care, as if grief is an object to be placed. That morning I began to understand a small piece of life in Northern Alberta and a small piece of life for aboriginal and Metis women that I had not understood before and about which no one at UBC could tell me. That small piece, as I begin to understand it and as I re-tell, it becomes part of my narrative.

Teaching About Infants and Toddlers

A year later in Victoria BC, in 1981, at the local college, I was teaching a course for the infant/toddler certificate program. In one course we focused on infant development. With a somewhat vague notion of raising the awareness of the class concerning the cultural nature of childrearing, I asked a woman from the Victoria Native Friendship Centre, which provided programs and support to aboriginal people living in the city of Victoria, to speak to the students about aboriginal ways of parenting. I expected an abstract discussion of childrearing (my own cultural notion) with general, grand, all-encompassing statements, statements similar to what you would expect to hear in a university course, such as, "We believe children should be quiet, noisy, polite, rude, etc., and this is the way we teach them."

The woman who came from the Friendship Centre was petite with a large, beautiful smile and a gentle demeanor. She sat in a chair at the front of the room with her feet barely reaching the floor and her hands folded in her lap and spoke for forty-five minutes, speaking clearly and warmly of her upbringing, of how she was raised and how she raised her children. I spent the first fifteen minutes waiting for her to tell us how aboriginal families raise their children and my impatience got in the way of understanding that she *was* telling us how children were loved and taught. She gave no grand sweeping statements or generalizations and students listened to her spellbound. At the end of her talk, a student who had spoken little, if at all, during the semester, came up to say that the woman had reminded her of her grandmother. Listening to our speaker, she had remembered her grandmother's stories. How much those stories had meant was reflected in the glow on her face.

I was listening and beginning to learn.

Our stories usually tell more about ourselves as individuals than anything else. When we speak deeply with others, we think aloud, we reflect on what has happened to us, we ponder its

meaning and we reveal the meaning we have taken from it. We can use story as a vehicle to present an incident, an event that troubles, pleases, or distresses us and in doing so we reveal ourselves, our interests, our concerns, our blind spots.

Of course, these stories I have written are not an accurate picture of what happened more than twenty years ago. Time and memory, no doubt, have changed the details while I have edited, elaborated, and constructed my remembered experiences for my own conscious and unconscious purposes. But through the above stories, I am trying to share with you some of the meanings, understandings, and perceptions that emerged for me, and as I write these stories, I wonder again at the power of these stories for myself.

Teaching and caring for children can provide stories to open up possibilities for exploration. Stories can "stick in our craw" and make us uncomfortable which can prompt us to explore ourselves—our motives, our desires, our pain. Pulling together the threads of our practice, our lives, we discover what meaning they have for us. When we listen to one another, as Bateson (1994) says, we can reach an understanding "that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another" (p. 14). Through narrative we share experiences to make meaning of them, to inspire thought in others, to allow for multitude of meanings and understandings. The magic of stories is that they cannot be entirely pinned down or analyzed. We can not be entirely sure what meaning another will make of a story or what thread in a story will resonate with another.

Often, in different settings, I have sat at round child-size tables and gone over the day by telling little stories of the day's happenings and connecting those stories to stories from other experiences, all the while trying to make meaning or sense of a particular child, parent, or situation. It is through talking, telling, and wondering, that caregivers and teachers make sense or

meaning of what happens each day. Young-Bruehl and Bethelard (2000) quote a traditional Chinese story from the *I Ching*:

> A lake evaporates upward and thus gradually dries up; but when two lakes are joined, they do not dry up so readily, for one replenishes the other. It is the same in the field of knowledge. Knowledge should be a refreshing and vitalizing force. It becomes so only through stimulating intercourse with congenial friends with whom one holds discussion and practices application of the truths of life. In this way, learning becomes many-sided and takes on a cheerful lightness, whereas there is always something ponderous and one-sided about the learning of the self-taught. (p. 18)

Stories can provide opportunities for each of us to slip into another's reality and perceptions. As instructors, we learn about a student's cultural context; as a teacher of small children we learn about a family's perceptions and understandings. This knowledge allows us to respond in a congruent manner: congruent to the situation and context. This journey of speaking and listening includes dead ends, false starts, unexpected surprises, uphill climbs, and breathtaking views.

The journey takes time, it requires attention, and it takes courage. To be honest, to share the stories that make us vulnerable, that lay bare our innermost questions is scary. Within a safe relationship built over time, children and adults will take risks in thought and action--and so will teachers. Through careful attention, my relationships with students have emerged and grown in unexpected ways and directions. Thinking of ourselves as in relationship encourages us to be careful and caring. Mary Catherine Bateson (2000) says, "The gift of personhood is potentially present in every human interaction, every time we touch or speak or call one another by name, yet denial can be very subtle too, inflicted in the failure to listen, to empathize, to attend" (p. 62). Over time and telling, our stories entwine.

Teaching Foundations of Early Childhood Education

Over the years as a teacher working with early childhood students I have come to rely on stories to introduce myself, to illustrate points, and to present possibilities. Some twenty years after my experiences in Grouard, I was again working with First Nations students, but this time in a community just outside Victoria, BC. Nine women came to take the Early Childhood program, and we met bi-weekly to discuss different topics from their reading and writing assignments.

"Those theorists," said one of the Early Childhood Education students I was teaching, "seems to me what they're saying is just common sense."

I had been trying to start a discussion about the theories and ideas that provide the foundation of Early Childhood Education. No one was very interested, until the conversation switched to one question in the course work: What would different theorists advise parents to do whose child would not sleep through the night in her own crib? The question assumed that babies should sleep in their own cribs.

"I just couldn't get my head around this question at all," said another student. " My son sleeps with me and my sister's son sleeps with her. I asked my mother and my auntie and they didn't know."

Other students in this small class chimed in. We moved from the tenuous ground of the irrelevant western theorists and experts to the knowledge of known people, people my students had a relationship with and who had authority in these women's lives and in the community. These are the experts within this culture; elders and family members hold the knowledge that is relevant. The students, all mothers, knew the answer from their experience and checked with the acknowledged experts within their community.

Stories began to be told about what happens in each family. In answer to the question about what could be done about the baby there is a general agreement that they would advise taking the baby to the parents' bed. They know how to do that; it is what they know to be "right". They are uncertain about how to argue for "those theorists'" advice about having babies sleeping in the crib. Within their culture and community it is the wisdom and the expertise of elders that is honored, that is the expert knowledge.

In an attempt to return the conversation to the theorists I tried to explain their work. I said, "Those fellows have made up stories to explain what they have seen or experienced in their lives." As I said that I wondered why the theorists would be any more right than the elders, but that explanation seemed to make the theorists seem more approachable for the class, but not any more relevant to their lives.

In early childhood education there are the grand narratives of the experts, the theories and beliefs that are valued and repeated and sometimes challenged. We also have personal knowledge and small stories that are told around the little tables after a day is done, that we tell each other to make sense of what we are experiencing. These stories bring our voice into our practice. Stories hold powerful feelings; they help us to begin the process of articulating difficult emotions and places within ourselves and within our practice.

Listening to each other helps build and maintain relationships, as well as provide a deeper understanding of the "tensions and passions" (Greene 1990) of our field. Casper (1996) says, "to be effective in working with very young children and their families, we need to understand their worlds. How do we usually go about learning what is really important to others? We observe and listen. We reflect" (p. 14). Strong research also involves observation and reflection. Sharing stories is a comfortable, familiar mode of discussing work for caregivers and using a narrative

approach was a natural and appropriate mode of research. Polkinghorne (1988) writes that discerning "narrative meaning is a cognitive process that organizes human experiences into temporally meaningful episodes" (p. 1). To understand the world of caring for and teaching young children we will learn much by listening carefully to the stories and voices of early childhood educators. Through stories, "experience and time work their way in inquiry"(Connelly and Clandinin 1990, p. 12)

Attending a Conference

Several years ago, I attended a conference where the speaker giving the keynote address said that, in his culture, it was bad manners to tell another's story; you have a right only to your own story. He went on to say that only when *all the stories are told, will we have the whole story*. I appreciated his concept; it leaves out no one, and suggests an endless array of stories. Telling our own stories, listening to those of others can illuminate dark places and provide space for voices seldom heard. The comedian Sandra Shamas (1997) said in an interview on CBC, "I tell my story so that you can remember yours". Using narrative opens up possibilities on many levels.

As stated above, the voices and stories of caregivers have not been heard, we do not see them in the research literature. As Hauser and Jipson (1998) write:

> Intuitively, the idea of storytelling seemed to provide an appropriate way to relate our explorations of the many differences we identified among the experiences of the women with whom we worked and studied. By telling stories, we could locate the diverse historical, cultural, and socioeconomic positions women have held as they have been excluded and then integrated into the public sphere of formal early childhood education,

> all the while continuing to be primarily relegated to the quasi-domestic work of caring for and socializing young children. (p. 4)

Stories, narratives, capture the complexity of the daily work of caregivers, the difficulties some families face, and the daily experiences small children.

There is always a risk that through using narrative inquiry, research will be dismissed as sentimental or folksy. Ragack (1998) warns us to be aware of how stories will be used. These risks are real and the challenge is to maintain the complexities and the ambiguities of practice within our narratives. Using the voices and words of diverse practitioners, the discussion about caring for young children can be enriched and intensified. Listening closely to those voices and paying attention to the streams and threads underlying them and "observing with a quizzical eye and then searching and again re-searching"(Barone 2001), we can gain insights into practice.

Conclusion

Informally, stories have long been part of Early Childhood Care and Education, as Cuffaro (1995) says, "early childhood teachers are storytellers. Each day we have at least two or three stories to share" (p. 14). Talking, sharing insights, telling stories and wondering about them are roads to understanding. Listening to another's narrative and the manner in which that story is told, can provide a glimpse into another world, another reality, triggering our own memories, providing a new perspective to old stories. Through narrative we can examine our own perceptions and assumptions, explore doubts and uncertainties, but to do this we must be willing to gather and share our stories.

Attending to our stories and wondering about them enriches our practice. Sharing our experiences and our reflections, we offer our understanding of an event, of a child, of a student. But even as we tell our story, we leave pieces out, we change details, we ignore some feeling;

stories may not be accurate, but they are true. “A totally factual narrative, were there such a thing, would be passive: a mirror reflecting all without distortion” (LeGuin 1989, p. 45). We need more than one story and more than one narrator in order for the richness and complexity of working with small children and their families to emerge. Wondering about and questioning our narratives brings out that richness and complexity.

The challenge is to bring our own stories into the open. Formulating difficult stories, articulating the feelings of an awkward encounter, and sharing our confusions take courage and commitment. As Vivian Gornick (2001) reminds us, “Penetrating the familiar is by no means a given. On the contrary, it is hard, hard work” (p. 9) Not only is storytelling difficult and challenging work, it can be dangerous. Stores reveal our vulnerabilities to ourselves and to the world; they also can cast spells and create illusions. We must challenge stories and test their authenticity and promise by telling and re-telling them and listening closely.

When we share our stories we share stories of successes and failures, of our joys and sadness. Through narrative we can begin a process of acknowledging the uncomfortable places of practice and our less acceptable emotions. There are times when we look away, move away, distract ourselves from experiencing the confusions and tensions our practice can bring. Seeing a baby arrive with not enough formula for the day, to see a mother struggle through depression to connect with her children, to sense the violence in a home situation are all situations not easily solved and difficult to observe. Through narrative we may begin to understand and accept some of the range of emotions we experience. Grief is one of the emotions early childhood educators don’t discuss often. More likely, we speak of anger, anger at parents whom neglect or abuse children, anger at society for the injustices done to others, or anger at ourselves. But often at the bottom of that anger is grief—a deep sadness at the way things are.

We help children name their fears, and as we help them sort out their emotions, we might do the same for ourselves. We must look at the grief and anger in this work, as well as its delights and joys. Through narrative we can name our fears and explore areas of tension; we can learn from each other. Susan Bernheimer (2003) reminds us,

> the greatest challenge of our time is developing the skill to live with purpose in the face of upheaval and uncertainty. Inherent in this skill is an ability to fully embrace our lives with all their complexity and contradictions. It necessitates finding ways of expanding beyond the safety of our old beliefs and building our capacity to empathize with others. (p. 54)

Stories help us expand our understandings and find our connections with each other. In finding connections we discover our relationships to each other and to ourselves.

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