

Stories of School, Stories in School: Understanding Two Aboriginal Children's Competing and Conflicting Stories of Curriculum

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In this article we explore how two Aboriginal children negotiate their identities in an urban school context. Moments of tension occurred as the children's unfolding stories bumped against stories of the children told by others. These tensions involved in part how attendance and relationships with others shaped identities. The role of parents is highlighted as they help their children negotiate their identities at school. The article focuses on threads of competing and conflicting stories and identities as we examine curricular spaces from the diverse lives of children in schools.

Aaron immediately headed for his classroom and found his desk (pseudonyms are used for all students, teachers, and schools). It still held his nametag, even though he had been absent from his year 1-2¹ classroom for some time now. Aaron's teacher and principal had assumed that Aaron would be attending a different school, given they heard Aaron had moved to a new town to live with his mother and step-father, and was no longer living with his grandparents near Ravine Elementary. But Aaron's story of home was a continually shifting story and he was back living in his grandparents' home with his mother and two younger siblings.

It was recess time and the children were all outside when Aaron reentered the classroom. I watched him find his old desk, his original nametag, torn and scribbled-on, still taped to the top. I watched as he put away the shiny new school supplies his mother had just purchased him for his return to Ravine. I watched as he took great care ensuring that all of his new scribblers, crayons, pencils and erasers were lined up just so. He kept a sharpened pencil right up front as if he was anticipating using it sometime soon. When Aaron was done sorting his supplies I watched as he folded his hands on top of his desk, patiently waiting for the bell signalling recess was over and the afternoon was about to begin.

"Aaron's here! Aaron's here!" the children all shouted as they crowded around him and began to rub his newly shaved head. Aaron's hands stayed folded on his desk but a slow, deep smile spread across his face. (Interim field text based on field note, February 14, 2003)

In this article we share an overview of the research program that comprised our doctoral studies in two classrooms at Ravine Elementary School, an ethnically and economically diverse urban school in western

Canada: research that shaped our lives as narrative inquirers. We open with a narrative about Aaron, a year 2 child at the school. We came to know Aaron's stories to live, one way of understanding identity as shaped by "narrative understandings of knowledge and context" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 4) as Marni walked alongside him both on and off the school landscape. Young (2005) helps us to consider how the concept stories to live by can be helpful in understanding the experiences of Aboriginal² children. Gradually, over time and over space, Aaron helped us begin to awaken to the story of community he was living. In this article we also introduce Cheyenne, a year 6 student in Shaun's research who like Aaron is of Aboriginal heritage and also attended Ravine Elementary School.

We position ourselves as researchers in the tradition of narrative inquiry conceptualized by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Narrative names the quality of experiences we studied and also the patterns of inquiry into our research. As non-Aboriginal researchers we recognize that we can understand the stories of Aboriginal children only from our own perspectives. By inquiring alongside the two children in this inquiry, we worked at coming to know them through a narrative lens in relational ways. The narrative commonplaces of sociality, place, and temporality shape our understanding of the narrative of experience of these children. Our task as non-Aboriginal researchers is to remain tentative as we learn from these children's stories of experience. This positions us in a relational place, but we know that our understanding of these children's stories is at best a peripheral view of their experiences in school. Although we must necessarily write from outside an Aboriginal paradigm, it is important to us to find windows into the experiences of Aboriginal students in our classrooms so that we can become better educators in relationship with them.

Opportunities to hear the narratives of these Aboriginal children allowed us ways to try to understand their experiences in school, their stories to live by in relation to their education. With narrative as our vantage point, we attend in this article to the experiences of two Aboriginal children as their stories to live by guide us toward deeper thinking about diversity, curriculum, and lives in school. Walking alongside Aaron and Cheyenne helped us awaken to the possibility of shaping spaces in schools where children can compose their stories to live by in relational ways.

Sideways looking in the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space provides a framework in which to think about our conversations with students in the inquiries each of us undertook. "Studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters [one dimension]; they focus on the personal and the social [the second dimension] in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in specific

places or sequences of places [the third dimension]" (p. 50). Telling a story fragment of Aaron lets us move backward in time to Aaron's extended absence, forward to his return to school, inward to the emotions that were felt by Aaron and his classmates and by Marni, the researcher in the classroom, and outward to the social situation experienced. We see the moment situated in place, in a year 1-2 classroom with a group of children crowded around a returning classmate's desk. This way of seeing this moment with Aaron is what we mean by seeing and understanding lives in the three-dimensional inquiry space.

Marni, Shaun, and Anne each spent over a year alongside students and teachers in classrooms at Ravine Elementary, from September 2002 to April 2004. For this article we focus on students in Marni's and Shaun's research. Field texts generated in this inquiry included students' work (found poetry, reflective pieces, narrative verse, journals, collages, and other written artefacts), researchers' field notes, and transcripts of taped conversations with children, family members, teachers, and the school principal. We began to think about sideways looking when we saw in our field notes how the children in the inquiry were enacting this in their interactions with one another, with teachers, and with us. As we read our field notes we began to see how some of the children participated in events in both the in-classroom and out-of-classroom spaces of the school in a somewhat cautious and casual manner, positioning themselves and observing from the side rather than being in a moment in the class. This sideways looking (Murphy, 2004) allowed them to watch and make decisions without being involved directly in the experience. We saw how this was also an approach that we used in conversations with children when we talked about our stories of these children in our research conversations and in reading field notes over as we began to shape research texts.

Only now, by continuing to share our research wonders with each other, have we come to name this way of engaging in research relationships with these children as sideways looking. Perhaps sideways looking opens an ethical space (Ermine, 2005) between people, a theoretical moral space that keeps us attentive and allows for deeper awareness, understanding and respect. Ermine writes, "it is argued that the ethical space ... can become a refuge of possibility in cross cultural relations" (p. 4). We wonder if sideways looking was our way of opening the possibility of relational spaces with Aaron and Cheyenne in a way that honored who they were and were becoming in relation to their families and their cultures and also allowed our own unfolding stories to be shared. Bruno (2007) explicates parallels between narrative inquiry methods and Aboriginal methods. Our work is grounded in narrative inquiry methodology, which Bruno believes "respects and reflects indigenous perspectives and practices—in essence, an Aboriginal worldview" (p. 39). She

writes, “[Narrative inquiry] is a methodology that I find is most consistent with Indigenous methodology” (p. 39).

In our conversations with the children, we usually followed the leads they provided rather than coming in with specific topics or questions. We worked to develop relationships with students based on shared interests and an authentic curiosity and desire to know each child more fully. In conversations, we attempted to attend to children and their stories on the personal end of the personal /social dimension of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. This meant that we did not often broach issues directly that we sensed at times might have been difficult for children. More commonly, we considered such issues by looking sideways at them in our field texts after the conversation, by gradually “slipping to cool observation” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81).

For example, if a child began to talk about home places and what home meant to her or him, we might ask questions shaped as wonders aimed at wanting to know more about the child’s understandings. We might make comments on what we were curious about in the context of our relationship alongside the child. Later, as we wrote about our conversation or read transcripts, we might begin to grasp the significance of what a child was saying in terms of his or her stories to live by. We might talk together as co-researchers about this emerging aspect of our understanding of that child’s composition of a story to live by. Thus we were moving more toward the social end of the personal-social dimension of the narrative inquiry space, while not losing sight of the intimate relationships we were creating with each child.

Over time we began to understand that a focus of one child’s composing of his or her stories to live by was about what it meant to have multiple homes. The temporal dimension of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space took on much significance as we came to think differently about the stories to live by that each child was telling and retelling as we spent more time alongside him or her. When we laid Aaron’s story of interrupted attendance alongside the story of school, at first glance it appeared to be a story of truancy that could have pulled forward a response of calling in authorities. But when we looked at Aaron’s story of interrupted attendance over time, we saw how his stories to live by were shaped by his multiple stories of home. For us this was a way of looking sideways at Aaron’s life that shaped a knowing space that was profoundly relational.

Place, the third dimension of the narrative inquiry space, is foregrounded in most of our field texts. Although many of our conversations took place at Ravine School over one and a half years, we began to see how the children’s stories were often about family and friends in out-of-school places. This reminded us of how porous school walls are, with all aspects of children’s lives in school affected by and reflected in

their narratives of experience outside school. Sideways looking is a way for us to observe how these multiple contexts permeate the stories students tell. When Aaron spoke over many days about his shifting story of home, from the city house with his grandparents, to the rural home with his mother and stepfather, and later to a new home with his extended family at the Metis settlement, we came to see that a large part of his story to live by in these moments of conversation was this puzzle about what place and family meant for him. He was not asked directly about how he was struggling to understand this aspect of his stories to live by; rather, a space was created for him to talk and to receive response to his stories, coming alongside him to look sideways at the ideas and stories he was sharing.

Sideways looking in the context of our narrative inquiries

Battiste (1998) writes, "The need is great for a transformed education that enriches our character and dignity, that emerges from one's own roots and cultural experience" (p. 22). In writing about the stories of two Aboriginal children at Ravine Elementary School, we attend to the perspectives of Aboriginal researchers who find their stories and the stories of their children often silenced in schools and other institutions. "Let us not allow others to decide our identity for us," states Restoule (2000, p. 112). As we positioned ourselves alongside the children in our research, we worked toward becoming vulnerable observers (Behar, 1996), toward a relational inquiry with each child. Sideways looking opened up an ethical space that allowed us to attend closely to the children's stories to live by and to lay our own unfolding stories alongside theirs. As we attended in this way, we recognized tensions for each of the children in relation with their school experiences.

Working with these children helped us understand how they were composing stories of school and stories in school. Stories in school are similar to competing stories in that they are stories in relation to larger narratives of school. They are a way of speaking about school that positions the individual, in this case each child, more centrally. When the children talked about school as a place where they had community and a sense of influence, we consider these to be stories in school. Stories of school are suggestive of conflicting stories as they become stories told about school by individuals on the margins. As we listened to the children talk about school, as they tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a place in the dominant narrative, we understood their narratives as stories of school.

Marni first met Aaron when he was a year 2 student in Gale's class at Ravine Elementary School. Marni was interested in understanding children's unfolding stories of community. Although the classroom population was ethnically diverse, Aaron was the only child who was visibly of Aboriginal descent. Marni's early encounters with Aaron occurred in his classroom at Ravine Elementary and at times in the school yard during

recess breaks. However, as her research unfolded, Aaron's attendance at the school was interrupted by several family moves. Their meeting places shifted as Marni followed Aaron to these other places. Because she had framed her initial research puzzle as a narrative inquiry, she anticipated that her research relationship with Aaron might extend beyond the classroom walls. She had not, however, anticipated that her research would also extend beyond the city limits as she followed Aaron and his family to new homes and towns. The narrative moment that opens this article captures some of the history of Aaron's school experiences, his stories of relationship, and his interrupted attendance. It was only by looking sideways at Aaron's school experiences that Marni was able to understand his story of attendance and shift her attention to the experiences he was living off the school landscape.

Shaun's research unfolded in a year 5-6 classroom at Ravine Elementary School. He began over the 2002-2003 school year to attend to the stories of five students in this classroom, two of whom identified as being Aboriginal. Shaun spent time alongside the students in class and also had taped conversations with each one individually outside class as his relationship with students deepened. Thinking about sideways looking was how Shaun came to understand how some of the children entered into the life of the classroom. As he observed children in class he saw that some appeared uninvolved with the events occurring. However, he also noted that some of them were aware of the events despite being positioned on the margins. In conversation with these children, he was able to understand that for them this was a way of observing without becoming involved, a way they sometimes chose for themselves. In this article Shaun includes narrative accounts and describes his gradual awareness of how a year 6 girl named Cheyenne was composing her stories to live by.

In a Dark, Dark Wood: Living a Competing Story

As we started to live on the landscape of Ravine Elementary School, Marni came to notice early on that her field notes were filling up with stories of Aaron. A moment Marni captured in her writings shortly before Halloween told a story of Aaron and his classmate Seeta sitting at the back of the room reciting their own version of a popular Halloween poem.

"In a dark, dark Aaron" whispered Seeta while Aaron in turn whispered, "In a dark, dark Seeta." The two children carried on their whispering game, keeping in time with the rest of the class but substituting one another's names for the nouns located in the pocket chart at the front of the room. Aaron and Seeta would cover their mouths when they found themselves getting too loud or starting to giggle, careful not to draw excess attention to themselves. We found it interesting that two brown-skinned children, one Aboriginal and one whose family had moved to Canada from India, would name themselves as "dark, dark." We

wondered if this game they played with words was also a way of naming their identity in the classroom and becoming visible to the other.

In her field notes Marni wrote how Aaron watched her watching him play with his friend as they whispered in time with their classmates. Each time Aaron would lean toward his friend to whisper her name, he would first look at Marni to see if she was going to ask him to stop. Instead Marni chose to wink, thereby encouraging him to continue with his game of words.

What happened in that moment of winking? We wonder now if Marni's winking was a manifestation of a competing story she was experiencing about where to stand in the classroom. Like Anne and Shaun, Marni was unused to being in a classroom where she was not positioned as a teacher, a student, a parent, or a teacher educator. We wonder too about two brown-skinned children naming themselves as dark and where they may have been positioning themselves in the classroom. While the rest of the children focused their attention on the words of the poem situated in the pocket chart at the front of the room, we saw Aaron's and Seeta's whispers and giggles as a competing story of what it means to be engaged in school.

Marni's field notes showed her delight in watching Aaron and Seeta improvise a competing story as they not only played with words, but possibly their identities. We see Aaron and Seeta staying with a story of relational knowing (Hollingsworth, Dybdahl, & Minarik, 1993), allowing them both to live out a competing story of what it means to be engaged in a classroom activity. While their classmates were attentive to their teacher and the words at the front of the room, Aaron and Seeta attended not only to the activity, but also to each other. Marni helped sustain this competing story through her act of winking. Marni's actions took on qualities of sideways looking in that moment. From the perspective of the two children, she can be seen to participate without actively becoming involved in their word game. In this way she helps them sustain it with indirect adult involvement while remaining an observer.

Marni's notes also highlighted the tension she was experiencing as she realized that she was encouraging what may have been perceived by the classroom teacher as student misbehavior. Marni worried how this might have positioned her in the teacher's eyes. Marni did not want to challenge the teacher's authority in the classroom, yet she wanted to be attentive to the relational story being lived out between Aaron and his classmate. And so this moment also illustrates a tension of straddling multiple worlds (Lugones, 1987) and the contradictions that Aaron, Seeta, and Marni all experienced as they negotiated their places on the classroom landscape.

It was not until we came to know more of Aaron's stories as a child with a shifting story of home that we also began to notice a competing story of school attendance bumping up against Aaron's stories to live by.

Negotiating a Conflicting Story

Marni's research interest was in understanding community as an experience. In her field notes and conversations with Aaron, she attended to his relationships with classmates and with family members. But over time her field notes began to fill up with stories of Aaron's absence and wonders about the place of school in his story to live by.

Regular attendance is one of the plotlines used to understand a successful story of school. Marni's field notes showed that Aaron lived a story of interrupted school attendance caused by his shifting story of home. As Aaron's story of home continually shifted, we began to attend to the places where Aaron's stories to live by bumped up against the story of school. When children live a plotline of poor attendance at school, teachers understand this story as conflicting with the dominant story of school, and so it was with Aaron. Aaron's record of poor attendance was in conflict with school expectations and policy. At one point there was talk that if Aaron's attendance did not improve, the district truancy officer would need to be called. When Marni became involved with school staff in imagining a way for Aaron to be able to remain in school instead of traveling to visit family for an extended stay in the Metis settlement, she helped move the story into a conflicting one. Even though Marni and the school staff believed they were acting out of care for Aaron, the plotline of attendance became more important than the plotline of family. The story of Aaron's attendance becomes particularly significant when we begin to attend to how the intersections between home and school shaped Aaron's sense of community. Opening this moment helps us begin to understand community as a series of complex, unfolding relationships: between and among teachers, children, and families. Only by remaining attentive to the tensions swirling around the multiple understandings of school attendance and the stories of community that Aaron was experiencing could we begin to learn more about Aaron's story to live by. Greene (2005) reminds us that it is this type of wide-awakeness that needs to live within and among us in order to allow for change and possibility in both stories of school and stories in school.

Cheyenne's Negotiation of a Conflicting Story

Cheyenne was a girl in year 6 in Shaun's inquiry, which took place in a year 5-6 classroom at Ravine Elementary. Most of the children in the year 6 class had been in teacher Lian Elliot's classroom the year before. Cheyenne and Lian shared a long history through Cheyenne's sisters. Lian had been one sister's teacher and the other's volleyball coach. For Cheyenne this was an important part of her story to live by in school.

Cheyenne told Shaun of a school she had attended before she came to Ravine. In this other place she had not felt safe. She was not safe from the scorn of a teacher who objected to the sound of Cheyenne's voice. By Cheyenne's own admission her voice sounded different—higher, unusual.

To the teacher it sounded like the voice of a baby, and she often told Cheyenne this. As Cheyenne did not feel safe with this teacher, she learned to silence herself, keeping her voice to herself unless talking was unavoidable. Cheyenne talked to her classmates; she talked to the other teacher who shared the room. She was wise enough to know that when the other teacher was in the room, the "mean teacher" would be nice. She was not as nice when she was the only teacher in the room.

And well ah my voice was kind of more like lower and stuff and it was kind of weirder sounding, it kind ... to other people, well she always would say to me, "Stop talking like a baby." And I wasn't really. It was just my voice ... and I couldn't do nothing. So I got all like, like all sad and stuff and I wouldn't really talk to her because I was all like, "Whatever if you're not," and she wasn't giving me good advice, like good advice and she'd always yyyell at me and stuff. And my mom was getting kind of mad and upset with her. (Taped conversation, January 15, 2003)

It surprised Shaun how thoughtfully Cheyenne dealt with this situation. She learned to avoid the teacher. She developed strategies to deal with her when she could not avoid it, "I would not make any contact with her, or if she called on me I'd have to talk ... But I'd try like to be like real, like a deeper voice" (Taped conversation, January 15, 2003). And then Cheyenne told Shaun in the same conversation, "I kind of just said, 'Well whatever' ... This, this is what she's thinking but I know it's not true. So I kind of just left her and then just did what I was supposed to do at school." Shaun expressed to Cheyenne his amazement at her ability to handle the situation. He asked her how she knew what to do and she replied,

Like my sisters, like they would go through those things and my mom would tell them those kinds of things, so I was kind of learning off of my sisters what they were doing... And so I just kind of thought, and my mom would always talk to me and tell me, "Well don't worry about it. You only get her sometimes and not all the time. So just keep doing what you're doing at school and don't worry about her." And my mom would give me always that advice so I kind of thought, "OK." (Taped conversation, January 15, 2003)

In this story of the teacher, Cheyenne told of her attempts to deal with the situation. Eventually she tried to put up with it, but her silence, her aloneness in the problem was too much to take. She knew she could not talk to her mother because her mother had already spoken to the teacher, who said that she had never commented on Cheyenne's voice and that Cheyenne was lying. Cheyenne's mother knew that her daughter was telling the truth, but in order to protect herself from the teacher, Cheyenne turned away from talking to her mother. Instead she turned toward her sisters, whom she also trusted.

Because I, I thought to myself, I kept thinking, "Well I need to tell somebody. I need to tell somebody because this is bad. I don't like being treated this way." So I said if I didn't, I kept saying to myself, and telling my sisters because I trusted them ... Because they weren't going to talk to my mom.... So they kept telling me, "Well you need somebody to talk to. Go to mom, go to mom." So I went to my mom and just kept going when my mom said, "Well don't worry about her." (Taped conversation, January 15, 2003)

Cheyenne's mother tried to intervene. In other situations at the school she had also tried to help when other children made her daughters feel unsafe. This time she told Cheyenne to ignore the teacher, but when the relationship between Cheyenne and her teacher did not shift, Cheyenne's mother moved all her children to Ravine Elementary School. Cheyenne's mother clearly provided important support for Cheyenne as she composed her story to live by on the school landscape. Being safe was a theme that came up often in Cheyenne's and Shaun's conversations. Her family kept her safe as we see in the story Cheyenne told about her sisters. Her relationships with children and teachers at Ravine School kept her safe. The actions of her mother kept her safe.

In this version of interrupted attendance, Cheyenne and her sister changed schools in order for Cheyenne to experience a different school community. This interruption did not require a truancy officer and falls within a more acceptable form of interruption of school attendance. This choice maintained Cheyenne's presence in school. This continues to shape our understanding of attendance and its relationship to community as Pearce (2005) understands it as a series of complex, unfolding relationships between and among teachers, children, and families.

Negotiating the stories of others: Cheyenne tells a story of herself as a mediator between cultures

Early in his inquiry while he was supervising the children in the classroom, Shaun realized that there was a heated conversation going on between Erica and Dylan, another Aboriginal student in Lian's class. The field note of that moment captured some of what was occurring.

Lian had to explain some things to the other classes and so left to do it. The class was a little more restless with her gone, but still worked. I was working with some other students when I realized some heated conversation was occurring with Erica and Dylan, with Cheyenne trying to mediate. I heard Dylan say to Erica "You're not an Indian, you're a white person." Erica replied, "And I'm proud of it." Then Dylan was out of his desk doing some dance steps. I asked him what he was doing. He said dancing. I had heard him say he had learned it on the reservation so I assumed it was a traditional dance of some kind. When I asked him what the dance was for he said he learned it from Mr. Magoo. In conversation I realized that Mr. Magoo was some kind of singer and that Dylan had learned the dance over a length of time. Cheyenne, Erica and Kara were watching him as he did it. When I asked him about the dance he got up and did it again for me. (Field note, September 13, 2002)

Shaun wanted to know more about the conversation between Erica and Dylan, but Dylan was unwilling to say more, telling him it was an "Indian thing" and he did not want to talk about it. Curious still, but aware that Dylan did not want to tell him, Shaun asked Cheyenne if she could talk about it. Her response is captured in this field note.

I asked Cheyenne what had happened and she told me that Dylan had said he gets money from the band council and that Erica hadn't believed him. Dylan had said to Erica what would she know about it. Cheyenne said she knew because she was Aboriginal. Dylan said

it was true, but Erica said she still didn't believe him. Then Cheyenne said they started having this conversation thing and as she said it she waved her hands back and forth. She seemed kind of exasperated with them for arguing over it. (Field note, September 13, 2002)

Perhaps Shaun should have asked her if she was exasperated by their conversation. Maybe she was exasperated with him for having to retell it. Regardless, she told him and helped him understand, and by doing so, named for Shaun one of the defining aspects of who she was in the world. Beyond telling Shaun she was Aboriginal, she also showed him that one of the ways she understood herself in the context of her classroom was as a person who tried to understand the story of others. In this instance she used her understanding of how Aboriginal band councils work to help her help others to understand. Shaun recalls Cheyenne's hands waving in the air as they stood together outside the school and the perplexed look on her face as she tried to understand what had happened in the room.

Competing and conflicting stories in the lives of Cheyenne and Aaron

In Shaun's first narrative of Cheyenne and the "mean teacher," it became evident that Cheyenne was trying to shift the story from one of conflict to a competing story. She drew on her resources in order to move out of the plotline that the teacher was constructing about her. She went to her family in order for them to help her make sense of what was happening. Cheyenne did not want to live a conflicting story. She actively sought ways to move out of the tension she was experiencing with this teacher. As with Aaron, it was her community that helped Cheyenne sustain her stories to live by in school. In the case of each child, family was an important aspect of that community. When Battiste (1998) writes of the need for education that emerges from one's own roots and cultural experience, she seems to be telling us of the importance of family and cultural stories in a child's composing of his or her stories to live by. Aaron's and Cheyenne's stories each reveal how they turned toward family and culture in their telling of who they were and were becoming in school. Our conversations as researchers in the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space created opportunities for laying our stories of these two children side by side, ways for us to see this thread woven through our stories of them both.

Cheyenne would seem to have a foot in two worlds, trying to explain to students and then to Shaun the story about Dylan, placing herself in this in-between space as mediator. Is this a competing story for Cheyenne with a story of herself as a student in Lian's class? Can the two stories, as student and as Aboriginal girl, co-exist peacefully here? It seems to us that for Cheyenne they do. She places herself in a relational context with Erica, Dylan, and Shaun by mediating and explaining.

Aaron's story of attendance became more significant for Marni when she shared her observations with Shaun and Anne. Aaron's stories of attendance became particularly significant when they were placed along-

side stories of his family. We know Aaron as a narrative being who lives his life as a story. Marni experienced Aaron as a child both on and off a school landscape and as a brother, son, stepson, grandson, cousin, nephew, and Aboriginal child in multiple settings. These multiple plot-lines of identity in his family contribute to Aaron's narrative coherence as he composes his stories to live by. Carr (1986) wrote, "coherence seems to be a need imposed on us whether we seek it or not. Things need to make sense. We feel the lack of sense when it goes missing" (p. 97). Aaron appears to depend on his relationship with his family to help him continue to negotiate narrative coherence, in this case that regular attendance at school is not central in his life.

At first Aaron's absences were seen as competing stories. Homework would be sent home and Aaron would return before too long. By keeping his desk and nametag, Aaron's teacher tried hard to sustain a story of Aaron as student in her classroom. But once his absences became prolonged, a conflicting story was introduced with the talk of contacting the truancy officer. We wonder what a "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson Billings, 2002) might look like for Aaron in his story of attendance.

Shaping curricular spaces for the diverse lives of children in school

Sideways looking at a transformed education

In our article we share moments of tension around our experiences with Aaron and Cheyenne. These children show us that we need to inquire into these moments of tension if we are to understand what it means to compose diverse lives in schools. Children come to school living their life stories, and we need to be attentive to the stories they bring, the stories they tell, the stories they live. Perhaps by attending to these moments through sideways looking, we can open up possibilities for understanding.

Relationships with others were central in the composing of their stories to live by for each of these children. The relationships that shaped the composition of their stories to live by in school might include other children as in the story of Aaron and Seeta, Cheyenne and her relationships with classmates and her family, and the relationships of each child with us as researchers.

We highlight the research relationship because we were aware of the ethical tensions in these relationships. Marni wrote of her awareness that her winking might not have been well received by the teacher. Shaun felt some tension in asking Cheyenne to explain the argument after Dylan had been unwilling.

From our perspectives as researchers we note some tensions that continue to trouble us. In the story of Aaron and Seeta, Marni noted how Aaron and Seeta played a whispering game together at the back of the classroom. In that moment they were part of a small group of two, children who were not full participants in the activity in which the rest of the

class was engaged. Nelson (1986) finds “the marginalized members of the community must enter the story sideways, as it were, correcting for the biases and distortions of the dominant interpreters” (p. 36). Aaron and Seeta were entering sideways into this activity, positioning themselves slightly apart and playing their whispered game, perhaps in order to “correct for” or challenge the biases of which they both were becoming aware, subtle distinctions around skin color that may have flitted through their lives. How might we transform classrooms so that Aaron and Seeta do not need to enter sideways into the activities?

Aaron’s family provided a continuity in his story to live by, a continuity that was not apparent in school. Marni, in traveling around the province to visit Aaron and his family as they moved from place to place, was documenting how Aaron’s story to live by held plotlines of moving frequently. The thread that did not shift through all this was that family was always there for Aaron. How might we think differently about education that is inclusive of families that move frequently? Battiste’s (1998) call for a transformed education might surely include a need for education that is responsive to cultures with a tradition of living not in one place, but across a variety of home places.

Cheyenne helped Shaun understand the place of relationship in composing a story in school. Cheyenne was able to move from a story of school, a story that positioned her on the margins of her classroom to a story in school. Cheyenne was able to do this with the support of her family and, eventually, a new school—a school where the narrative was different, at least in the classrooms she experienced. In her first school Cheyenne tried to negotiate a place for herself in the story of school in a sideways manner, by adopting manners and strategies that did not draw attention to her. At Ravine Cheyenne gave no indication that this was necessary. However, she attended to the relationship of others by mediating an understanding for Dylan and Erica. We imagine that Cheyenne drew on the narratives of relationship shaped by her family to help her in this negotiation with Dylan and Erica.

The relationships of these children with others helped them to shape a space in which to compose their stories to live by in school. We wonder what will become of them as they move through the school system, moving in and out of relationships. Over time these children may encounter other individuals who will help them shape a space for the ongoing work of composing their stories to live by. We are hopeful about how Aaron’s and Cheyenne’s families are helping them imagine who they are and who they are becoming, specifically in relation to the school system.

Notes

¹Because of the multiage organization at Ravine Elementary School, our research site, we refer to the children’s year in school rather than grade. Year 1-2 refers to the diverse group of 5-, 6-, and 7-year-old children in the classroom.

²We use the term *Aboriginal* to reflect the First Nations of which these children are a part. Bruno (2007) writes, "First Nations refers to Aboriginal, Native or Indian as it is defined in the Constitution Act, 1982. These terms are used interchangeably by various authors" (p. 19).

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