Storying: The Child's Articulation of Experience Through Imagination

by Idrenne Lim-Alparaque, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Alberta, 1986.

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What do children reveal through their storying? How do children experience storytelling and story listening? How do children's experiences become part of their storying? These ponderings became "signposts" or signals for Lim-Alparaque on her journey with children through their "world of storying."

Lim-Alparaque did not look at the experience of storying from a traditional "pre-formulated theoretical or scientific" perspective which forces the child's languaging experience into the researcher's framework or mold. Instead, she became part of the context and listened to the stories as they took shape; she watched as children became involved in telling and listening to stories. Thus storying was viewed as the *process* of story itself; it encompassed the experiencing, composing, understanding, and sharing of story as well as the "listening-telling/telling-listening" experience.

Her phenomenological approach to storying, which is "a first" in this area of childhood research, has opened a new vista in the epistemology of children's language in that it allowed her to create meaning *through* the child's language rather than make meaning *of* the language. Lim-Alparaque clearly explains the research attitudes which served as the methodological base of her study and states that through the use of contemplation, participatory involvement, and sympathetic reflection she began to make sense of the events in and around the children's storytelling. The threads collected from their shared experiences form a theme for each chapter of the thesis. And as the chapters unfold, a tapestry of storying, experiencing, and imagining begins to emerge. Drawing from phenomenology and hermeneutics for her philosophical and methodological base, she weaves an insightful and significant "story about children storying."

It is not my intention to downplay the impact of Lim-Alparaque's thesis by referring to it as a "story about children storying." On the contrary, I view her perspective of the "storytelling-researcher" as indicative of research in its fullest sense. Her approach and style encouraged the emergence of a "poetic discourse of childhood" which enabled her to utilize the "magic of storying" to draw the reader into the research.

Her opening paragraph, which is nine-year-old Jenny's moving story of a lonely aborigine boy, stirs your curiosity. She moves on to describe how some neighborhood children had gathered in her backyard and listened to Jenny's story.

> Some were sprawled on the grass, others sat with me by a tree, a couple of boys were perched on their bikes and a six year old sat beside Jenny, hugging her knees together as she listened. Each listener was obviously situated in their own physical space, yet unmistakably, all held together in that flow of experience through imagination, stirred by the telling of a story. One could feel the "magic" that pervaded that brief storying moment. It was as if Jenny's storytelling had installed the children's bodies in a situated-ness that ushered each child into another space. A storying space maybe? (p. 1)

As you continue to read, you become aware of a subtle change in the "story" as a linkage is made between the backyard scene and research. A review of literature emerges and forms a backdrop for the study; the stage is set and the story moves on to encompass the characters.

The eight characters (or storytellers) introduce themselves in the second chapter by relating aspects of their personal life. For example, Eva states, "I'm nine years old. I take piano lessons and ballet." Patrick shares not only his age, but indicates that his origins have special meaning by saying, "I'm eight years old. I was born in Toronto." Kimberley, age eight, reveals a "national identity" and a strong personal dislike when she exclaims, "My name is Kimberley. I'm a typical Canadian girl." When pressed for an explanation of "typical" she responds, "I hate broccoli." The introduction of the eight children continues in this manner and provides the reader with a brief vignette for each storyteller. By introducing the children through their own language, not only was a more personal view of each child provided, but a respect of children's storying was also apparent. Each child, from the very beginning, was viewed as a spellbinder who could weave a story for an audience. These stories were based on the children's lived experience and reflected various themes.

Themes reveal not only what is said but also what is unsaid; they are the lens through which a researcher can view and make sense of an experience. The themes which emerged from the storying experiences were Lim-Alparaque's pathways or "access-ways" to the children. The scene or theme of *Touch Magic* (Chapter 3) is one in which the reader sees

> Children flicker in and out of two realities, the imaginary and the practical. Their stories take shape from the base of their everyday familiar experiences. From these grounds of practical experiencing storying accomodates their thinking, feeling, and languaging within the matrix of new meanings made accessible through the filter of old meanings. Their

> storying does not stray far from the arena of casual daily experiencing. (p. 130)

"Touch magic" is a time when a bonding occurs among teller, listener, and tale. There is also a bonding with language and a "joy of recognition." The joy occurs as the child discovers a "new knowing" and "new recognition" within the storying process.

This new knowing and new recognition appear again in Chapter 4 as the children's stories clearly indicate that "what they know, they can know again," only in a new way or in a new light. The chapter *Invitations to Storying* describes how the children needed time or "moments of gathering" to scan and sort the experiences which formed and reformed their stories. There are descriptions of "moments which invite storying." These moments are basically the natural activities of childhood—the playing, drawing, talking, being together, experiencing an alone space, and so forth. The theme of "invitations to storying" spills over and weaves into other themes, for example, the way lives touch other lives.

Lives Touching Other Lives, the theme of Chapter 5, depicts the "human-ness of storying." This chapter suggests that "storying heightens the opportunity for enriching their (children's) relations with parents, friends, and others. Hence we see friendships furthered, family relationships strengthened, and a bonding with great authors and storymakers" (p. 69). You also see the human side of storying though the child's "meandering."

> Perhaps because of their new-ness at things children tend to take their time to meander as it were along the storying path. It does not necessarily denote an inadequacy or reluctance on the children's part when they meander, but it is more of a yielding to that compelling urge to turn over every stone that crosses their path, to swing from branches of trees that seem to invite swinging from, to poke into things, on and on in their own exploration of the world. (p. 85)

For those new at storying, this meandering is perfectly normal. Unfortunately, not all teachers acknowledge or accept this behavior as a natural part of storying. They expect children to "produce" stories at a certain time or on a specific day. Yet professional writers say that their storying ideas can occur at anytime—day or night. Novelists seem to meander in their thinking and their writing before their book or short story is submitted for publication. If storytelling/listening and story writing are to be educational experiences, teachers must first allow such activities to be evolving human experiences. These activities cannot be timetabled in a rigid manner but must be allowed to ebb and flow throughout the day. Such flexibility will allow children the opportunity to relate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

In Chapter 6, the reader sees how the child's thoughts, feelings, and languaging are linked to "experiencing through imagination." Eight-

year-old Patrick, for example, uses language and past experiences to create his own version of why the world has color.

> A long time ago a man lived in a black and white land. And one day it rained and it rained and it rained. And the man got tired of this rain so he went up—he decided to talk to the rainmaker. So he went up to the rainmaker—and told him to make to to—to stop making it rain.
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> And the rainmaker said "Okay—I'll stop making it rain." And then when the man got down from the rainmaker's house he saw a beautiful rainbow. It looked really lovely. And when he got down to earth—he took handfuls of colours from the rainbow and spread all the colours around the world. That's how colours came to be. (p. 91)

Lim-Alparaque noted that if we encourage children to relate experiences through storying, we create opportunities for them to think in a "remembering and anticipating" way. The connections among children's experiences, their play, and their languaging were apparent at all age levels. Unfortunately, most schools do not accept play as a means of learning except at the preprimary or kindergarten level. Yet play is the child's personal curriculum—it is the vehicle used to integrate experience and language and to form meaning. Thus a connection or a full circle is made back to children's "two realities" of the imaginary and the practical.

The circle starts again as the research reflects on *Expression* (Chapter 7) and how to make sense out of lived experiences. She questions, "How does my experience of the children's storying find its way to expression? What approach best demonstrates that dialectic between experiencing and thoughtful, sympathetic reflecting, between reflecting and expression?" (p. 117). Lim-Alparaque then explains why she elected to turn to the attitude that guides hermeneutical writing in order to "bring to language a story about children telling stories" (p. 117). The languaging of hermeneutical writing allowed her to explore and describe the children's storying experiences in a "feeling way" and yet still capture the openness and depth of the meaning. The circle starts again as the researcher reflects on the experience of being part of the storying world of children—of being a listener.

What is it like to listen to children's stories? As a researcher, how does one become part of *A Terrain of Listening*? In Chapter 8 Lim-Alparaque notes that, "There are three elements which for me seem to belong to the researcher's listening experience" (p. 121). She then reflects on how resonance, reverberation, and recognition are integral and basic to her terrain. Resonance is seen as the first part of the listening experience. It is the luxury of listening for enjoyment; it is a time to bask in the experience and to be drawn into the drama. Reverberation is the researcher's interaction with the experience—it is the reflecting and the pondering. Recognition is the process of "stepping back" from the experience so as to fully appreciate its

fullness and understand the meaning. While these "three Rs" are described and discussed separately in the thesis, it is clear that they are the furrows in the terrain of listening. The terrain itself has to be spontaneous, sincere, and sensitive. The listening experience of the researcher is linked to the storying of children to add a new dimension to the child's world of storying.

Depth is woven into the tapestry of storytelling as pedagogical underpinnings are made explicit in Chapter 9. Each theme or thesis is reflected on in light of current educational practices and/or proposed practices. For example, Chapter 4 describes the process which took place for Patrick, one of the storytellers, before he created his story about the *Bad Butterfly*. First he had an invitation to storying and then there were "moments of gathering." The invitation was the arrival of a parcel for Lim-Alparaque containing butterflies which had carefully been mounted on velvet and placed in a picture frame. (Patrick was one of the six storytellers who helped Lim-Alparaque unwrap the package.) The moments of gathering were next—this was a time when Patrick read books about butterflies and even bought a paperback book on sale. He told Lim-Alparaque that he had "pictures of butterflies" in his head. It took time, or moments of gathering, before the following story burst forth:

> It's about the loveliest butterfly in the whole wide world. And the fairy—Fairy Goodness brang—brang [sic] some gifts for the butterfly. She gave her some magic powers—something like hers. It was invisibiality [sic]. They would turn invisible and hold things up which is invisible powers. So—ummmm—the butterfly said one day, "I get tired of being so nice and being Mr. Nice Guy all the time. I wonder what it would be like . . ." So he changed his attitude and he looked ugly—uglier—blacker—he turned dirtier. He was rude. He took Miss Ladybug's baskets and put—put—holes in them and dashed them with water. And made drops hit Mr. Spider. (p. 139)

And so the story continues, relating the adventures and misadventures of the "bad butterfly." The story does have a happy ending as Fairy Goodness makes the butterfly "good again" and through her magic makes him "forget all about his past. From now on—the good butterfly continued to explore the world all over again" (p. 140).

As Lim-Alparaque discusses the pedagogical implications of these moments of gathering, she notes that "there are pauses that precede the actual rendering of the story (p. 133). In her discussion she pointed out that it is difficult to exploit these moments in a classroom if children's storying "is limited to a Monday writing schedule and all their final draft copies expected to be handed in on Thursday" (p. 134). She then draws on the work of Richards (1985) to describe the type of classroom environment which would encourage these moments of gathering.

Even though Lim-Alparaque's study took place outside the school setting, some important pedagogical insights can be gleaned from exploring a child's "home/community world." Most children spend the first four or five years of their life with their families and friends; they are usually not in classrooms. Once they do start school, the majority of their day is still in a home or community context. If educational practices are to complement and/or extend what the children experience outside the classroom environment, then we need a clearer understanding of their "other world." Recent qualitative studies focusing on the child within a home/community context have uncovered some meaningful insights in terms of "being a home learner" (particularly in the area of early literacy). It is possible that curriculum and teaching practices will change drastically as we learn more about the child's "out-of-school" world. Some of these possible changes needed to be explored in more depth in the thesis.

The ways in which children spontaneously use "imagination/play" to create stories was an important finding of the study, yet there were few suggestions which would help teachers utilize this aspect of children's nature for learning in the classroom. However, teachers can turn to some of Lim-Alparaque's other observations to examine their own behaviors. There are two aspects of her work that I feel have relevance for all educators. First is the use of the "three Rs" (Resonance, Reverberation, and Recognition) when listening to others. These are useful guides for educators (from preschool through university) to adhere to if they wish to develop a terrain of listening *and* learning. Such a terrain would mean that both students and teachers work and learn together in a sensitive, caring way. The second aspect has to do with "invitations to learning (or storying)" and "moments of gathering." What is it that invites one to learn (or to story)? The same invitation will not attract all people; therefore teachers need to develop a keener insight into when a student is accepting the invitation or being drawn in by an experience. The teacher will need to provide a host of experiences or "interesting butterflies" for students to "play around with." For children, this "playing around" is a literal, concrete activity. With adults, it is usually experienced as "playing around with ideas." In either case, these are "moments of gathering" which grow into "a new creation"—into a story which has never been told.

These are only two examples of the pedagogical application of Lim-Alparaque's work. As this thesis revealed how individuals draw from their experiences to create new meaning, I believe the audience for this study is wider than those interested in children's storying. Thus I intentionally outlined very general ideas which encompass all grade levels (preschool through university) and can be applied to any field of study.

In summary, Lim-Alparaque's thesis is an excellent example of phenomenological research. The "story" unfolds to reveal the many

facets of children's storying. While the pedagogical implications have been limited to this area, I see a broader application in terms of classroom practices and teacher education. I am certain that each person who reads this thesis will find their own "educational sign-post" embedded within the "storying tapestry" of this thesis.