**The trouble with "getting personal":**
**New narratives for new times in classroom writing assignments**

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ABSTRACT: *This article explores and interrogates the common practice of asking students to write personal narratives within elementary English Language Arts classrooms, addressing some of the difficulties that may arise when students are required to share personal details. Using interview and focus-group data from a study of internationally adopted children and schooling, and a number of autobiographical experiences, using a complexity thinking frame, we address some of the challenges such assignments can present for students who have diverse cultural, family or life history backgrounds. We examine some teacher biases that can present difficulties within writing assignments and present some new narrative possibilities and literacy practices that can be more inclusive of all students and acknowledge diversity.*

KEYWORDS: *Writing instruction, English Language Arts curriculum, complexity thinking, diversity, adoption.*

> There is a very puzzling contrast – really an awesome disconnect – between the breathtaking diversity of school children and the uniformity, homogenisation, and regimentation of classroom practices…. (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 4)

> J. had an assignment in Kindergarten where she was "Star for the Day" when she was expected to present a history of herself. Everyone else brought in their baby photos but because J. was adopted at age 2, all she had was an orphanage referral photo. (Parent interview)

## INTRODUCTION

In many North American elementary (K-7) classrooms, students are asked to share information about themselves or their lives. Personal narrative assignments are pervasive in English Language Arts classrooms, particularly in the early years, when educators often begin with what children know, "themselves", as typical content for writing and representing activities. Over our years of elementary English Language Arts teaching experience, as primary teachers and as teacher educators, we have witnessed and initiated many such "write about yourself" projects. While there can be regional variations depending on school or district practices, assignments such as "All About Me" projects, "Student of the Week" writing and presentations, "When I was Born" reports, personal timeline writing, and student journal writing are all resilient pedagogical structures in the classrooms we visit. Topics involving sharing of personal details or information are also connected to goals and outcomes in mandated curricula. For example, in the province of Alberta, Canada where we reside, within the Kindergarten to Grade 3 level English Language Arts curriculum outcomes (Alberta Learning, 2000), students are expected to "share personal experiences" and

"contribute relevant ideas from personal experiences to group language activities." Later, students in Grade Four are expected to "produce narratives that describe experiences and reflect personal responses" and Grade Five students are expected to "use own experience as a starting point and source of information for fictional oral, print and other media texts". A quick scan of English Language Arts curricula in Canada and the US demonstrates that such objectives are fairly typical across North American elementary classrooms.

Having students use the experiences, memories, and background information from their own lives as the "raw material" for classroom assignments and experiences would seem to be developmentally appropriate pedagogy (Clay, 1993), as well as practice that acknowledges the significance of identity to matters of literacy (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). And, some may ask, doesn't the notion of beginning with students' "own stories" honour the backgrounds and diversities children bring to school?

While on the surface such practices appear to do just that for *some* children, we aim to uncover the "[t]rouble in the works" (Bruner, 2000, p. 33) less visible when viewed through the lens of the normative narrative (Carrington, 2002) and dominant discourses and interpretations of childhood (Heydon & Iannacci, 2008). As we have acknowledged, in our own teaching careers we have both included personal narrative writing and the sharing of autobiographical stories in the classroom without much scrutiny. However, each of us can recall specific instances when surprising student responses evoked a sense of discomfort and caused us to wonder what had gone wrong. In this article, we will address the discomfort and disconnection that occurs for some students when they are required to "get personal" in their writing. We will examine some of the ways in which notions of "normality" can permeate narrative writing practices, using examples from a research project working with adoptive parents as well as several autobiographical experiences that have provoked us to revisit what we might really be doing when we ask students to write about their backgrounds and experiences in the English Language Arts classroom.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Exploring children's personal writing experiences at school requires a consideration of the complex intersection of learning processes, diverse personal backgrounds, sociocultural assumptions, school environment, and the layers of embedded and historical "school practices" involved in such activities. We draw on the theoretical perspectives of complexity thinking (also known as *complexity science* and *complexity theory*, see for example, Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2008; Richardson & Cilliers, 2001) to further explore personal narrative writing assignments as complex, pedagogical phenomena.

Complexity thinking has emerged from "hard science" disciplines including, among others, the fields of neuroscience, mathematics, biology, information science and physics (Doll, 1993; Johnson, 2001; Waldrop, 1992), and has also developed within other areas such as anthropology, economics and education (Cilliers, 2008; Davis et al., 2008; Laidlaw, 2005; Morrison, 2008; Richardson & Cilliers, 2001; St. Julien, 2005). Complexity thinking in educational research is particularly useful for studying phenomena that defy reduction into "parts" and are part of interconnected living

systems, and where transdisciplinary attitudes provide tools for deeper understanding. One visual metaphor for complexity is the fractal shape, where each smaller section provides a complex representation of the larger whole (a branch of broccoli, for example). Another draws on the image of the rhizome to consider phenomena or ideas, where notions that may be "above ground" are intricately linked to "below ground" roots and histories (Davis et al., 2008[1]). In Western Canada, near the Rocky Mountains, poplar colonies are joined through rhizomes as one large organism, often with a long history of growth, although individual trees are still visible.

Exploring children's personal narrative writing assignments in school requires a consideration of multiple yet interconnected structures, and acknowledging historical influences as well as contemporary shifts. As Davis and Sumara (2006) suggest, gaining an understanding of phenomena within social systems such as schools requires considering "all-at-once" how layers and intersections of dynamic activity constantly interact, and the knowledge that such "organisational/organismic layers" may not be neatly separate (p. 28). We use a complexity-thinking lens as a way to look between and across data to explore relationships among the "micro" examples of individual student or autobiographical experiences and the "macro" data offered by our larger research projects. Ellis (1997) writes, in relation to autobiographical work, that it "adds blood and tissue to the abstract bones of theoretical discourse" (p. 117). The "blood and tissue" vignettes that we have included allow us to make connections among personal experiences, narratives of children's school experiences shared by research participants, and "historical" patterns of curriculum practice.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAME AND DATA CONTEXT

As noted, the work of this paper draws upon the "micro" realms of autobiographical experience as well as "macro" data from a larger, multi-phased research project, aiming to use complexity thinking as both a theoretical and a methodological influence. The first phase of the research project, entitled *Changing Families, Changing Schools* was funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. In this initial phase of the project, Linda interviewed parents of internationally adopted children to investigate specific examples of school experiences that their child(ren) found challenging or difficult, as well as attempting to uncover aspects of classroom experience that seemed to work well in supporting children from diverse backgrounds (Laidlaw, 2010; Laidlaw, 2006). Adoptive parents from 17 families answered questions and recounted stories of their child's encounters with schooling, and shared experiences in relation to their family structure as adoptive families. These interviews were intended to take an ethnographic approach, that is, as developed by others (Behar, 1996; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988; Richardson, 1997) as research opportunities where both participant and researcher are acknowledged as involved in multiple layers of cultural experience and biographical positioning. Participating families in the interviews were from three regions in Canada: Western Canada, Atlantic Canada, and with the majority of participants residing in Central Canada within the province of Ontario. The majority of families

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[1] In their descriptions, Davis et. al also draw from the use of the image of the rhizome by Deleuze and Guattari (1983) noting the transdisciplinary nature of complexity.

[2] It is important to note that non-white Canadian parents also adopt internationally, and attempts were

had daughters who were adopted from China, with several children in the study adopted from Korea, Vietnam or Haiti. All of the children were in elementary school (preschool to grade six). All adoptive parents interviewed were Euro-descent Canadians, and included two Francophone Canadians (French Canadians living outside of Quebec), and one parent who had emigrated to Canada from Australia.[2]

In the second phase of the project, *Changing Families, Changing Classrooms*, Suzanna and Linda worked with a focus group of six teachers who were either adoptive parents or were adoptees. This group of teachers considered and discussed areas of classroom or school experiences that had been mentioned as either "positive" or "negative" incidents by the adoptive parents who had participated in the earlier interviews. Working collaboratively with the teacher/parent focus group, Suzanna and Linda examined "problematic" classroom practices that had been noted by interview participants and explored ideas and resources that might be used to create more "diversity-friendly" options for literacy classrooms. And finally, within the autobiographical layer, the roots of our own experiences and identities also influenced our perspectives: Linda is a third generation Euro-Canadian adoptive single parent of two Chinese daughters and Suzanna is a first generation Canadian of Chinese descent and a parent in a bi-racial family.

While it was possible to collect certain statistics and note trends within the first two phases of the project, we recognise the value of gathering the "small stories" that families or children viewed as significant. Like Behar (1996), we understand that the complex "web of stories" (p. 132) that emerges as the individual stories are told communicates different information than the statistics do. Collectively, such stories provide insights into how such families and individuals experience their differences and the ways in which schooling both includes and excludes children. While each family had particular experiences and a unique perspective, often their stories would speak to one another, and Suzanna and I at times found aspects of our own experiences also echoed within parent interviews or conversations.

In considering this weave of data, the micro, the macro, and the "in between", complexity acknowledges that "small-scale" phenomena (for example, an individual) may be equally complex to that of a larger-scale level (for example, a particular collective), and to that of wider and less tangible levels of phenomenon (for example, a culture or a discourse). Additionally, such systems are understood as interwoven and overlapping in their influence and effects. We have found that the use of conceptual frames, emerging language, and metaphors offered by complexity thinking provide additional opportunities for interpretation and representation within the "messy" and dynamic layers of this project. Each "small story" is itself a complex phenomenon, often representing an intersection of multiple dynamics. We present the following vignette as one such example.

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[2] It is important to note that non-white Canadian parents also adopt internationally, and attempts were made in the study to include several Canadian-Chinese parents who had adopted from China, as these parents comprise part of the international adoption "community" in Canada. None of these families chose to participate. Similarly, Linda received no response from Canadian families who had adopted Caucasian children internationally (for example, Russia, Kazahkstan).

**THE TROUBLE WITH "GETTING PERSONAL": A "SMALL STORY" EXAMPLE**

As we were debriefing a discussion we had earlier one day with the focus group of teachers and parents on the topic of "problematic writing assignments", Suzanna shared a difficult writing experience of her own, which had recently occurred in a course she had taken as a graduate student. She had been asked to write a brief personal narrative and unexpectedly found herself experiencing "writing trouble". Here is an excerpt from her later written reflection:

> Recently, I was assigned to write a personal life story in one of my graduate courses. It was one simple paragraph of my personal experience teaching elementary school but I struggled with it for weeks. Writing is my forté, why the struggle? What was my problem with personal life story writing?

In our conversation, Suzanna made a connection to her memories of earlier narrative writing experiences from her childhood elementary school history, which she saw as linked to her resistance to the graduate narrative writing assignment:

> Throughout my elementary school career, I always dreaded school holidays. Not that I did not enjoy my school vacations, rather, I did not enjoy writing about my personal holiday experiences. Writing assignments such as "write the highlight of your summer vacation" or "what did you do during your Christmas holiday?" were especially problematic. As a Chinese-Canadian immigrant family, Christmas was not a celebration for us. We were not Christians and Christmas holidays did not involve any traditions such as gift exchange, family turkey dinners, or playing pick-up hockey on a frozen pond. However, the majority of my former classmates happily shared such holiday highlights and personal experiences.

Suzanna recounted that when she was a young student she found herself relying on another approach when dealing with "difficult" requests to write personal narratives. She used the creation of fiction as her coping strategy:

> In most of my personal life story writing assignments, I simply abandoned the personal experience aspect. Instead, I created fictions which imitated the Little House on the Prairie or Anne of Green Gables stories.[3] Fictional writing became a survival skill in elementary school. I wrote about the most wonderful and beautifully decorated Christmas trees in our gingerbread-fragranced living room, long stockings hung on our chimney, vivid descriptions of our Christmas gifts, joyous carol singing with my mother playing the piano, and so on. These fictional writings helped me survive the dreaded "what you did you do during your Christmas holiday?" assignments or requirements to write other personal stories about my childhood experiences.

Similarly, parents in the adoption study interviews recounted examples of challenging and "excluding" assignments for their children that often presented a "disconnect" between their child's background or experiences and those of their classmates. Assignments requiring the sharing of personal history details were often mentioned as problematic, though ironically, were likely being developed by teachers with the

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[3] Popular American and Canadian historical novels for young readers.

intention of building a sense of class community and making connections to identity.[4] Several parents mentioned specific difficulties created by personal autobiographical writing assignments intended to tell a child's story from birth, and assignments that were part of "When I was a Baby" or "All About Me" theme studies that required students to share specific information from their early life. One parent recounted:

> J. had an assignment in Kindergarten where she was "Star for the Day", when she was expected to give a history of herself. Everyone else brought in their baby photos but because J. was adopted at age 2, all she had was an orphanage referral photo.

Another parent shared an example where her child was asked to create a short book about herself as a baby:

> My daughter had a homework assignment where she had to ask me a bunch of questions about her birth, which of course we know nothing about. The questions were about time of birth, whether she had hair, weight, height, etc. I wanted very much to call the teacher and tell her that this was inappropriate and the assignment should have been modified to accommodate all the children in the class, but my daughter wouldn't let me.

Similarly to Suzanna's childhood strategy, in addressing this problematic assignment, the mother recounted that her daughter eventually chose to invent some "facts" so as not to stand out from her peers. For this child, the point of the assignment became "complying with the teacher's request" and she did not wish to reveal her own life history, nor did she want her mother to address her difficulty with the assignment and reveal personal information to the teacher.

Suzanna reflected:

> Not writing the truth is a lie. Have I been a "fake"? Most of my journal entries in elementary school were fictions. Should I feel guilty about lying to my elementary teachers because they gave me good grades for my "fake" personal life story writing? And why does it still bother me four decades later? I believe "the revealing of private sentiments or private happenings are matters to be shared among [good] friends perhaps, or between lovers, or in the gossip columns of life" (van Manen, 2007, p. 54) but not to strangers.

When teachers present writing assignments that are impossible or difficult for students to accurately write about, either because of lack of information or because of awareness that their own story might be considerably different from those of their peers, or contain what Britzman (1998) names "difficult knowledge", students are placed in an untenable position. Children who are unable to obtain specific birth or life history information or who may have identities and circumstances that differ from their classmates, such as Suzanna's experience as a new immigrant child, may be left feeling like they do not measure up in comparison to peers who can readily complete such assignments. They may also be concerned with appearing "not normal" in classrooms where assignment instructions clearly communicate the sorts of histories

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[4] The parents interviewed tended to be somewhat sympathetic to such pedagogical "missteps" indicating that they otherwise found their children's teachers to be highly competent. Several suggested that such events were based on teachers being "misinformed" about the diversity of children's lives today, or guessing that some problematic assignments seemed to be based on curricula being "outdated".

students are expected to have in a "mono-approach" (Heydon & Iannacci, 2005) to diversity in literacy classrooms. Some children may simply resist or evade such assignments, as we suspect has occurred with students in our former classrooms, the "real problem" at the centre unrecognised when a lack of cooperation becomes the focus. Some students may still wish to comply and do not challenge these assignments, similar to Suzanna's example of writing about her "Christmas vacation" and the student required to write her "baby book", to appear as "good" students and not attract undesired attention to their differences. Resisting problematic writing assignments, through fictionalising and "inventing", are simply more subtle evasions than outright refusal or stating, "It's not really any of your business, teacher!" For children who may be navigating identity issues in relation to diversity – new immigrant children, children in diverse family compositions, children arriving to classrooms with different or difficult "histories" – such moves can have lasting negative consequences. As Suzanna's graduate writing experience exemplifies, such events are still memorable many decades later.

For trans-culturally and transracially adopted children, such as those in the families who participated in the research projects, issues of identity are complex. As Register (2005) suggests, for international and/or transracial adoptees, "Inside and outside don't match up" (p. 79) owing to differences between birth family and adoptive family contexts (for example race, ethnicity, culture). Acts of fictionalising can create an even greater sense of feeling like an imposter, as a person who is mis-seen, misread, and misunderstood. As Suzanna's anecdote relates, children from new immigrant families and/or who are members of culturally or religiously diverse families can also feel marginalised by personal narrative writing assignments, when there are narrow or limited choices given, or when the rest of the class shares very similar kinds of personal stories. The sense of not belonging in one's country can be a difficult identity issue for immigrant children (Kirova & Adams, 2006), and such assignments can further underline differences. Similarly, children who experience other kinds of differences based on family composition[5] or circumstances[6] can also be excluded by narrow constructions and biased assumptions about children's lives. In the following sections we examine ways in which contemporary classrooms are changing and unpack and address some of the challenges and possibilities for shifting English Language Arts teaching in response to student diversity.

## CHANGING FAMILIES, CHANGING CLASSROOMS

> Like subjectivity, the ways in which people inhabit family and/or interethnicity is mediated by time and place. That is, every family experiences itself in site-specific ways. This is not new. However, what is new is that we are no longer bound by ideological blinkers to expect to see the nuclear family narrative objectified in day-to-day life. (Carrington, 2002, p. 141)

Although what Carrington (2002) names "new family" structures are proliferating, including an increase in more racially and culturally diverse families and diversity in

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[5] For example, single parent, same-sex parents, children in divorced families, children whose birth has involved reproductive technology such as genetic donors or surrogates, children in foster care placements.
[6] For example, family health or addiction issues, incarceration of a parent, or other kinds of trauma.

family compositions, these still tend to be under-represented within public school curricula. The modern nuclear, or "traditional" biological family, has been the normative standard against which all other family models have been measured, and where, in contrast, alternative family structures may be represented as deficient or illegitimate (Carrington, 2002; Carrington & Luke, 2003; Patton, 2000; Marsh & Turner-Vorbeck, 2009; Turner-Vorbeck, 2005). It is our contention that, typically, when teachers are developing the sorts of autobiographical English Language Arts assignments we have presented, it is the normative "Dick and Jane" 1950s family archetype from North American basal readers that is often still envisioned. The cultural resiliency of the notion of the construct of a nuclear family with two children (a boy, a girl), usually White, and middle class, in spite of increasing family diversity in contemporary society, represents what Heilman (2008) names "family hegemony". As Heydon and Iannacci (2008) suggest in their analysis of how young children are often positioned in school environments, issues of "normality" and "abnormality" are often used as colonising forces in classrooms, through discursive practices and "lived literacy curriculum."

"Other kinds of families" and home-lives can be ignored in the day-to-day "busy-ness" of classrooms, creating a context where a student's "different history" stands out more starkly. While parents interviewed within the adoption study mentioned observing representations of racial and cultural diversity within their child's school, many of these instances seemed to be fairly superficial displays of "costumes and customs," exoticising "the Other" rather than making real connections to culture and diversity. And, few of the parents could recall *any* concrete representations of family diversity in their child's school:

> [Family structure] is not specifically acknowledged.
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> There has been little recognition for different family structures.
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> [Representation is] heavily skewed toward two-parent families...same-sex families are also under represented.
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> I don't think the school acknowledges different family structures adequately. A lot of the work/assignments that come home seem to show two parent families. There have been a few times where a book has photos of transracial families or single parent families, but it is rare.

In the busy life of a classroom, the pressures of meeting curriculum aims can leave little time for a more critical reading of who might be excluded in particular materials, texts and assignments and whether or not all children see themselves, their families or their histories acknowledged in school materials. Sometimes, as we have observed and experienced ourselves, exclusions and "difficulties" become most apparent in the missteps, in the realisation that a particular assignment has been unintentionally troublesome for particular students. However, we are more concerned with some of the "below ground" situations, when children or their families do not inform teachers that a particular assignment is problematic or impossible to complete honestly or in a way that respects a child's dignity. Teachers are unlikely to know all details of all children's circumstances and personal histories, so what to do? As the parents and teachers in our focus group conversations emphasised, all the problematic narrative writing experiences and assignments had in common a lack of awareness about underlying normative assumptions that were often central to particular assignments.

**TROUBLING BIASES**

Many of the problematic narrative writing assignments that participants spoke about in our research, or were part of Suzanna's childhood writing experiences, were not inherently terrible learning activities. Most assignments parents mentioned had evidently involved detailed teacher planning and were carefully linked to curriculum and classroom inquiry topics. Several of the parents Linda interviewed recounted that in situations where they informed their children's teachers about the difficulties with particular assignments, teachers were initially surprised and then seemed to be troubled by the fact that they had not considered the possibility that some students would be unable to complete such work without difficulty – that they had made incorrect assumptions about the lives of their students. Such reports are also consistent with Linda's observations of occasions when her own children's teachers were made aware that some assignments were posing difficulty because of "normative" biases.

We are fairly certain that in most if not all of the incidents mentioned in our interviews and focus group discussions, and those we have witnessed or experienced in our own lives, such "slips" were not due to any malicious intent on the part of teachers. Rather, the "trouble" rises through a lack of critical analysis of the normative assumptions and "biased" assignments that are used uncritically, year after year. The following list includes the biases that were present in the problematic narrative writing and language arts activities mentioned by parents, and those we have encountered in our own classroom or life experiences:

- that all children have lived with their current family from birth;
- that all children live with biological relatives;
- that all children have access to the same information about their early life, and that if there is something they might not know they can ask a parent who will be able to tell them;
- that all children have access to the same documents (for example baby pictures, family photographs, birth certificates);
- that all children have access to accurate information and artifacts from their birth culture;
- that all children have happy and healthy lives they can write about honestly;
- that all children will be able to write/share a personal narrative about _____ (fill in the appropriate holiday or vacation experience) without difficulty;
- that all children will be happy and willing to share their experiences or personal background in the public forum of the classroom, or with their teacher.

Approaching assignments and classroom activities by considering potential biases and exclusions is something that literacy teachers already do; for example, in pre-reading literature to be shared in the classroom, most teachers will make choices not to share books or resources that present biased perspectives in relation to gender or that contain examples of racial or ethnic prejudice, unless they are using such examples for critical literacy analyses and for the purpose of having students develop awareness of bias and critical reading skills. We suggest that critical literacy skills and "close reading" (Gallop, 2000) are necessary for teachers, in addressing increasing diversities in contemporary classrooms, making necessary shifts in pedagogy and to

avoid creating the sorts of biased "missteps" that were frequently mentioned by research participants.

## OPENING POSSIBILITIES FOR NEW NARRATIVES

So what are teachers to do when English Language Arts curricula insist that students engage with personal narrative forms? It is our contention that personal narrative forms of writing are not the problem, but rather, it is how such forms are presented, and what is being required of students to address them. Mitchell (2007), in her adoption awareness guide for teachers and parents, suggests providing a number of choices for students and broadening the range of assignments as options for addressing potential difficulties that might arise for diverse students. For example, students might be encouraged to select a time frame of their own choosing in order to write about themselves in the past (rather than a specified age or time), or to create an imaginative narrative where fictionalising is welcome (for example, "When I was a baby, I think I was…"). Students might include self-portraits representing what they imagine they looked like at a younger age rather than requiring photographs to illustrate. Students can write about favourite activities or pastimes rather than a specified event or celebration, and might write about "someone who has been special to me", in contrast to writing a Father's Day poem or creating a Mother's Day book – contentious or impossible writing activities for some children.[7] Turner-Vorbeck (2005) suggests using inclusive alternatives such as "the ME Poem" where students can develop "descriptive statements about themselves, their interests, and their lives, including family members" (p. 8), using open-ended criteria such as a collection of adjectives to describe themselves, lists of interests, and so on. If students are given a number of choices in the creation of personal forms of narrative, they will also have opportunities to further develop the cultural dimension of literacy (Green, 1998, 2012), considering the significance of their choices in relation to meaning and context, in addition to thinking about the content and form of their work.

Using devices from fiction can also provide effective options for developing narrative writing, and this strategy provides explicit "permission" for students not to have to share details of their own lives if they do not desire to. In her teaching practice, Suzanna has used novels or picture books, asking students to write a personal narrative from the perspective of a particular character, "writing in role", or asking students to create a fictional story with themselves as the protagonist. When working on autobiographical or biographical writing projects, students may be given the option to write their own autobiography or to write from the perspective of a famous person, novel character, or historical figure. While we do not want to eliminate the possibility of personal narrative writing for the children who choose to reveal or explore aspects of their own lives, or for students to explore autobiographical forms, providing a range of choices for all includes everyone and does not point to those who might have "a different story". As the parents in Linda's study reported, projects that are designed as extremely specific (for example, "include the name of the hospital where you were born", "list your first word", write about your summer, and so on) and lack flexibility are those that tend to create more dilemmas and difficulties for student writers. Unless

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[7] Linda, as a single adoptive mother, has received some rather curious Father's Day writing artifacts from her children over the years, and one of her daughters once complained to a teacher that she didn't want to make a card for her grandfather, because, "My mum is the mum and the dad in our family!"

such questions or activities are carefully developed, such projects can require that children and their families publicly reveal difficult information, make students stand out as different from other members of the class because of gaps in their responses, or create situations where some students feel they must lie to protect themselves. Assignments that enable all students to participate and to make *their own choices* about what they wish to reveal or keep private will help to avoid the sorts of pitfalls that our parent participants mentioned and that caused distress.[8]


## BUILDING FURTHER CONNECTION

When we have addressed our concerns with the ways in which personal narratives are sometimes used in elementary classrooms with groups of teachers, we are sometimes asked, "But then, how can I get my students to connect with one another and with me? Aren't students going to be missing opportunities to get to know one another, or for me to learn more about them, if I don't include those sorts of writing assignments?" Sumara (2002) recounts that when asking pre-service teacher candidates about teachers they cared about and remembered from their classroom memories, they tended to know very few "personal" details:

> They do not know much about their favourite teachers, and yet they love them. Or so they say. It seems to me that they love what they and the teacher have become interested in….They loved being interested in something with someone else. (p. 118)

Following Sumara, we suggest that what is more important than knowing specific personal details about one another within classrooms and the context of school is engaging in shared projects of learning with others. Students and their teachers make connections with one another in shared reading and writing experiences on topics that are interesting to them, individually and collectively.[9] Alongside such activities they may choose to share details of their own lives, or they may choose not to; "getting personal" is not necessary to learning or the ability to create learning communities that are able to explore, investigate and share interests together. If it were, we believe we would see classroom teachers sharing more details of their own private lives with their students than is typical in most classrooms!

Linda, in her undergraduate and graduate classes, frequently asks students to share portions of their writing in class, often read aloud or posted in digital spaces. Usually, the writing that is shared is in the form of analyses or interpretations of readings, as well as connections being made to course topics. Students are never required to share personal details or information. Though some students will choose to share descriptions of events from personal experiences linked to course topics, the focus remains on the ideas being explored. In these classes, students always remark by the end of the term that they have gotten to know one another very well through their individual and collective writing projects, and in a "deeper" way than they have

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[8] In several interviews, parents spoke about particular assignments addressing information that they had not yet told their child (for example, details of child abandonment, and so on) and feeling as though they were suddenly pressured to address these in the space of a classroom rather than the later conversation they had planned for their children at a more developmentally suitable stage.

[9] And we acknowledge that students and classrooms are sometimes also sharing such interests more widely in the digital realm, where they may have very little "personal" knowledge of those with whom they may be sharing.

experienced in many other classes. While students are not required to share specific personal details, they tend to learn a great deal about one another in relation to their interpretations of readings, issues, and the particular content and inquiries being addressed within the course. They learn what their classmates are thinking about and what might be important to them. Knowing particular and consistent "facts" about one another's lives, their specific family details or what they did during their winter holidays is not necessary to forge those relationships.

We suggest, too, that when students engage in shared projects and collective engagements, literary or otherwise, and form relationships of trust with their teachers and peers, they may feel more comfortable about sharing details of their own experiences or differences, in their own time, and in their own way – even if they are "different" and contain information that might be "difficult". One of Linda's daughters, in her kindergarten year, with a trusted teacher and a group of supportive peers, chose to share photographs and details from her early life – vastly different from those her classmates – in response to an emerging class discussion about families and birth. But key in this sharing was that the choice was entirely hers, and that the teacher followed up this presentation by exploring the information that was shared in ways that moved beyond "the personal", including reading books and facilitating class discussions on adoption, foster homes and "different ways to become a family".

As we have outlined, the children who enter contemporary classrooms come with increasingly diverse backgrounds, family compositions and experiences. Children arrive at their classrooms with their own set of "small stories" (Behar, 1996). Some of these stories may find connection with peers or teachers, and some, for whatever reason, may not, although those stories may find their way to other places, just as the stories of our research participants and our own stories found their way into this project. As we look across the larger "poplar colony" of this work – separate, yet interconnected stories of experiences with narrative writing in classrooms, we see possibilities for classrooms to create new connections in rethinking writing activities and learning structures. Stated simply, it is the right of all children to be included in curriculum decisions and to be considered when teachers develop activities and learning structures. And when teachers make a focused effort to change practices that might exclude or pose difficulty for some children, they benefit *all* children. As adoption educators Wood and Ng (2001) suggest, "All children learn when all families are respected" (p. 76).

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