

How stories are lived in the Sunlight Room?

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Abstract

The word “story” mean much more than a story from a book. This inquiry is based on how the word “story” is lived among a group of infants and toddlers. The aim of this inquiry is not only to find out the stories of children, but also to inquire how stories are lived in the Sunlight Room. The Sunlight Room is a branch of one of the early childhood centers, which has an infant toddler program. The inquiry was carried out through close observation of the room and the children during a relatively long span of time. Videos and photos were the main tools to capture what was being observed. The inquiry demonstrated that everything is a story in the Sunlight Room and everyone in the room has a story. Also the stories that start in the Sunlight Room, can continue outside it.

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When I opened the Sunlight Room door, the materials, the children, the educators, the classroom set up, the classroom walls and every bit and piece of this room told me a story. Words cannot do justice to the many hundred languages in which the toddlers in the Sunlight Room revealed their stories. Every face in the room has a story. When encountering each other we become a story. Something was revealed and concealed at the same time in this encounter (Van Manen, 1997).

The term ‘story’ comes from the Latin *historia* and the Greek *historia* meaning learning by inquiry (Deitcher, 2013). According to Deitcher (2013) “Storying” appears to be a fundamental and uniquely human activity, and involves creating (as teller or author) and recreating (as listener, viewer or reader). My time at the Sunlight Room as a practicum student, unveiled to me that “we are our stories” (Episkenew, as cited in Bidwell, 2012, p. 109). Our identities are shaped by our stories. I cannot be who I am without my past stories and the future world I dream of. We are also a part of others’ stories. I was living with everyone’s stories in the Sunlight Room.

My inquiry at the Sunlight Room shows that stories are found in lived experiences (Van Manen, 1997). Everyone in the Sunlight Room has a story by which they can identify themselves. Ryan is one of the children who are fascinated with trucks. Ryan has communicated with me not verbally, but otherwise, how much trucks mean to his life. Every day, when he enters the room, he wants to be greeted by it. The joy of seeing and playing with his truck means the world to him. In a nutshell, the truck has become part of Ryan’s life story as an infant. While viderecording Ryan and the truck, my camera felt too weak to capture the intimate relationship that existed between them.

Yasmin, another child at the same centre, is a good storyteller. She always has stories about her family. Even if she sits in the Sunlight Room alone, the memories and stories of her family are present with her. She shares them as an experienced storyteller. Her rich language gift literally creates pictures in the listener’s mind. Sorrel and Redmond (as cited

in Weston, 2012) suggest that “stories create memorable pictures in the mind of the listener as well as connecting listeners to the values, information and principles of the storyteller” (p. 41). Certainly, we learn or know something about Yasmin from her stories. According to Harper (2001) stories are memories and Yasmin brings her memories alive when she shares her stories. When we tell a story, the pictures we have in our minds become vivid in front of our eyes and take us back in time. Thus, every time a story is generated, we become part of that story.

“Storytelling has been recognized for centuries as being a key element in education, recreation and preservation of cultural identity” (Koenig and Zorn, 2002 as cited in Weston, 2012, p.41). Living in time means living in the realm of the story. In other words, stories bring people together under one umbrella in a common time. I remember the time of stories or story time in my life. Growing up with stories, I think of stories not as printed materials but rather as narratives that emerge as they are created. These were oral stories. I mainly remember the stories that my father and my uncle created for me. As a young girl in Afghanistan, I remember myself sitting around *Sandali* (صندلی). *Sandalis* are set up in winter due to the cold weather. *Sandalis* are set up by covering a short table with a big blanket. Under the table a metal oven that contains charcoal fire is placed. The warmth of *Sandali* during the cold weather would bring children, adults and everyone in the family, under one blanket.

Winter’s cold heart has covered the windows with ice. Sitting on a warm mattress, lying down on soft cushions, and eating nuts with green tea unfetter the story. My cousin and I were restlessly waiting for the time when everyone was around *Sandali*. We were all anticipating the arrival of my father and his amazing sense of humor. To make us all laugh he drew each one of us on paper and created funny stories about us.



Fig. 1 Sandali set-up.¹

My uncle was another person who was able to take us, children, to another world with his stories. He shared the stories he learned from his father; the stories were about fairies, monsters, and other creatures. I became fascinated by fairies and I was praying to see them one day.

¹ Obaid Ur Rahman Ahmady. (2014). Facebook [Afghanistan my passion]. Retrieved November, 17, 2015 from <https://www.facebook.com/Ariyana.Afghanistan/photos/a.534882709953832.1073741829.525750997533670/672799922828776/>

Coming together under one big blanket and sharing our thoughts about things created new stories. We talked about each other and our memories. We also shared news about things that happened during the day. Together, we enchanted the happy news and felt sorrow for the sad news. Harper (2001) considers that the word “news” represents the etymological root of the word “story”.

Sometimes the *Sandali* took the role of a teaching table. It provided us with moral lessons. As Dieter (2013) asserts “a discussion about moral behavior in a story carries much weight in the child’s development, and generates multiple responses to morally challenging situations” (p. 240). By sharing their stories, my family wanted us to follow the way they lived their life. According to Harper (2001) the word “moral” seems to also contribute to the etymological root of the word “story”.

The stories of *Sandali* time affected my life as a person and opened the world to me. *Sandali* time is a part of my own story time. As a practicum student at the Sunlight Room, I needed to share my own stories with the educators at the center before entering the realm of the stories shared by children. I felt that this way of gradually introducing myself to others will help me gain courage to become part of the children’s story time.

The Sunlight Room has a *Sandali* time. When Joanna, one of the educators, brings her books, all children gather around her and form their own *Sandali*. She opens her sack of stories and takes the children to another world. Together, they all linger with animals, fairies, monsters, aliens, and humans. Children are not only listeners, but also contributors. They bring their stories into the story. While Joanna was reading the story titled *Little lamb, have you any wool?* (Minhós Martins & Kono, 2011) she pointed to the long woolen scarf on a lamp. Yasmin responded: “Hey! That is like lopty loop.” “Books construct social relationships and promote concepts, ideas and identities that respond to what adults believe children should know and value” (Reyes-Torres & Bird, 2015, p.125). When Joanna reads the story she shares her beliefs and values with the children. The story time becomes a time when the educator and children witness and have a dialogue about an account or narration of something that happened (Harper, 2001).

The children are introduced to many stories. However, some stories speak to some of the children deeply. They get into the children’s hearts and capture their interests. *Dark Night* (De Monfreid, 2009) is a story about a boy named Felix who is lost in the forest and later saved by a rabbit. This story lives with the children. The children and educators talk about Felix in the same way they would talk about a child who was physically in the room. Salma is one of the children who loves the *Dark Night* story and connects to the story. She memorized many sentences from the book and recalls those sentences when she flips the pages of the book. I wonder what it is about one particular story that builds connections with some children? Is Salma empathizing with Felix and feels the same fear that Felix experiences in the story? Which aspects of the story grab her? These are some questions I am left with.

Have you seen my dragon? (Light, 2014) is another storybook that found a permanent place in the Sunlight Room. The main character, a boy, loses his dragon and searches around the city to find it. The story does not have much text or many colors; rather, finely patterned black lined pen-and-ink drawings depict the city. While looking at this story, the children like to search and find the dragon on each page. This story is not about a dragon running around New York City, but about the dragon in the Sunlight Room. An educator drew a big picture of the dragon from the book and this dragon comes alive on the walls of the Sunlight Room, the nap room, within the blocks and on the canopy. Once, the picture of the dragon was hung up from the ceiling in the nap room along with other big pieces of paper. When Salma entered the room, she lay down under the papers and said: “I am sleeping in the dragon’s building.” When Eva came, she said: “Look! The dragon is here.” She tried to jump up to bring the dragon down. In the story the dragon gets hungry and eats a hot dog. Emma and Sophia used clay to prepare peanut butter in order to feed the dragon. They were acting out the sound of the dragon’s voice while eating. The dragon lived in other drawings and in papier-mâché as well. It accepted

different colors from green to brown and many others. The story of the dragon was repeatedly narrated with clay. One educator and a group of children came under a canopy to make a clay dragon. Children were generous and added other things such as dinosaurs, chestnuts and cars to the story. Narratives emerged and a lot of dialogue happened. Ali and Noel wore paper tails and were pretending to be dragons. Children played with the story.

The dragon had a baby and it was eating ice cream.

Like the story of the dragon, many stories are interpreted differently and are transformed by the children and educators. Children create their own theories and narratives from stories, learning something new every time.

The Sunlight Room became a *Sandali*. Sunlight has an ultimate friendship with paper. Beautiful papier-mâché bowls are hanging from the ceiling. Papers are used to draw stories. Children create their own stories with paper. One day, a child found a box of shredded paper in the room. The paper traveled all over the room and the children were playing and throwing it at each other. Music was playing in the room. Some children joined the educator in dancing with the paper. It brought all the children together and created a *community of a common story*. This illustrates that stories form a community.

After the dance, the box of paper was left unattended until Sulaiman decided to hide under it and to act like a turtle. This captured others' attention. Somehow the box became a living entity. Sulaiman was underneath the table and the children together with the educators started to draw on it. This moment created a new story. According to Harper (2011) stories are sequences of events. By combining all the events with paper a larger event is created and a new story can be told. Furthermore, each material can have this potential. "Stories do things. They not only reflect reality; they create it" (Bidwell, 2012, p.112). Children's play tells a story that either takes route from a culture or it creates a new culture. For instance, Salma always plays with the center's baby and she carries the traditional role of a mother and a woman by diapering the baby and so on. One day, Salma and Ali (a little boy) had some struggles over the baby. The materials allow for a narrative to happen. They bring into action the hundred languages that children communicate with. Finally, I can say that stories are materialized. Materials create stories.

In the following section, I will share the story of Max and his dinosaur to show an example of how children can generate stories. His story is written from my perspective and is based on my interpretation. Max's story shows us how narratives "allow us to broaden the horizon of our normal existential landscape by creating possible worlds" (Van Manen, 1997, p.70).

The story of Max and the dinosaur.

The way the children play with materials creates a story.

One day, when the sun was still warm and shining upon the trees, under the tall trees, in the forest, lived Max and his dinosaur. This orange dinosaur was from the brachiosaurus family. Many people surrounded Max and his dinosaur. A group of students from a curriculum class were in the forest drawing with the children. Papers, crayons, pencil colors, and sharpies were all lying on the ground. Max looked at the paper and was fascinated by the drawings on it. He wanted his dinosaur to experience the paper. Max thought that dinosaurs sense things with their mouths. He tilted the dinosaur's mouth onto the paper to allow it to feel the drawing. He then touched the paper with the dinosaur's

feet. The dinosaur walked all over the paper. Next, Max wanted the dinosaur to walk with him in the forest. Holding onto the dinosaur's tail, their walk begun. He showed the dinosaur to me and said: "Oga." He continued on his walk. He passed the trees, stones, and the people. He wandered around the forest holding his head high. Suddenly, he saw a tall bush. He let the dinosaur eat a branch of the bush. He continued on his journey. On his way, he found a round piece of rock. He introduced the rock to the dinosaur. The rock lived among wood chips. Max played with the wood chips and searched for what lied beneath them. He let go of the rock and ran ahead holding his dinosaur by the tail. He pushed his body to climb up the hill. He reached the garden. As he saw Cathy, one of the educators, he ran towards her.

Cathy said: "Hi! What time is it?"

Max showed his dinosaur to her. Rui, another child standing with Cathy, saw Max's dinosaur, and fed it a leaf.

Cathy asked: "Does he like raspberry leaves? Ummm! Yum Yum."

Rui said: "Ummm."

Cathy asked: "I wonder if it likes to eat pinecones?"

Cathy showed the pinecone to them. Katlyn grabed the pinecone and started feeding it to the dinosaur.

Rui said: "Num! Num!!"

Max's eyes glittered and were apprehended by something else. It was a bush with green leaves. He took the dinosaur there and let it taste the leaves. He also touched the plant. A large piece of cement was standing behind this plant. Max let the dinosaur drive on it. The dinosaur became a truck and made sounds. "Brum-brum-brrrrr!"

Max says: "Beep! Beep!" As the dinosaur turned right, a giant piece of leaf hanging up from a bush talked to him. Max pulled out the leaf and fed it to the dinosaur. He said: "Num! Num!"

The dinosaur started walking again with Max. Max put the dinosaur under the sun in the garden. He left the dinosaur behind and started exploring the forest by himself.

Similar, to this story, every moment is a story with the children in Sunlight Room.

To conclude, life is a story. If we reflect back on our life, it is chain of our everyday stories and memories. We are the authors of our own life stories just like the toddlers in the Sunlight Room. They shape our personality and character as well as our identity. We live in the midst of the stories of others and ourselves. We are attuned and alert while listening to other's stories; we are being a part of other's stories.

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