

***Crossing Borders and Negotiating Conflict:  
Lucian's Story of Teaching English from within  
the Singapore Primary Classroom***

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Stories are a fundamental part of our lives. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 4) suggest of stories and people: "People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them and write narratives of experience." Through the transaction of learning from each other, the researcher and participant can begin to understand specific experiences within the context of stories told and retold in community. New understandings about the content and context of a situation *can* begin to open up possible new imaginings for future stories to be lived. "A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories" (Ibid, p. 4). This living of new stories can become an endless process, as differing perspectives continue to influence understanding. In this inquiry, Lucian, a recently appointed Department Head of English in a Primary school, recounts for us his journey through the Singapore School System from student to teacher, and into school administration. During his travels, he recalls difficulties he encountered along the road because of what he terms his 'differences'. These 'differences' appear to have emerged from his earliest childhood English language learning experiences. They eventually begin to impact the relationships Lucian is attempting to negotiate with his colleagues and supervisors in the Singapore Primary Schools where he is assigned because his philosophical beliefs about the implementation of English pedagogy and practice begin to collide with the beliefs of others, and the policies that exist within his system.

Within this inquiry, I explore the conflicts and tensions that arise out of Lucian's story that require him to cross 'borders of understanding' with others in the teaching profession. Lucian's story leaves me with many wonders about teaching and teacher leadership within the context of teaching English at the Primary level in Singapore.

**Key words: narrative, teacher education, primary practices, borders**

## INTRODUCTION

Stories are a fundamental part of our lives. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 4) suggest of stories and people that "People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them and write narratives of experience." Through the transaction of learning from each other, the researcher and participant can begin to understand specific experiences within the context of stories told and retold in community. New understandings about the content and context of a situation *can* begin to open up possible new imaginings for future stories to be lived. "A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories" (Ibid, p. 4). This living of new stories can become an endless process, as differing perspectives continue to influence understanding.

In this inquiry, Lucian, a recently appointed Department Head of English at a Singapore Primary school, briefly recounts for us his journey through teaching into school administration. During his travels, he recalls difficulties encountered along the road because of what he terms as his 'differences'. These 'differences', formed from his earliest childhood experiences of learning English later emerge to create gaps in understanding of teaching pedagogy, practice and policy between himself and others in the Singapore schools where he is located. As Lucian's story develops, these chasms begin to widen. They must, of necessity, be bridged in order for Lucian to be able to work effectively within the Singapore education system.

At the same time that Lucian is attempting to cross borders with others in his profession, he is restorying himself from the teacher he describes below as he entered the profession, to the teacher who exhibits such “moral tiredness” later on in this inquiry (Clandinin, 1995, p. 4).

My first teaching experience was actually the first year of NIE, I started teaching at practicum. I fell in love with teaching then. I fell in love with the kids, with teaching them, with engaging them, seeing their responses. I fell in love with the look in their eyes when they've learned something. The teachable moment, I just love it. Practicum I can't quite remember, but for the first few years of teaching I can. The reading, the read alouds, getting us to share our favorite books, because I have so many favourite books, so I got them to share their favourite books. Sort of advertise their work. I called them the book of the day because I want them to love reading; I want them to be excited about reading. The reading aloud to excite them, to get them interested. The silent reading to give them the time to read, which they don't have or might not have at home. And also the structured discipline to read. And also to share a book. Their favourite book, if they have books they would like to share with the class. And because it's instituted by me their form teacher, those who are shy will have to share. So it's getting them to vocalize their thoughts and vocalize their feelings as well.

Lucian's story leaves me with many wonders about teaching, teacher leadership and pedagogy and praxis belief conflicts within the context of teaching English at the Primary level in Singapore.

## **METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

This research supports *narrative inquiry* as a methodology and term as described by Connelly and Clandinin (2006, p. 477):

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experiences in which humans, individually and socially,

lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and they interpret their past in terms of their stories. Story, in the current idiom is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adapt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study.

Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 3) suggest that “the educational importance of this line of work is that it brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived” and is, therefore, “the starting point and key term for all social science inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 414).

Narrative inquiry is a form of empirical narrative where the stories, themselves, become the data for research interpretation (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 5). Data for narrative inquiry can be gathered from field notes, interviews, story telling, letter writing, autobiographical and biographical writing, and historical artifacts such as letters, philosophy statements, newspaper articles and metaphors. Lucian's story has been storied and restoried following the many conversations we have shared, several of which have been transcribed and time dated for authenticity. We have also kept an ongoing year long electronic journal together where we have questioned inconsistencies and problems that have arisen during the retelling of Lucian's story. Lucian's story is believable; it is “an account of which one might say, ‘I can see that happening’” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 8). As well, there is a definite sense that there will be future chapters to Lucian's story, that is, his story is not finite.

Lucian speaks from inside his own story and from within the Singapore School System while I explore the related research and bring my own story to bear upon the inquiry from outside of the ‘data centre’. Together, we track Lucian's story from his school beginnings to the present while exploring how

his history may have influenced his ways of seeing and knowing the teaching of English within the context of the Singapore Primary School System.

Lucian's story is not a 'happily ever after' story; it is filled with conflict and tension as he tries to make sense of the world around him coming to bear upon his own beliefs about teaching which were shaped from his earliest learning experiences. This transition occurs concurrent with Lucian's continuing difficulties negotiating border crossings with others whose philosophies run contrary to his own teaching beliefs. The ending of Lucian's story is not clear; it leaves me with wonders about how he will restory his life in a new direction in the future.

## **TRAVELLING ACROSS WORLDS: BORDER CROSSINGS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

De Walter (in Clark, 1998, p. 16) suggests that "People can interact in discourse as travellers if they write and read in ways that render participation in discursive exchange a transformative act crossing an alien place rather than the more defensive act of occupying familiar places." My 'travelling' to Lucian's 'world' has involved travelling in a collegial sense where both distance and time blur as we, Lucian and I, are able to stand on the same plain looking outward at the same situation from our differing perspectives in such a way that we feel bonded together. Lugones (1987, p. 11) says of this form of 'world travelling': "Those of us who are 'world' travellers have the distinct experience of being different in different 'worlds' and of having the capacity to remember other 'worlds' and ourselves in them."

Key to 'world' travelling is the development of a caring relationship between researcher and research participant that ensures there is no "academic violence" within the relationship; that is, "We are able to think, imagine, and feel how the other is thinking, imagining and feeling. We do this neither by projecting our own feeling onto the other nor by remaining detached but by being open to that which is taking place in the person before us" (Shabatay,

in Witherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 149). Within our caring relationship, Lucian and I have been able to 'cross borders' to each other so that I became a part of his 'world' at the same time that he became a part of mine.

Clandinin (2007, p. 58) suggests that "borders are abstractions. They exist as clear demarcations of territory only on maps but do not show up so clearly in the real world." The borders Lucian and I have crossed while telling our stories of practice to one another are: a.) physical - place to place, b.) temporal - forwards and backwards in time within our own, and across each other's story, and c.) internal and external to our own stories - struggles within and outside of ourselves with our own and other's beliefs, our own and other's cultures and our own and other's communities.

It is significant to note that I was a practicing primary teacher/principal in Alberta, Canada for 25 years before moving into university teaching and international consultancies. These are the key "narrative beginnings that speak to my relationship to and interest in the inquiry" (Clandinin, Pushor and Orr, 2007, p. 25). As I think about my border crossings with Lucian from my Canadian background to his Singapore school landscape, I certainly resonate with Clandinin's description of a narrative borderland:

The idea of a borderland is helpful for understanding the tensions that exist for those of us who work within the broad plotlines of narrative inquiry. Narrative inquirers frequently find themselves crossing cultural discourses, ideologies, and institutional boundaries. In this work, they often encounter both deep similarities and profound differences between their own experiences and those with whom they work, neither of which can be reduced to the other. (2007, p. 59)

The similarities between our stories of teacher to teacher leadership in primary schools, as well as the stories of difficulties we each encountered along the way as we negotiated our personal philosophies of pedagogy and practice within our systems, have helped us cross borders of understanding to each other during our conversations. The contextual differences within our stories bring tension to this inquiry.

## **WEAVING LUCIAN'S EXPERIENCES INTO HIS STORY OF PRACTICE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

The beginning As we enter Lucian's story, we see him recounting for us his experiences with daily reading, first as a pre-schooler, then as a student in the Primary Singapore classroom. These experiences appear to form the seeds of Lucian's pedagogical belief system about how to teach English to Singapore Primary school children:

My mum is a non-English speaker; she is a Hokkien speaker, so my first language is actually Hokkien. I spoke English very sparsely because I mostly spoke Hokkien at home.

No one in my family reads so I have no idea where my love of reading came from. Well, actually my dad reads newspapers daily. So perhaps, because of seeing that practice...since I was young he reads the newspapers daily, religiously. Both my parents didn't do well academically but they believed in school.

I attribute my reading to Sesame Street. My parents would go to work; they left me alone most of the time, and they dumped me in front of the TV. I liked Sesame Street because I got to listen to people talking in English and I responded to them. I was an only child so I talked to the TV. I responded to Ernie, Big Bird, and all that. So I picked up whatever I learned in Sesame Street and applied that to books. In the past there were also quite a few British comedies on TV. So I tried very hard to listen to them and tried to understand them and even now, I understand the dry British way of humor. Many of my friends don't, so I attribute that to watching British comedies at that age too.

Later I began reading Enid Blyton, maybe at P3 or P4. I think it was at the school library or something, that I started borrowing them from there. There were many different series by Enid Blyton and I love them all. I tried one and I loved it and moved on to another series. My favorite was the Famous Five series.

My parents, though not well off, saved money so that they could buy me books at the end of every year. It became a form of reward. I looked forward to it. Sometimes I would get 2 to 3 books at the end of every year. I really looked forward to it. I loved to read. I didn't have the privilege of a

rich environment; nobody spoke in English much at home, so I read a lot. I read widely, loved going to the library, loved going shopping for books. My first recollection of books was the Mr. Series: Mr Lazy, Mr Hungry... My parents bought those books, one at a time. I read them myself. Every year, I tried to buy 2 books. I read them five, six times. I still have those books, they are yellowed. Really yellowed...

Lucian is very clear about his passion for books as he describes the condition of those he owned as a child from years of constant reading: "They are yellowed. Really yellowed." I wonder then, what might happen if Lucian were to enter a school as a student where touching, reading and exploring literature as a personal experience was not a key component of learning English in the classroom. I also wonder how experiences within a conflicting belief system might influence his ways of seeing and knowing himself as a learner of English.

In school As Lucian recalls his Primary school experiences, we see tensions begin to emerge as he explores how his preschool experiences appear so contrary to his 'new' experiences in the classroom.

In P1, I remember playing and I remember spelling too. Spelling definitely. I learned by memorizing. No one taught me how to spell. And I read those little minute Mr. Books, I think.

No English teachers ever read to us actually. They got us to read – we have our readers so they got us to read as a group, to stand in front of the class to read out loud to the kids - the rest of our classmates and then the teachers would pick those who are better readers to read alone. Well, this was an activity that I enjoyed because I thought I read quite well so I enjoyed getting picked as one of the readers. That occurred in lower primary and middle primary, P1 to P3, I think.

I felt that I wasn't taught the language by the teachers I encountered. I felt that the main teacher, the primary teacher was the books I read; that's where I learned all these grammatical structures, all these words from because I don't recall any teachers really teaching me or making such an impact on me in learning this language. To me, the main teacher, the only

teacher was the books so I felt that the books allowed me to be competent in the use of this language and so I would share this teacher with my students - my pupils. I wanted to share that with them because they won't need the teacher; they don't need to depend on one particular teacher, a talented teacher – they just need to access the books. I wanted them to have that skill, that avenue to be independent.

In this part of his story, Lucian reflects upon his experiences as a Primary student weighed against those first critical learning experiences he had with books as a pre-schooler, and we begin to see Lucian's beliefs about how children might best learn English taking shape. From Lucian's description of the role he believes his Primary teachers had in developing his English proficiency, I am left to ponder whether this description might, in and of itself, be a forewarning of the difficulties he would encounter crossing borders and negotiating relationships with his colleagues and supervisors in the Singapore schools where he is later assigned during his teaching life.

## **TENSION, CONFLICT AND BORDER CROSSINGS**

Lucian's beliefs about teaching reading and what he describes as his best practices as a teacher can be tracked back to his historical beginnings as a Hokkien child learning English by himself through the books he refers to as 'his primary teacher'.

Well, my best practice is instituting a reading time for the children. For every single one of my class from day 1 of my teaching career of 10 years, I read with my students in class. First of all, I firmly believe in it, because that's how I picked up language. So I believe in reading. And to ensure that my children will have time. And I'm the form teacher, so I have 3 subjects to play with; English, Mathematics, Science. So I will allocate 15 minutes everyday in the beginning just to do silent reading. Sometimes in the beginning of the day, in the middle of the day, at the end of the day. Mostly in the beginning and in the middle of the day. Because I strongly believe that it is important for them to read, to find joy in reading and in

reading they will be able to pick up language and that's they key. If they don't have time, then they can't really practice what they have learnt through English language lessons. Reading allows them to practice in their minds. They have to read everyday. (And) because I believe in it, I found time.

First I will teach them how to choose a book. I will take them to the library to choose a book they can read. Then I read aloud to them everyday. At the beginning of everyday, at the start of the academic year, I will use picture books to read to the P5s and P6s every day and usually also at the end of the day. And it's very heartening to know that when they are pressed for time, and the clock is ticking away, they'd ask me for a story. Then it reaffirms that, yes, this strategy is working because they love to listen to my stories. So I'll read to them. And after I run out of my picture books, I start on chapter books. Usually something simple.

The first chapter book I started was Harry Potter and it was in 1999 and that was phenomenal, the reaction. Then, Harry Potter was still not as famous at that point in time. So they just loved the book. I'd read for a few chapters...then I'd stop and tell them to go and get the book. They loved it! The library had a few copies, not many, and some of them went to buy one on their own. Some of them bought it and followed me as I read. Sometimes I'd check for understanding but I didn't ask directly. I didn't want to break the momentum.

We can make the time if we really believe in reading, and I believed in what I did, so I made that time.

As Lucian grows in the teaching profession, it appears that his strong beliefs about how children learn English are put to the test more and more often as they run contrary to other teaching practices and policies he observes. In the following excerpt, Lucian describes a reading program he was required to participate in as a teacher in the first school where he was located:

There is a school wide reading time and it's in the hall, 10 to 15 minutes. But it's more of a disciplinary measure and children know it so you don't really read, you just take a book and pretend to read.

Lucian says the following of his colleagues' behavior during this school

wide reading program:

The teachers, they talk and the children know it. They can see the teachers talking. The teachers are sitting in front, at the side as well as behind. And they can see the teachers talking or marking. Not reading...and they are supposed to read.

Here we see Lucian questioning the practice of his colleagues, as he recognizes why the program has disintegrated towards what Fountas and Pinnell (2001) suggest can occur when a Sustained Silent Reading Program lacks both regulation and structure.

Lucian's teaching beliefs also run contrary to some accepted community teaching practices in this school. In the following excerpt, Lucian describes an incident that occurs where he comes up against a school mandated book report policy that runs contrary to his pedagogical beliefs about how children best learn English. This is the first example offered by Lucian where he purposefully chooses to cross the line from inner questioning to going against the grain of accepted school practice:

I also don't believe in doing book reports because it's a chore. I don't want the reading to become a chore. I want it to be a pleasure, like something pleasurable...like something joyful. I don't want them to see reading as a work. So in a sense, I went against the grain of the school when it instituted a book report policy.

Lucian has learned to practice "obstructionism – not doing the work", a method that Field suggests is a 'legitimate' way to resist practices seen as unreasonable, unproductive, unfair or unjust in an organization (Field, 1998, pp. 377-380). From this point onwards in his story, Lucian practices obstructionism whenever he comes upon a practice or policy in the teaching of English that he disagrees with. The following situation that also occurs in this school highlights this behaviour:

The Principal wanted me to be the Assistant to the Head of Department of

English. I thought I could make a difference by de-emphasizing the worksheets and emphasizing more on the reading programme, the aspects of reading and on other reading strategies. I thought I could share this and I thought that certain things could be changed. Sad to say, that wasn't to be the case. I realized that this Principal had her own way of doing things and she did not change her policies at all. Her requirement was that we agreed to whatever she said and we just did it. All the meetings were merely to revise the worksheets, to churn out more worksheets, to prepare more worksheets and I couldn't quite agree with this aspect because I knew from my own experiences that worksheets are not a guarantee that learning takes place and worksheets are a chore to children if too many are given. More time should be given to teaching rather than finishing the worksheets but because this Principal believed so much in worksheets, tons and tons of worksheets were printed during the holidays so when the teachers came back, they had to clear all these worksheets during that term and many a time, as a teacher, we complained that we have to rush through the clearing of these worksheets rather than teaching. The principal wasn't too happy because I was supposed to be Assistant to the Head of Department and I didn't quite believe in this policy of hers and I believed in reading so I instituted a 15 minutes to 20 minutes time of reading. And so the worksheets or workbook was used as a form of reinforcement of the learning that took place. I did not use that excessive amount of worksheets so that the extra worksheets that were printed – I didn't really use them, I just kept them in the cupboard. During file checking time for worksheets used, she was not too happy about it. Because mine was the best class, she expected it to be the thickest of the whole lot for the whole level because the best class could do a lot more but I didn't quite believe in it so my files were not as thick as the others and so she was shocked, so she's not too happy about it. Well, it showed disobedience; I didn't quite toe the line and it didn't look good because I had sort of defied her policy. Of course, she didn't put it across that way.

Chomsky (1999, p. 7) describes the result for people who resist in organizations as follows: "There are people who don't accept, who aren't obedient. They are weeded out; they're behavioural problems. The long-term effect of this process is to foster and reward subordination. It begins in kindergarten and goes all the way up through your occupational or

professional career. If you challenge authority, you get in some kind of trouble.” Lucian indicates that this is what he believes happened to him: “After that experience, I was blacklisted; I was punished. The first two years of my second school, I was teaching the best class. During the next three years, I was placed in the lowest stream of students in P5 and then P6.” (Author’s note: In many Singapore government schools, students are streamed by results past the Primary 3 level to EM1, EM2 and EM3, with EM1 being highest in demonstrated academic potential and EM3 being the lowest.) Lucian also reveals that he decided to resign as Assistant to the Head of Department of English following this situation.

When Lucian storied the episode of being moved out of a top P5 classroom into the lowest streamed P5 and then P6 classes, following the disagreement he had with his principal about the amount of worksheets required, his voice showed the emotional extent to which he felt affected by the incident. Even the fact that Lucian learned to love teaching the EM3 students in no way mitigated his distress during the retelling. Clandinin (1995) describes Lucian’s reaction as ‘moral tiredness’ within the context of teachers and teaching:

Moral tiredness is tiredness that seeps into our very being. It takes us past the physical tiredness that comes from the long hours of moving and talking and bending and cutting and pasting and hanging and talking. It takes us past the emotional tiredness of the intensity of interacting with many children, parents, other teachers and administrators. Most of all, moral tiredness speaks to knowing that what we think is important is not valued by those around us. (p. 4)

Past Lucian’s personal belief that what he had to say was “not valued” in this situation, Lucian believed that he was ‘punished’: “After that experience, I was blacklisted; I was punished.” Whether this was the principal’s intent or not, Lucian’s perception became his reality. It is important to note, as Wheatley indicated about story telling at the 8<sup>th</sup> *International Conference on Thinking* in Edmonton, Alberta Canada, there are two sides to every story:

When we ask two people to tell us their story, we start with the assumption that no two stories will be the same. We agree with the understanding that no two people see the world the same...There's no one interpretation; there's no single cause and effect. There's your story from where you sit in the complex system. There's my story from where I sit in the complex system and then there are all those millions of others. (July 4-9, 1999, taped version)

The principal's story in Lucian's second school is not included in this research; we only know what Lucian believed to have occurred in his story, and Lucian believed that he was punished by his principal. That belief, in and of itself, is enough for a border to develop between Lucian and his principal.

Lugones (1987, p. 8) discusses how borders are created when there is a shift from acceptance to rejection of an individual, thereby situating the person as an outsider to the community: "Their world and their integrity do not require me at all. There is no sense of self-loss in them for my own lack of solidity. But they rob me of my solidity through indifference, an indifference they can afford and which seems studied." It is in these situations and in these relationships that Lugones suggests that we begin to perceive others "arrogantly in their turn" (p. 5). Lucian indicates that he believes his beliefs about how children learn were not heard or validated by his second principal; Lucian further believes that he was 'punished' by the principal for putting his teaching beliefs above the 'worksheet policy' in the school. I must wonder, then, who it was that closed the borders of communication between Lucian and his principal, initially, and who it was that reacted to the closing. It appears that when "arrogant perception" is insinuated into a relationship, regardless of from which direction, the response may be "arrogant perception" in return. Greene in Witherell and Noddings (1991, p. xi) suggests that it is only when we become the "friends of one another's minds" that we are able to cross borders of understanding to one another. I question whether from Lucian's perspective, he will ever be able to become a friend of this principal's mind following his experience. I suspect that border has been permanently closed.

Wheatley offers the following for consideration: “Now if we were to sit together to tell stories we might, I believe, begin to grasp the complexity of our organization, the complexity of our life, the complexity of our community.” I wonder how different Lucian’s life might have been if he and his principal had sat down together to find a common ground before this incident occurred that so affected Lucian’s life.

### **MY WONDERS ABOUT LUCIAN’S STORY**

In Singapore many students enter school without a strong English background just as Lucian did. The literature strongly supports daily reading as a practice to help students bridge the gap between their mother tongue or first language and the English language. Bainbridge and Malicky (2004, p. 88) speak to this issue:

In addition to becoming immersed in print-rich environments, we believe that children need to interact with books every day. For those who have been read to regularly by their parents before entering school, this will be a direct extension of home experiences, and they will know what to expect from them and what to do with the books. For other children, books and being read to will be less familiar. These children benefit from daily opportunities to play with and handle books, as well as from being involved in book-sharing activities.

As Adams (in Bainbridge and Malicky, 2004, p. 94) concludes: “The single most important activity for building the knowledge and skills eventually required for reading appears to be reading aloud to children.” Daily reading aloud to the children who have no home English experiences becomes imperative if they are to cross cultural, social and economic borders to enter the same world of English as the children who have come from print-rich environments.

Tompkins (2005, p. 302) indicates, “As they read aloud, teachers model

how to use strategies, and after listening, students can reflect on how they used them. It is easier for students to focus on strategies used during listening than during reading because they don't have to decode written words when listening." She further suggests that "As teachers read aloud, they provide opportunities for children to listen aesthetically and know the lived-through experience of aesthetic listening; and students who find pleasure in listening to stories read aloud are more likely to become lifelong readers" (Ibid, p. 305).

As indicated in the Singapore *English Language Syllabus 2010* (p. 35), "although reading aloud to pupils is helpful in developing their language, the central importance of pupils reading widely at increasingly challenging levels cannot be over-emphasized" (p. 35). The reading of quality children's literature to primary students should run concurrent to the *Shared Book Approach* (Bainbridge and Malicky, 2004; Ricky, 2002; Tomkins, 2005, 2006; Gunning, 2008), or the use of *Basal Reading Series* (Bainbridge and Malicky, 2004; Gunning, 2008; Ricky, 2002; Tomkins, 2005, 2006), or a *Guided Reading Program* (Pinnell & Fountas, 2002). These reading strategies can help build a comprehensive reading program for primary children if they coincide with daily Read Alouds by the teacher of outstanding children's literature in the classroom.

As I look at the wide body of knowledge that supports Lucian's practice of orally reading to children daily to develop their love of English while enhancing the students' own enjoyment of reading, I am perplexed at the resistance he encountered along the way in attempting to align good teaching practice with credible reading teaching theory (National Institute for Literacy, 2000). In order to begin to understand this resistance, I take a deeper look at the "worksheet clearing" episode in Lucian's story in the following section as it applies to Singapore's national curriculum and relevant literature to explore how his practice placed him on a direct collision course with the principal in his school.

Lucian's primary concern was that the time taken to 'clear worksheets' restricted his ability to actively engage the students in his classes in literature

through Read-Alouds. As a direct response to his concern, and prior to the confrontation, Lucian consciously chose to take time away from ‘clearing worksheets’ to ensure that his students had been read aloud to daily. However, within what Lucian has described as a “worksheet culture” in Singapore schools, his principal expected Lucian’s file to be the “thickest of the whole lot for the whole level because the best class could do a lot more.”

The culture of Singapore schools is the ‘worksheet culture’. Whenever we go to any school, there is always a ready set of worksheets available. During department work time, during the holidays, when I ask my friends who are Heads of Departments in other schools, most of the Department work was centered around revising and creating new worksheets so that there would be a mental model to be used, a very familiar way of carrying things out. Teachers are always told what exactly they need to do, what exactly they need to finish by a certain time.

It is interesting that Lucian characterizes the “worksheet culture” as a school-based practice and not a Singapore Ministry of Education policy. In fact, Wolf and Bokhorst-Heng (2008, p. 161) suggest that the root of that culture is coming from the Singapore parents: “There is a sense [from the parents] that reading is a waste of time except for textbook reading” and many schools are responding by tracking work that parents believe is relevant to ‘the examination [as] the soul of ethos about education in East Asian societies’ (Cheng in Mee, 1998, p. 192). Was Lucian’s principal, then, supporting this “educational ethos” by ensuring that the teachers lived within a “worksheet culture” in order to demonstrate the school’s educational programming competence to parents?

As I continue to explore this incident, I see that “file checking” as an administrative practice connected to the “worksheet culture” appears to be so entrenched in Lucian’s school that it has become a “sacred story.” Crites (1971) makes the point that sacred stories are so pervasive they remain mostly unnoticed and when named are hard to define: “These stories seem to be elusive expressions of stories that cannot be fully and directly told,

because they live, so to speak, in the arms and legs and bellies of celebrants. These stories lie too deep in the consciousness of people to be told directly” (p. 294). Lucian describes his frustration when coming up against the file checking policy where the principal tracked the amount of worksheets cleared by teachers in his school: “I know from my own experiences that worksheets are not a guarantee that learning takes place and worksheets are a chore to children if too many are given. More time should be given to teaching rather than finishing the worksheets.” If the “worksheet culture” is being driven by the parents, as Cheng suggests, then it appears likely that “file-checking” as a “sacred administrative story” is designed to convince parents that preparation for examinations is being tracked by the principal. Perhaps, then, “file checking” has, as Lucian believes, nothing to do with “learning taking place” but more to do with gaining parental support for the school’s program.

What is interesting about the “worksheet culture” and the “file-checking” policy is that both appear to run contrary to two of the six *Principles of English Language Teaching and Learning* adapted from the EL Syllabus 2001 by the Minister of Education in the English Language Syllabus 2010. In the first principle, ‘Contextualization’, the document indicates that “Learning tasks and activities will be designed for pupils to learn the language in familiar, authentic and meaningful contexts of use” (p. 11). Wolf and Bokhorst-Heng (2008, p. 159) strongly suggest, however, that worksheets used in classrooms in the Singapore school where they completed their research, were usually “decontextualize” with the ultimate effect being “mere code-breaking”. In the second principle, ‘Learner-centredness’, the document indicates that “Learners are at the centre of the teaching–learning process. Teaching will be differentiated according to pupils needs, abilities and interests.” Wolf and Bokhorst-Heng (2008, p. 159) suggest, however, that there is “an overwhelming dominance of an exam culture and residual overtones of a top-down model that continues to limit the full extent of engaged learning.” This is characterized within the worksheet culture Lucian experienced. I have to wonder why the school policies in Lucian’s school fall

so far outside of the recommended *Principles of English Language Learning* as recommended in the national curriculum.

A final puzzle I am left to consider is how Lucian continued to be singled out for administrative tracking following the conflict and tension he indicates peppered his teaching life. Following his three years in the EM3 classes, Lucian was promoted to the Head of Primary English in another Singapore school. As I think back to my own experiences as a principal in Alberta, Canada, I recall careers being blocked, administrators being demoted or shuffled totally out of the system or great battles occurring that ended with various administrators at all levels of the school system leaving my school district. In the Canadian system I came from there was no 'second chance' for people like Lucian. The types of situations he described would have permanently altered his possibilities for moving forward in an administrative career. The borders would have been permanently closed; no visa would have been issued.

### **LUCIAN: THE NEXT CHAPTER...**

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest that through telling and retelling our stories we can construct new meaning that will help us begin to live new lives. "Contrary to common sense, which assumes that our lives determine our stories, narrative scholars argue that our stories shape our lives and that narration makes self-understanding possible" (Chase, 1995, p. 7). This is the hope which the practice of storying brings to people.

Lucian's first year as Head of English in a Singapore Primary School coincided with this inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (1994, p. 155) indicate of this 'living in the midst': "The horizons of our knowing shift and change as we awaken to new ways of 'seeing' our world, to different ways of seeing ourselves in relation to each other in the world." I often wondered as we worked together in community if Lucian would be able to restory himself in his new position from our shared understandings about his old story so that

he could recapture the initial joy he described at discovering teaching:

I fell in love with teaching then. I fell in love with the kids, with teaching them, with engaging them, seeing their responses. I fell in love with the look in their eyes when they've learned something. The teachable moment, I just love it.

Or would the gaps in understanding about teaching pedagogy, practice and policy that he had experienced with others in the Singapore School System continue to plague him?

Lucian's journal entries back and forth to me about his new position are filled with reflection, self-questioning and personal change as he works to create relationships with the teachers in his cadre while also bringing to life his English language teaching philosophies. Lucian says of this part of his journey: "Slowly – I'm doing it slowly - I've learned, I've realized that I can't go at the pace I would want them to go. I have to go at a very slow pace; I had too many assumptions in the beginning so I had to throw all those assumptions out." Perhaps because of his new understandings about his old story, Lucian has learned that "We can influence each other only by connecting with who we already are. We encourage others to change only if we honour who they are now" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rodgers, 1996, side two, taped version).

## CONCLUSION

In this inquiry, Lucian, a Singapore Primary teacher and English Department Head, shares his beliefs about teaching English and his stories of the difficulties he experienced negotiating 'borders' of understanding in education. O'Laughlin (1992, p. 338) discusses why narratives are so critical in helping teachers find voice and rhythm in their practice: "In a world in which teachers are often silenced by the institutional structure of schooling, the most powerful antidote is to affirm their personhood and their experiences

and provide a space in which they are enabled to voice their thoughts and examine their experiences.” Hoffman (in Florio-Ruane, 1997, p. 159) indicates that storying and restorying our stories offers an opportunity for “reconciliation of experience, and the hope of rediscovering a sense of self in a decentred world.” Cooper (in Witherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 97) suggests:

Telling our own stories is a way to impose form upon our often chaotic experiences and, in the process, to develop our own voice. Listening to our own stories is a way for us to nourish, encourage, and sustain ourselves, to enter a caring relationship with all the parts of our self

This inquiry offers Lucian a way to impose form upon his past chaotic experiences so that he can restory himself as a teacher leader for the future. It also offers a critical reflection through Lucian’s eyes of teaching English within the Singapore Primary School System, while exploring how personal best practice can run contrary to embedded “sacred stories” within a school. Finally, it explores the notion of how border crossings between teaching professionals can be affected by the perceptions teachers have of administrative actions and by policies administrators support.

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