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Told and Untold Stories: Finding New Ways to Represent the Voices of Culturally Diverse Learners Through Narrative Vignettes

Abstract

This article considers the challenges of representing young, ethnically diverse learners via narrative vignettes. Aware of young learners' underrepresentation in research reporting compared to adult teaching perspectives, (Author 1, 2017), we feel it important to review methodologies that claim to represent young learners' stories. Looking back at a year-long critical ethnography, we return to the data, reflecting on old conversations while revisiting the motivations behind writing narrative vignettes. Our new conversations consider how this brought participants (and researchers) in from the 'margins' of research (Author 2 and other, 2011). We reflect through an embodied, emotional and affective lens, raising important questions around the ethics of representation and making socially just choices. We conclude that narrative vignettes are not giving voice to young learners, but that the methodology captures both told and untold stories which benefit from a reflexive approach to data at the time of the research as well as retrospectively.

Keywords: narrative vignettes, politics of representation, affect, embodied experience, researcher reflexivity

Introduction

This paper reports on a reflexive journey as we collaboratively and critically re-examine the use of narrative vignettes in Author 1's (2013) one-year critical ethnographic doctoral research that explored the experiences of newly arrived children entering primary school in the UK. As Creese, Takhi and Blackledge (2015: 266) note in referencing Rampton, Maybin and Roberts 'ethnographies involve rhetorical forms, such as vignettes and narratives (Hymes 1996: 12-13) that are designed to provide the reader with some apprehension of the fullness

and irreducibility of the “lived stuff” from which the analyst has abstracted structure’. Blackledge and Creese (2023: 142) note that ‘personalising, aestheticising and poetising sociolinguistics through forms such as ethnographic drama, ethnographic poetry and research vignettes expand and elaborate social phenomena, rather than reducing them’.

We argue that narrative vignettes are creative and powerful devices that capture lived experiences and meaning making in the everyday. We define narrative vignettes as a hybridisation of traditional storytelling (Clough, 2002, 2004) and ethno-drama (Cannon, 2012) constructed from a polyphonic blend of data (Blackledge and Creese, 2023) of both large and small stories explored within the research.

Through our re-examination, set out as a dialogue between the authors based on notes made during and after many virtual meetings via Zoom, we discuss how decisions were arrived at, at the time of the research and, in returning to the data, consider what issues and questions are relevant to those choices now. How did our own identities, as student and academic supervisor at the time of the research and now, as co-authors, affect our perceptions of narrative vignettes as a vehicle for representing and drawing out young learners’ voices? With the passage of time and new theories to draw on, does a return to this same data alter or strengthen our interpretations of their effectiveness as a methodological tool? As we reopen conversations between us in a different time and space, we consider how our creative dialogues return to the politics and ethics of representation and voice, and ask what can be learned by looking back? (Critical Methodologies Collective, 2022).

During this process we draw also on the embodied, emotional and affective labour of research in its varied phases and the way that research is shaped by relationships with participants and between researchers. We spotlight how research foregrounding the conceptual work on embodied, emotional and affective labour can offer us new ways of thinking and feeling about the data - more specifically the humanising of the experiences of learners as captured through told and untold stories. In addition, we use these conversations to draw attention to untold stories and discuss what they offer us now in understanding the stories that were chosen for inclusion in the research.

Theoretical Framework

In this section we outline our theoretical framework starting with our understanding of critical ethnography, the affordances of working from this approach and our commitment to unravelling and making visible the reproduction of power through specific discourses within educational institutions.

Firstly, we define critical ethnography as a site for both researcher observation and participation, which seeks to recognise the ideologies, power structures and participant identities (including the researcher's own) within the setting in order to highlight inequalities and, in doing so, affect change where possible. Rooted in anthropology (Blommaert and Jie, 2010), critical ethnography is human centred with researchers' multiple identities affecting the data as much as their participants (Author 2, 2011). Powell (2022: 29) summarises this methodology as 'unpredictable' and advises on the need to,

continually search for and reflect on methodological and ethical challenges, such as how to elicit, listen to, and represent children's voices, or how to "be" and "act" as a researcher in a primary school.

Selecting what information to omit from the final research is as much a part of the process as deciding what to include. We would argue that returning to the data enables researchers to reconsider their positions in relation to power and the politics and ethics of representation, drawing stories in from the margins and opening conversations around 'new ways of seeing' (Clough, 2004: 375). To demonstrate this, we consider our reflexive positions as researchers in relation to the research, the data and the ways in which we now revisit the told stories and re-present the data through learners' untold stories.

Secondly, we draw on Georgakopoulou (2015, 2016) and Frank (2010) to enable us to identify untold stories that sit inside data but were unused at the time of the research. Georgakopoulou (2016: 267) describes these stories as small, often 'fragmented' and 'open ended' in their telling, 'exceeding the confines of a single speech event and resisting a neat categorisation of beginning-middle-end'. While small stories, as meaningful narratives, are always contextualised at the time of telling, each has 'the potential to be lifted from its original context and to be re-contextualised, that is, to acquire new meanings in new contexts' (Georgakopoulou, 2016: 268). As a methodology, narrative vignettes seek to uncover and understand participants' identities, offering the chance for 'counter-stories' to emerge that, 'do not fit expectations of who the tellers should be and what stories they tell' (Georgakopoulou 2015: 263). In addition, Frank (2010: 3) reminds us how participants'

stories (and our representations of them), ‘work on people, affecting what people are able to see as real’ and are therefore bound up with the emotional and embodied experiences of doing research (Wetherell, 2013).

Finally, we revisit the importance of reflexivity in requiring researchers to acknowledge the role and influence of their personal ontological and epistemological standpoints (Corlett & Marvin, 2018) while demonstrating how these affect their interpretation of big (Bamberg, 2006) and small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2016) hidden in data, along with their perceptions of participant identities. Critical ethnography, modelled on ‘reality’ as a social construct, co-created between participants and researcher in a particular time and space, requires levels of reflexivity to reveal the researcher’s position on knowledge production within the research setting and how their positionality affects this production (Corlett & Marvin, 2018). Mindful of this, we acknowledge researcher reflexivity as an integral part of the process of researching and writing a critical ethnography, and of our current conversations around the politics and ethics of representation and voice (Critical Methodologies Collective, 2022). These were central to the creation of narrative vignettes at the time of the research, but equally relevant to our reflexive stance of looking back at those choices to see their relevance today.

Snapshots of our conversations are shared in vignettes throughout the paper as we foreground the lived experiences of two particular newly arrived learners - Gloria and Cecile ¹.

A1: While I was gathering data in school, I remember being particularly struck by newly arrived learners in KS2 and how they struggled with very little or no English. I worked a lot with Gloria and Cecile as a support teacher. Their day-to-day struggles struck a chord with me because they were very different physically, culturally and intellectually, yet their needs were similar in lots of ways.

A2: Let’s remind ourselves of who Gloria and Cecile are and the story you created to introduce them.

A1: Reads aloud:

‘These two girls were as different as chalk and cheese. Cecile was smart, athletic and quick thinking. When teams were selected, she was chosen first. Fine-boned and delicate with a flawless brown complexion, she concealed an inner toughness that Gloria admired. Gloria, in contrast, was tall, well-built, and inclined to throw her

weight around unintentionally. Her physicality often got her into trouble, usually when she retaliated after a knock or kick in the playground. Slow to learn, Gloria was as keen as mustard. She wanted to be independent, but she also needed to be liked. Jokes and laughter followed her around. Children found her entertaining. They wanted to share in her fun and exuberance. This is why Cecile craved Gloria as her friend and together they made a slightly odd couple.’ (A1, 2013: 110)

Methodological positioning: Looking Back, Moving Forward

The basis for this article is a year-long critical ethnographic study that examined the processes and procedures for welcoming and inducting newly arrived learners into a small primary school. It also considered how young learners, with little or no English language knowledge, were assigned identities by teaching staff, and how the learners were agentic in negotiating or rejecting these identities. Here we define agency, drawing on Blackledge and Creese (2023: 131) who propose that,

individuals come to occupy the position of the subject through language. The subject is discursively constructed and emerges as agentic through interactional relations with others.

Situated in the UK’s industrial Midlands, The Cedars Primary School was typical of many schools receiving large numbers of learners from Eastern Europe and Africa through the European Union’s open-border policy before, during and after 2011. The research drew on the experiences of eleven newly arrived learners in Key Stages² 1 and 2 and gathered various data, (including written observations, semi-structured interviews, field notes, researcher journal, school documentation and photographic evidence). Other participants in the research included parents, teaching and support staff, local authority workers and students from the local university who volunteered as translators.

Creating narratives vignettes was an iterative process. Initially, Author 1 categorised data using Cummins (2001) theory of intervention for collaborative empowerment which created four chapters of the thesis based on this framework: Cultural and Linguistic Incorporation, Community Participation, Pedagogy and Assessment. However, as the focus for Cummins’ theory is the definition of educator roles within these four areas, including the beliefs and practices of teaching staff, A1 was keen that learners’ voices be equally represented.

This led to conversations with her supervisor, A2, about methodological choices which we recall below:

A1: I remember you advised me to look at the work of Peter Clough and I was totally spellbound by it. It really spoke to me! I wanted learners to be three dimensional, to be represented in a way that revealed their multiple identities and their stories. So, using verbatim quotes and narrative details offers readers a more realistic picture of what it was like to work with them as their support teacher and as a researcher.

A2: Yes, and I was trying to encourage you to think more creatively and to delve into ways that might expand and bring to life the experiences of newly arrived young learners. Lifting out of the page their experiences, their relationship with you at the time, the emotions and memories that were triggered through your conversations. Using your fieldnotes, interviews, observations and other data you were trying to capture the messiness, the untidy everyday interactions experienced through the eyes of children. Their hopes, dreams, memories, trauma and so on were being processed by you and them. The narrative vignettes allowed you to experiment and foreground the stories - those apparent and those that were invisible that you slowly drew out. You also grappled with ethics, power, representation and voice. Asking questions through our conversations about all of these. Maybe this is the power of using them?

Conversations like these led to A1 creating what we term ‘narrative vignettes’ which, in turn, connected us to the increasingly diverse field of researchers choosing to express and represent their data and fieldwork processes in creative forms (Blackledge and Creese 2021; Blommaert 2006; Goldstein et al., 2014; Lundberg 2022). A1 was inspired by the seminal work of Clough (2002), who wove research data into fictionalised stories to explore the lives of his research participants, and Cannon (2012) whose ethno-drama brought her interactions with a student to life as an imagined playscript. This led us to think about what it meant to work in a way that Blackledge and Creese (2023: 142) refer to as ‘working in genres that blur social science and literary writing, and consequently disturb the boundaries between fact and fiction and between truth and imagination (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005)’.

To create narrative vignettes, Author 1 returned to the data, this time using the learners’ names as categories for analysis. This built a portfolio of information on each child but became refined to Cecile and Gloria, as A1 worked more extensively with them in her role as a language support teacher. By examining their actions, emotions and words, recorded across

different data forms, Author 1 decided that she could construct a fictional lesson to best represent the learners' emotional and embodied experiences of being newly arrived in school. As a literary device, an English lesson authentically recreated the many hours Author 1 had spent with the learners as a teacher and researcher. It also opened a space for verbatim data to be woven into a fictional lesson by juxtaposing many snippets of informal chatter and longer semi-structured discussions into a larger, coherent whole. The 'narrative' element encapsulated the physical, mental, social, and emotionally embodied experiences expressed regularly by Cecile and Gloria in a way that conventional transcripts could not.

With the narrative vignette nearing completion, Author 1 realised that her conversations with the learners mirrored Cummins (2001) framework and that it was possible to preface each of the four thesis chapters - Cultural and Linguistic Incorporation, Community Participation, Pedagogy and Assessment – with a section of narrative vignette that related the learners' thoughts, opinions and experiences to these areas. Therefore, by deliberately positioning a vignette at the start of each chapter, Author 1 ensured that the children's experiences prefaced more teacher-centred discussions on identity, empowerment, and privilege (Author 1, 2017).

Revisiting Researcher Reflexivity

A1: My motivations were political, I realised that then and even more so now as we talk through the data and the memories come back. I wanted to make a difference to the lives of newly arrived learners like Cecile and Gloria, to help them to be seen and heard in their classrooms. I wanted their teachers to be better trained to cope with their needs, to ensure that they were secure, happy and successful at school.

A2: What you tried to do was more than just understand their experiences, you thought of the implications and impact of the work – wanting more than their experiences to emerge. We need to think about the politics and ethics of representation as we look back at the process; the power of a story in representing the learners' everyday experiences and who they are. We're looking at how narrative vignettes are one way of representing their multiple voices, but we can't claim them as 'truth'. Somewhere in the creation of safe spaces during your fieldwork the girls were able to tell you their stories; you were witnessing their lives through their expressions, emotive re-telling and the trauma that they experienced. You took the time to listen, gently engage with them to ensure that they were safe. You also questioned yourself, what you were doing and how you were entwined in this act.

As our conversation above suggests, we would argue that reflexivity as a process of ‘self-conscious analytical scrutiny’ (England 1994: 82) is an important and integral part of this process of revisiting the research for both authors. Carter, Lapum, Lavallée, et al., (2014: 13) argue that,

in order to maintain a rigorous process, we need to constantly interrogate self as the researcher, our responses to participants, and the interpretive process of analysis.

These steps will enhance the reflexive nature of research.

It means understanding our roles as student/supervisor during the dissertation process but also now, as co-authors of this article, critically re-engaging with the data and our relationship to it. As author 2 notes, acknowledging our researcher identities (Author 2, 2011), is key to understanding how we are choosing to re-examine methodological choices. The following section attends to our positionalities - then and now - and engages with new theories that pivot our gaze towards an embodied and affective experience of the field.

Researcher Identities and Positionalities: Embodied and Affective Entanglements

A2: We’re looking back at the children’s experiences, agency, and their voices. We’re not ‘giving voice’ to them or empowering them but extending and using this device of representing them.

A1: You’re right, it’s about power relationships, isn’t it? About politics and of young learners from minoritized backgrounds not being seen and heard.

A2: And it’s about the stories we chose to tell, what we select from the data, but also the untold stories. The notes in the margin of our research.

Reflecting on our conversations at the time of the research, and today, we are aware of how our shifting, multiple identities as researchers impact on our (re)interpretations of the data. Author 1’s position in the research was immediately privileged as a white, middle-class, professional advisory teacher. In addition to becoming a part time researcher, she was also a mother to three school-aged children which affected her interactions with the young learners and their parents. Clough (2004: 376) argues that, to ‘make sense’ of participants’ lives, it means,

fitting these lives into the researcher's own personal world of experiences and as the stories (separately) unfold ...(finding) some sort of struggle to understand the relation of personal and professional.

Author 1's socialist political affiliations remain grounded in a family history linked to the UK's Midland textile and car industries, coupled with a strong sense of social (in)justice shaped by previous degree studies into Britain and Europe's imperialist and colonial past. This position affected her methodological and analytical approaches to the data (Kassan et al., 2020) and knowledge production.

Author 2 (Author 2011: 134) notes that 'researchers as social agents are located by and produce discourses that shape the ways in which we negotiate, challenge, and manage identities and positionalities in the field'. As such her positionality is shaped by discourses and her multiple identities as a 'Canadian-born, heterosexual female of Italian heritage, raised in an Italo-Australian context by working-class immigrant parents' which are 'embodied and narrated across space and time' (Author 2, 2011: 134). Her identities are also shaped by her childhood experiences of being an ethnic minority multilingual child entering monolingual, monocultural English, Canadian and Australian mainstream schools that did very little at the time to acknowledge let alone harness linguistic and cultural forms of capital (Bourdieu 1991). These multiple cultural and linguistic identities affected her own doctoral research journey amongst the Italian Canadian community and informed our discussions around the politics and ethics of representation. The nature of our collaboration made Author 1 more aware of her ideological position and multiple identities at the time of the research and steered the research towards a critical ethnography with its potential to affect social and political change (Powell, 2022).

By revisiting the process, our collaborative discourses reopen conversations that shed new light on how researchers continue to interact with both their participants and the research process across time and in new spaces. While we agree that representation is 'deeply implicated in power relationships... (and) is always a political endeavour' (Critical Methodologies Collective 2022: 2), we also recognise the process as an affective and embodied experience for both researchers, and participants at the time of the research (Ahmed, 2004). As researchers, we draw on personal memories 'to construct a narrative plot which helps us define who we are' (Ahmed & Morgan, 2021: 3) while aware that learners like Cecile and Gloria may be subject to post-memory, carrying 'stories of displacement, loss,

trauma and violence that they did not encounter personally but whose affective burden is inscribed upon the language repertoires and identities of speaking subjects' (Ahmed & Morgan, 2021: 3).

It is within this complex process that we seek to position ourselves in order to better understand the power and limitations of creating narrative vignettes in ethnographic research. We also add that the affective and embodied experiences that we have as researchers to fieldwork and to an ethical commitment for working alongside participants draws on a different kind of labour. That is, one that pays attention to 'embodied states' (Wetherell, 2013: 352) - body movements, articulation of the senses in relation to an action, event, an entanglement with the material world and others in it. In the process of meaning making of the everyday experiences of others we draw as researchers on our own experiences and stretch ourselves, emotionally and cognitively, to engage with these experiences in a way that tries to keep to the authenticity of the stories brought to us in order to share these with a deeper understanding of the teller's experiences.

We are inspired by researchers who have paid attention to affect, emotion and the embodied experiences in research (Ahmed 2004; Benesch 2020; Leander and Ehret 2019; Wetherell 2013; Zembylas 2005) and we align with a discursive approach to understanding affect and emotions. Like Zembylas (2005: 936), we assume 'power, agency and resistance are at the centre of exploring the role of emotion' and as such emotions are 'discursive practices' that are shaped by culture, power and ideology (Author 2, 2023).

The 'affective turn' in research (Clough, 2002), moves our understanding along a trajectory that engages with not only what we see and hear but how this makes us feel, and what these experiences evoke for researchers and participants when they engage in conversations. Whether through observations or interviews, for example, ethnographers attend to the rituals and patterns of everyday meaning making and try to understand the experiences of participants from their perspective. In doing so, we are drawn into their stories, the way that they may put emphasis on their explanations accentuating a deeper and more vivid account of their experiences that draws on the sensual and material. We pay attention to our own bodily responses, expressions and the way in which we read and listen to these stories as highly invested participants. These stories leave traces and, in the re-creation and revisiting of stories, we see, hear and feel the memories of these stories and of the lives that have constructed them. In our attempt to 'feel' Cecile's and Gloria's lived experiences, we try to

do justice to who they are and their desires for a future within an educational system that has positioned them in ways that do not always open up opportunities for them or is understanding of how their pasts have shaped their present. Memory plays a part in aligning actions and emotions as it historically binds these emotions. Triggers of a past act can bring forward an embodied and emotional rush that evokes particular actions that may not be understood within the present set of circumstances or contexts within which students are embedded and inhabit. The narrative vignettes are used to animate, align, engage the listeners in the telling of the stories into a space that seeks to find a common point of contact and bind reader and teller together (Ahmed 2004).

In the following sections we put forward our reasons for the use of narrative vignettes as a starting point and then move forward as we revisit data from the research, re-examining both what we call the ‘told’ and ‘untold’ stories. We then discuss the data in terms of our conversations today and how they address and extend our previous discussions to pay attention to a number of points elucidated in sections above.

Revisiting Told Stories: Constructing Narrative Vignettes

The following section moves to revisiting the told stories. It highlights the ways in which we attempted to foreground Gloria’s and Cecile’s experiences of everyday schooling and how the telling through narrative vignettes drew us closer to hearing and feeling their voices. The extract below, from a narrative vignette prefacing the study’s chapter on Cultural and Linguistic Incorporation (Cummins, 2001), shares some of the interactions between Gloria, Cecile and Author 1 (support teacher/researcher) as they chat about languages.

I speak Lingala,” Gloria continued, looking straight at me with the deepest brown eyes you could imagine.

“Yea, I know. You’re so clever. What’s hello in Lingala?”

“Mboté”. Cecile’s soft voice interjected before Gloria had time to translate.

“Wow! You know Lingala too?” I sounded surprised, yet why was I?

“My Mum speak it to Gloria when we play.”

Of course! Cecile’s linguistic and cultural roots lay in Africa, in Cameroon where her Mum was born. Dad’s roots, along with Dad, remained in Paris.

“That’s amazing!” I sighed. “I’d love to be able to swap between languages like that.” For a second or two, I felt isolated, my monolingualism overshadowed by two ten-year-olds. Did a smattering of secondary school French and even less German count for anything? The girls worked silently on their pictures, ignoring my wistfulness. The researcher in me broke the silence. “Have you met Shazia yet, the new girl in Year six? Could you give her any advice about making friends here?”

“What language does Shazia speak? English? French?” My reverie was interrupted by Cecile.

“No she no speak English!” Gloria suddenly became animated, her face alight with recognition. “I know! I know! It’s Punjabi. Miss Dhariwal speaks Punjabi.”

“You’re right, Shazia can understand a bit of Punjabi.” I tried not to dampen Gloria’s enthusiasm. As an essentially monolingual teacher, I felt ill at ease quantifying other people’s language skills (A1, 2013: 54-55).

This extract reveals how young learners, often silenced in classrooms until they command a basic understanding of conversational English, (a concept Cummins’ (2000) theorises as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills), conceal a repertoire of language skills. Research shows that young learners’ bilingualism is underutilised across the curriculum, (Costley, Gkonou, et al., 2018) - in Cecile’s case, her ability to speak basic Lingala, the original home language of her mother, and French, the familial language. This hidden translanguaging (Garcia, 2020) repositions Cecile and Gloria within the conversation in relation to their teacher. It momentarily empowers them, creating a transformational, affective space far different from traditional classroom settings, allowing each learner to draw on her cultural and linguistic memories and resources.

A small story (Georgakopoulou, 2016), emerging from the vignette above reveals how, as an essentially monolingual teacher, Author 1 feels ‘ill at ease’ quantifying or judging her learners’ language capabilities while, in contrast, Cecile’s and Gloria’s multilingualism affords them greater linguistic capital. Author 1 experiences momentary isolation within the discourse, acknowledging that her embodied feelings of awe and inadequacy are rarely expressed so candidly in daily classroom conversations between staff and learners.

Re-visiting the narrative vignettes, Author 1 recognises the reflexivity they afforded her at the time of writing and how the politics and ethics of representation were bound to her

‘insider/outsider’ position. As a local government advisor and ‘outsider’, she supported schools to create inclusive environments for newly arrived young learners, against a backdrop of national government policies privileging monolingualism (Author 1, 2017). However, working at The Cedars as a support teacher over several years, privileged Author 1 as an ‘insider’. The successful professional relationships she had forged with colleagues, learners and their families, allowed her to interact with and observe participants as someone familiar and non-threatening, whose professional values were known and shared daily. It also enabled her to get to know Cecile and Gloria in ways that would be less practicable for a class teacher (whose attention is regularly spread across thirty or more learners at any one time) or for an external researcher, who might encounter greater reticence or suspicion from learners defined as vulnerable (DCSF, 2008).

In re-examining the interview data from which part of the vignettes emerged, we reflect on interviews as ‘conversational narratives’ that, according to Patiño-Santos (2018: 65), ‘are social activities, which make them apposite discursive sites to reflect upon individual and group memories, specific situations and individual and collective selves.’ Davies and Davies (2007: 1157) also argue that interviews ‘produce moments of life as it is being lived’ and create an archive that can be drawn on repeatedly to make sense of that production. It is this archive that we, as authors, re-examine in a new temporal space, drawing aspects of Gloria’s and Cecile’s identities away from ‘the margins’ of research (Author 2 and Other, 2011). Our conversations, illustrated as preludes to sections of this paper, add to our existing understanding of who each learner might have been at the time of the research. We are struck by aspects of Gloria’s agency, previously un-remarked, which emerges from the stories she selected to share with Author 1 during an interview, stories which express important and highly personal experiences from her life that had affected her physically and emotionally.

A1: Looking back at the data, I realise how agentic Gloria was during my interview with her and Cecile. I noticed how she answered my questions but also how she introduced new themes and expanded on things that were clearly important to her.

A2: Yeah, Gloria told you what she wanted you to know. It’s about making things visible – an honest approach. Gloria is a living breathing person; we are not ‘giving voice’ to her through the vignettes – rather representing what she said in that moment. There is feeling, passion, in the telling. It makes you feel as you read it and almost hear it as it brings you back into frame. Back in time.

A1: And I think, on reflection, that it was an honest approach, but I can see how my attention to the data was driven by my research questions. Now, talking through the data with you, I see other things, new things. I realise how much Gloria, and Cecile, were both using the space to tell their own stories. I had my research agenda, but they had things they wanted to share and, I realise now, that the interview time enabled them to do this.

Below we draw attention to two further extracts from the study as part of the told stories. The first one is a section of interview data, the other is part of a narrative vignette that emerged from the same transcription³, demonstrating how ‘fictional’ storytelling can merge with verbatim quotes to represent learners’ voices. Author 1 led the interview with Cecile and Gloria while James, a bilingual volunteer from the local university, was on hand to translate questions into French. The conversation below, however, took place in English.

A1: Miss Jones doesn’t shout

Gloria: Yes she is], just like that. How dare you! (She mimics the teacher in a loud voice. Then she laughs)

Cecile: [Yes she (is?) does

A1: Shouting at you?

Gloria: Everybody. Shouting at everybody.] If everyone is doing nothing, shouting like that. How dare you! That what is making me angry

A1: Making you angry? Oh. What about you Cecile. What do you think about Miss Jones? Because I know you both like (Teaching Assistant)]

Cecile: [How dare you!

Gloria: Because in the Congo (?) no stand there shout like that how dare you and in the Congo little bit (she gestures with her hand, a gentle, relaxed swing with her palm, suggesting calm and quiet)

A1: So they didn’t shout in the Congo?

Gloria: Yes (agreeing with me)

A1: Everybody was quiet?

Gloria: Yes (?) making trouble (?) how dare you! (mimicking Miss Jones, her teacher)

A1: So there's more shouting here? That's interesting.

Gloria: Yes, it's like (?) my (?) , how dare you!

A1: Who shouts like that?

Gloria: Miss Jones. That's why I don't like it

A1: Yes, just occasionally she does have to shout a little bit

James: Are you scared of her though?

Gloria: Yes, I no like

(Transcript from Interview 15/03/11)

Looking back, we recognise how Gloria draws on memories of schooling in the Congo to recall an affective, embodied experience which helps to define who she is (Ahmed and Morgan, 2021). She displays agency clearly in the interview. By using the space to critique staff behaviour, she challenges the notion of the UK offering unconditional safety and security to refugees by implying that she finds the class teacher's shouting scary and unsettling.

Below we demonstrate how this raw, transcribed data was refined into a narrative vignette:

“Miss Jones doesn't shout,” I laughed, trying to make light of something I knew was completely true. The researcher needed to explore it, dissect it to find the hidden meanings while the teacher felt instantly protective towards her colleague.

Gloria ignored my lame excuses. Unabashed, she shot back, “Yes she is, just like that. “How dare you!” And in those three words, mimicked in a loud, clear, peremptory voice, Miss Jones momentarily entered our conversation. Gloria dissolved into laughter, falling across the table in hysteria. Cecile joined in, delighted by the perfect impression.

“Yes she is,” Cecile giggled.

“Shouting at you?”

“Everybody,” Gloria insisted. “Shouting at everybody. If everyone is doing nothing, shouting like that. “How dare you!” That what is making me angry.”

“How dare you!” Now it was Cecile’s turn to mimic although she lacked Gloria’s perfect pitch and intonation.

“Because in the Congo,” Gloria went on, “No stand there shout like that, “How dare you!”, and in the Congo little bit...” Here Gloria gestured with her hand, a gentle, relaxed horizontal movement that suggested calm and quiet (A1, 2013: 90-91).

On reflection, we recognise how simply but effectively narrative vignette writing could capture Gloria mimicking her class teacher in an affective and emotionally embodied way (Ahmed, 2004). The interview had created a secure space for Gloria’s agency to be asserted; she felt sufficiently safe to defy conventional power relations with a teacher (which would have seen her ‘behaviour’ as inappropriate, disrespectful, and potentially disruptive) and felt empowered to express what was clearly a concern for her in an amusing and anecdotal way. This story highlights how Author 1’s interpretation of the data presented Gloria as agentive rather than disruptive and demonstrates how we, as researchers, affect representation through our own emotional, embodied and political responses.

We argue that narrative vignettes act as a collage of data, creating a picture of participants’ lives. These embodied experiences become affective, human, and relatable small stories (Georgakopoulou 2015) where the ‘rippling effect of emotions’ (Ahmed 2004: 119) can be imagined and explored in the present, retrospectively, and with predictions of how those ripples might affect the characters’ future experiences. Our discussions, which foreground the importance of a dialogic process to re-imagine the powerful ways participants’ voices can be heard in research, exemplify how, on re-examination, Gloria’s stories moved in from the field (Author 2 and Other, 2011) to a position where they were chosen for inclusion in the vignettes. Through a semi-structured interview Gloria, as protagonist, orients towards an embodied and emotional experience that constructs her relationship towards school - both historically and in the present.

However, our present conversations acknowledge how much data still contains untold stories. Further examples of Gloria’s agency appeared in fragments of data where interview questions around the physical classroom space at her previous Congolese school, were met with stories of threats of corporal punishment if she arrived late. The emphasis shifted again with, ‘I don’t like the Cedars (primary school) ...Miss, I can tell you something. It was children here; it was

making trouble. Kicking people here,’ (Interview notes, 15/03/11) and a story unfolds of physical attacks in the playground when she first arrived in the UK. In the section below, we continue this journey in examining the untold stories that emerged as we re-engaged with the data.

Notes in the Margin: Re-examining Untold Stories

A2: And the untold stories? What do they tell us about this process, about the politics and ethics around representation?

A1: For me they’re a reminder of our shared humanity, but they’re also a reminder of how learners come to us with different experiences. Some of those experiences I, as a teacher, had never come across and therefore couldn’t truly empathise with. Like Gloria’s night terrors or Cecile’s family break-up or relocating to a new and totally different country. But I think those untold stories are a reminder that, as researchers, we need to revisit data because, like you say, it’s those notes in the margin, the untold stories that help us to decide if we have represented learners in a genuine and honest way; to think about them again at that moment in time when the research was carried out, but with the benefit of new theories and research to draw on. This helps to see if representing learners using narrative vignettes is a methodology that stands up to scrutiny, and I personally think it does.

Untold stories lie within and beyond the boundaries of research, often as notes, left in the margins (Author 2 and Other, 2011). We define ‘untold’ as those stories, episodes or events that were unrecognised or remained unremarked at the time of the research or were left out of the final dissertation due to space constraints. Today, as we discuss the political and ethical ideologies underpinning this critical ethnography, we become aware of how the untold stories add to our understanding of the methodological processes of ‘doing’ research and of how we, as researchers, chose to represent participants through our own epistemic and ideological positions.

On re-examination, the data reminds us how young learners bring with them a multitude of identities, many of which are never revealed, acknowledged, or nurtured in school (Cummins and Early, 2011; Author 2, 2011). In the extract below, Cecile chats to James. The original conversation was in French and translated by him afterwards from the audio-recording.

James: Do you think you will return to France?

Cecile: Not soon. I need to wait for my little sister to speak English, but she's still a baby, so I'll have to wait a long time for her to grow up!

James: Ok – but it must be great having a little sister!

Cecile: Yes. I only have sisters anyway.

James: You don't have any brothers?

Cecile: Yes, I have two brothers, but only my sisters are in England.

James: Do you miss them?

Cecile: One of them.

James: Why not the other?

Cecile: Because he is nasty.

(Transcript from Interview 15/03/11)

Cecile's socio-cultural background and family relations were only transiently visited during the study. On reflection this was due to the dilemma of what to include and, equally, to exclude in answering the study's research questions. Her conversation above with James, and occasional comments during classroom conversations with Author 1, recorded as fieldnotes, alluded to migration to the UK because of a family break-up and, as Cecile stated, 'Because my mother wanted me to come to England to learn English'. The fragmentation of Cecile's family and separation from her brothers and father are, and remain, untold stories. They are only fleetingly referred to in a vignette:

Cecile's linguistic and cultural roots lay in Africa, in Cameroon where her Mum was born. Dad's roots, along with Dad, remained in Paris (A1, 2013: 54).

During our discussions, we notice how Cecile's story, encapsulated in a brief conversation, is a 'counter-story', one of the 'stories that are not encouraged or allowed in specific environments' (Georgakopoulou, 2015: 263). Opportunities for Cecile to disclose these personal details on arrival in the UK only occurred in a safe space with someone who spoke her native French. For school staff to arrange these conditions would imply circumstances where there was a perceived problem that required a solution. Although some of Cecile's family details may have been known to the school through initial welcome and induction meetings, (for example, who her legal guardian was and how many siblings were in the

household), the motivations for Cecile's move to the UK were never part of school discourses. Her stories were ones that 'do not fit expectations of who the tellers should be and what stories they tell' (Georgakopoulou, 2015: 263). Once identified as an acquiescent and able student, there was never any requirement for the school to delve deeper into Cecile's history. As with all newly arrived young learners, her assimilation into the rituals of school life precluded any need to understand her socio-economic, cultural, political, or linguistic background in any detail. The memories and trauma of this dislocation from one life to another, which were part of Cecile's story and her multiple identities, only surfaced through the research.

A further untold story related to Gloria's previous life in the Congo is highlighted in two field note extracts below.

'G recognised the Congo on a map and identifies a plant on the illustration that is native to Africa. She tells me a few details about the Congo, 'Is big' and how her Nan 'has the monies' and is 'helping the people'. She also talks of 'killing people, is dying'. She says "I like the Congo" and declares that when she is grown up she will return to see what it's like. Her mum calls people in the Congo. She tells fragmented stories in broken English of someone going to their house, (whose is undisclosed) deciding that they should die and she makes a throwing action with her hand (reminiscent of someone lobbing a grenade into a building) and says then they die. She says, "My dad is here first. My dad say I need to come here and my mum". G has told Emily (her class teacher) of night raids in the Congo and of being afraid of the dark (Fieldnotes, 31/01/11).

"When Emily was reading The Iron Man, she had slammed her hand down on the desk for effect and shouted "Crash!" G had jumped and screamed and been very upset, then regained her composure and laughed with the others. Emily was sensitive to G's talk of night raids and that she had 'freaked out' in the night dome when it visited school" (Fieldnotes: 18/02/11).

The unrest in central Africa that led Gloria's family to travel north to the UK crept into a few of the interactions she had with members of staff. One week, a dome was inflated in the school hall to simulate the night sky. Stars and galaxies were projected onto its black interior walls and ceiling as the children sat inside. Gloria found this unbearable. The blackness

triggered memories of night raids, where people would visit houses in her area and intimidate or kill the inhabitants. She cried and had to leave the home.

This harrowing information was left out of the vignettes and, years later, as authors, we discussed reasons for the omission. Author 1 concluded that the account was so far removed from her own experiences that she didn't feel capable of representing Gloria's feelings and emotions in a way that would do justice to the experience. Kassan et al., (2020) suggest that researcher identity has a great effect on what data a researcher is 'attuned' to, and what shapes the research process. Author 1 never asked Gloria about the night raids during the research, which, on reflection, was ethically motivated. Holding conversations in which Gloria offered information about her former life voluntarily felt very different from enquiring directly about experiences that clearly distressed her. In this respect, Author 1 exerted an ethical bar or personal moral censorship in the research process, beyond which she would not venture either as a researcher or teacher. However, Kassan et al., (2020) remind us that, regardless of how reflexive a researcher may become, their position is always one of power where it is impossible to achieve a position of equality with participants.

By re-examining the data, we re-open and extend the political and ethical discourses which shaped the initial thesis a decade ago. We acknowledge young learners in the study as living, breathing, agentic people with multiple identities and positionalities yet know that, in choosing narrative vignettes as part of a methodological process, we are not 'giving voice' to them. Rather, we are attempting to express their thoughts, feelings and lived experience in a particular moment while positioning ourselves in the research, aware of the sociocultural and linguistic inequalities ingrained in UK school governance, policy, and practice (Author 1, 2017). We discuss visibility, voice, identity, and the embodied and emotional experiences of young learners in relation to ourselves as researchers and participants, while questioning how we can amplify the children's stories to explore and contextualise their everyday lives by revisiting untold stories in the data. Do our representations do justice to young learners? Our new conversations stress the need for integrity in the research process, critiquing the use of narrative vignettes to make participants more visible and questioning whether our representations are ones that the young learners themselves might recognise, then and now.

We argue that narrative vignettes add to a polyphonic approach to critical ethnographic research. By drawing on a wide range of data and blending it with storytelling, this methodological approach enables researchers to 'witness and comprehend the complexity of

human experience...and to document (it) more fully' (Blackledge and Creese, 2023: 143). The approach creates new spaces where a 'heteroglossic diversity of voices' (Blackledge and Creese 2023: 49) emerges from the data, allowing individual participants to 'speak' and be heard. While we acknowledge that learners' voices are only partially represented in any data, and that research does not empower participants as individuals by claiming to give them a voice in ways that can directly affect social or political outcomes (Cook-Sather, 2006), we believe that the process of writing narrative vignettes, 'requires that we listen to the multiplicity of polyphonic voices involved in research' (Blackledge and Creese, 2023: 143). This opens up opportunities to see, hear and feel connections between what De Fina (2008) describes as the macro and micro elements of storytelling, or big stories (Bamberg 2006) juxtaposed with small stories (Georgakopoulou 2015, 2016). Gloria and Cecile's experiences foreground past political, historical, and humanitarian struggles which our conversations today view contemporaneously, assessing and questioning whether creating narrative vignettes represent their lived experiences as authentically, rather than as 'truthfully', as possible.

Through Gloria's control of the interview narrative, her storytelling exposes both a local, micro view of her education in the Congo with a transcultural, macro commentary on the similarities and differences between a central African and UK system. She sheds light on social and cultural behaviours (with her comparison of teachers' pedagogic approaches), symbolic and cultural capital (and the requirements of paying for education in the Congo or suffering exclusion), and translanguaging (displayed as a commonplace skill of her linguistic repertoire). These insights into her life and experiences show how stories 'act in human consciousness, with individuals sometimes being aware of what story is acting and sometimes not' (Frank, 2010: 14). Frank (2010: 13) suggests that 'After stories animate, they instigate', leading to the creation of further stories which draw in new storytellers or listeners. By revisiting the data, we, as authors, have become part of those further stories.

Concluding Thoughts

Our conversations and reflections, then and now, with participants, each other, critical friends, and researchers, foreground the importance of creating powerful and ethically driven methods through which research participants' stories can be heard and amplified, and of revisiting those methods - which is both a political and ethical action. Vignettes composed of verbatim quotes from the narratives of young learners, as discussed in this article, become a

form of storytelling that is a ‘type of discourse practice’ in itself (De Fina, 2008: 422) and has the potential to identify small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2015) that might otherwise be lost across broad data sets.

Through our approach of looking back in order to look forward, we continue to recognise that there are ethical issues needing further consideration. For example, how anonymised can data remain within narrative vignette writing when, ‘The more context and detail offered in a narrative account... the greater the chance of compromising anonymity’ (Willis, 2019: 446). A further political consideration of narrative vignette writing, and one that relates to the politics of representation, is a researcher’s ability to selectively include or exclude data when fictionalising participants’ stories. This places the researcher in a powerful position where an ‘evidence-saturated culture will continue to police stories of the moral and political in educational settings into the margins’ (Clough 2004: 372-3). However, our paper shows that the reflexivity afforded by a methodology that incorporates narrative vignettes, enables critical ethnographers to reveal their political objectives, of showing ‘otherness’, of glimpsing the experiences of people who have lived beyond the UK but now find themselves embedded in a new and unfamiliar culture.

As we discuss the research today, we are mindful of the fact that we cannot fully understand Cecile and Gloria, or the communities they represent and that this means,

carefully reflecting on the practice of creating representations of other people, while not letting those critical reflections lead to a state of not being able to do any representation at all (Critical Methodologies Collective 2022: 3).

Endnotes

1 All names relating to research participants and their school have been anonymised.

2 Key Stages refer to the ages of learners in English primary schools. Children aged 5-7 work in Key Stage 1. Those aged between 8 – 11 are in Key Stage 2. This distinction enables learners to go through national assessment for reading, writing and mathematics at the end of both Key Stages.

3 Transcription conventions:

(Brackets – sharing additional, relevant information)

[Denoting concurrent or overlapping discourse.

(?) Inaudible response

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