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## Learners' Lives: A Narrative Analysis

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# Learners' Lives: A Narrative Analysis

by  
Heather J. Richmond<sup>±</sup>

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## Abstract

Learner's lives, a narrative impulse, establishes the importance of stories, provides an illustrative example of the analysis of an adult learner's story. The paper provides a step-by-step account of how a researcher conducted a narrative analysis and developed an organizational structure useful for other researchers.

**Key Words:** Adult Education; Adult Literacy; Narrative Analysis; Qualitative Methods; Stories

*The narrative impulse in students may become a liberating instrument through which they can impose structure on the flow of experience and give meaning to their own lives and to the traditional materials of schooling. (Hopkins, [1994](#), p.126)*

## Introduction/Background

The methodology used to gather data about adult education programs learners' perspectives of their literacy experiences relies on case stories gathered and analysed through narrative inquiry methods. The data were collected through observation at two adult education program sites, through focussed group interviews, and in-depth individual interviews. The research approach allowed learners to tell their own stories in a reasonable and recursive way.

## The Importance of Studying Stories

The "case story" approach used in this research provides descriptive knowledge which must be understood in context. The individual interviews were conducted using a narrative inquiry process (Bogdan & Biklen, [1982](#); Stake, [1988](#)) which

yields history, literature and myth, and because it is central to the development of social and personal identity (culture and self) - because it is thematized (or emplotted) experience - it has inescapably to do with education and learning. (Hopkins, [1994](#), p.127)

The narrative process "seeks to collect data to describe ....lives" (Marshall & Rossman, [1995](#), p. 86) and narrative analysis "can be applied to....an in-depth interview" (p. 86). In analysing narratives, the researcher works to actively find the voice of the participant in a particular time, place or setting (Connelly & Clandinin, [1990](#)). I have attempted to provide a description of the learners' literacy stories and experiences based upon their recollections and statements about their own feelings, and perspectives. The narrative process enables these learners to begin to

restory and reconstruct lives in an educational setting. Transformative learning can occur when groups of people come together in community or social groups to critically reflect on the conditions that constrain their actions and create difficulties. This model is embodied in the learners' stories.

## **Approach to the Study of Narratives**

My approach to the study of narratives was self directed. I was located in a small university, in a mainly rural area of the country. There was no "critical mass" of other researchers and few who were interested in anything but empirical answers to all the research questions. My struggle for literary and literacy connections and analysis developed over time. The model of narrative analysis that I developed came from necessity rather than uniqueness. I needed to develop something for my particular study that suited the context of the study.

When I originally went into the field, it was for a larger case study of sixteen community-based adult education programs (Richmond, [1999](#)). One of the purposes of the overall research was to examine the learners' antecedent literacy experiences. The statistics formed a background upon which I wished to paint a representative picture. Thus, I entered the world of the narrative without a compass, so to speak. Perhaps if I had been formally trained as a narrative researcher, the framework and structure would have been less complicated. However, working alone, and reading, writing and thinking about the literary and literacy connections in the learners lives, led me to make the connections that enabled a constructive, creative and considered analysis of the narrative impulse.

## **The Field Needs More Step-by-Step Accounts of How Researchers Conduct Narrative Analysis**

Recounting steps taken to conduct research may assist other researchers engaged in a similar study. I was greatly influence by the theoretical writings of Brunner ([1987](#), [1990](#), [1994](#)), Mishler ([1986](#), [1999](#)), and the work of Connelly and Clandinin ([1990](#), [2000](#)). My first encounter with the narrative as a research method came as I read Wolcott on ethnography and validity in qualitative research ([1988](#)) and Eisner's *Aesthetic Modes of Knowing* ([1985](#), pp. 22-36). One other influence came from my desire to make sense of my world through stories. I attempted to analyze the adult learners' words into something meaningful, their past, present and potential literacy experiences. At the same time, I was reading and searching for connections between literacy and literary knowledge. The approach relies on three dimensions-temporal, personal and experiential. The temporal outlined as past, present and future, the personal, ranging along a continuum from disorder and confusion to organization and clarity, and the experiential situated in self, family, community, schooling, and work.

Hopefully, others writing and doing research in the narrative or other aspects of qualitative study will find something in this paper of interest to them. The beginning researcher might be heartened to know that making sense out of stories is enjoyable process. In fact the journey through this narrative process defines the research.

## **The Narrative: How a Definition Organizes the Analytical Approach**

The definition of the narrative is both process and product in this particular study's approach to analysis. The narrative provides an organization borrowed from literature, (the plot), from language and thought, (cognitive reflection and understanding), and from life events (actions and outcomes). The analysis attempts to reduce the story to a set of elements that may reveal a particular case in a certain time or place. If narratives have common elements, such as drama, satire, or love with characters seen by themselves as survivors, heroines, or victims, we then may be able to use the story maps in cross-case comparisons (Garaway, [1996](#)). Such a comparison may provide evidence for the researcher of the usefulness and trustworthiness of the methodology.

## **A Step-by-Step Account of a Model of Narrative Analysis**

### **Narrative Methodology**

In order to analyze the learners' stories, the research uses a narrative framework that serves as a screen through which the story of the learner may be examined. This, also more importantly, becomes a way for a learner to critically reflect on earlier or current perspectives in order to construct or reconstruct meaning in one's life world.

The narrative analysis of the learner stories uses terms from literary study. The word "story" is used interchangeably with "narrative" throughout the study. The stories of the adult education program's learners, are not works of art, rather they reflect "a kind of life story" which enables us to study "how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves" (Connelly & Clandinin, [1990](#), p.14). A "life story" can be a work of fiction, but can also "be factual, as in the telling of an event that has happened in your personal life" (Lauritzen & Jaeger, [1997](#), p. 35). I have analyzed each life story using a framework which allowed me to examine "all requirements of story: setting, characters, action directed toward goals..." (Lauritzen & Jaegar, [1997](#), p. 35).

I have developed a 'storymap' for each learner whose story has been part of the research. The storymap organizes the learners' recounting of past and present experiences and future intentions under the rubric of character, setting, events, conflicts, incidents, themes and resolutions (or outcomes). This "map" gives a shape to individual stories and allows for a more penetrating analysis in relation to the objectives of the research. The storymap taps a metacognitive response in those who tell the story and those who hear it (Davey, [1983](#); Rumelhart, [1980](#)). The form of a story is a pattern known to both storytellers and listeners, allowing the mind of both to reconstruct and make sense of what is being told or heard. The story is a meaningful way of organizing thinking and is useful for this study.

### **Rationale for Using a Narrative Analysis**

The narrative approach provides the researcher with an organizational structure designed to be responsive to analysis. A typical narrative framework focuses on the 'core narrative' or skeleton plot through four categories:

- Orientation - describes the setting and character

- Abstract - summarizes the events or incidents of the story
- Complicating Action - offers an evaluative commentary on events, conflicts and themes
- Resolution - describes the outcomes of the story or conflict (Mishler, [1986](#), pp.236-237)

The resulting analysis moves towards a reduction of the narration to answer the question "what is the point of this story?" (Mishler, [1986](#), p. 236). This type of analysis is quite formal and structured and its "power lies in its generalizability" (p. 241).

As each narrative unfolds it is contextualized by the purposes of the interviewer in terms of the research and of the learner in terms of self-presentation. Murray ([1986](#)) refers to this as 'life construction' (p. 277) where the story may not represent 'truth' or reality but is an attempt...at information reduction, in which the large variety of life events is reduced to a set of narratives.... This representation convinces the listener or the reader [of its trustworthiness], if it is coherent, whole and if the emplotted events conform to the conventions of comedy, romance, tragedy and satire" (p. 278).

That is, the sense of the story may be organized and understood according to the conventions of literary study. In this approach to narrative analysis, the narrator may tell the story as a tragedy and describe self as a tragic hero or heroine, or as a myth, with self described as a mythic survivor or victim. In this analytical approach there are only so many stories; and most narrations can be categorized through the use of cultural traditions, archetypes and myths (Bruner, [1987](#); Polkinghorne, [1988](#); Ricoeur, [1966](#)). The search for a "universal plot" (Polkinghorne, [1988](#), p. 79) leads the analyst to consider the "temporal experiences" - the past, present, and future - of the learners' narratives.

The narrative analysis of learners stories in this study, in part uses Mishler's 'core narrative' structure; and in part, uses the conventions of literary study in an effort to present multiple learner cases. It also uses the form of a storymap to present a meaningful cross-case comparison. The case stories, in turn, can be understood as being closely linked to the idea of literacy.

The "case story" approach provides descriptive knowledge which must be understood in context. The individual interviews were conducted using a narrative inquiry process (Bogdan & Biklen, [1982](#); Stake, [1988](#)).

The use of a narrative inquiry and the development of case stories offer multiple perspectives in understanding a community-based literacy program. This type of method gives meaning to the learners' own lives; it yields history, literature and myth. Hopkins ([1994](#)) writes that because the recounted experience is central to the development of a social and personal identity - it has a lot to do with education and learning.

Connelly and Clandinin ([1990](#)) tell the reader that stories can allow individuals to reflect upon life and explain themselves to others - in order to study 'life narratives' as a context for making meaning. A life story can be a work of fiction but as Lauritzen and Jaeger write it can also be factual as in the telling of a real life incident ([1997](#)). They point out that this factuality reflects the learner's point of view, not actual reality.

In analysis I worked to find the voice of the participant in a particular time, place or setting (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). To find the voice in the story I decided to develop a type of story map. This was a way to organize learners' recounting of past, present, and future experiences within a rubric (See [figure 1](#)).

**Figure 1**  
**Schematic Organization of the Storymap**

	<b>The World of</b>				
	<b>Self</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Schooling</b>	<b>Work</b>
<b>Past Experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background</li> <li>• Self-identity</li> <li>• Roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roots</li> <li>• Personal history</li> <li>• Events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting the context</li> <li>• Past connections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Incidents</li> <li>• Sites</li> </ul>	Past work experiences
<b>Present Experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current status</li> <li>• Level of awareness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current connections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current work experiences</li> </ul>
<b>Future Intentions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outcomes</li> <li>• Personal development</li> <li>• Self-identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future Connections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plans for future schooling</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future work expectations</li> </ul>

(Richmond, [1999](#))

### **An Overview of the Study and an Illustrative Example of the Narrative Approach.**

#### **Narrative beginnings**

Focussed group interviews were conducted with approximately forty learners, twenty at each of the research sites. The number of persons in each group interview varied from four to ten; the interview always included the adult education programs facilitator. The group interviews were conducted at the beginning of the study and helped me negotiate entry into the adult education programs settings (Merriam, [1988](#)). I observed both morning and afternoon sessions regularly at each site over a period of five months. During these observations, I participated to some extent in the life of the adult education programs through conversations, observations, and the occasional meal at lunchtime. At the end of each observation period I made field notes outlining my observations and conversations.

Lengthy individual interviews were conducted with nineteen learners, nine at site A (Woolville) and ten at site B (Moorcot). The data from some of these interviews have been summarized for a chapter in *Adult Literacy Now* (Richmond, [2000](#)) to illustrate the stories told by the adult education programs learners in general. Those narratives were selected because the data for each was extensive and the stories relatively complete.

Throughout my research, I have undertaken to maintain the anonymity of the individuals involved through using pseudonyms. I have also attempted to mask the name and location of their communities; however, this is a small area and the identities of the communities may be obvious to knowledgeable readers.

This section intends to provide the reader with an example of a learner's perspective of adult education programs and her own literacy experience as a case story or map. The narrative research in this illustrative example focuses on the learner's antecedent literacy experiences and the relationship between these experiences, her current experience as a learner in a literacy program and her future intentions. The interview data from the individual learner is presented as a "case story" which can collectively offer multiple perspectives in understanding the community-based literacy program exemplified in the adult education programs.

## **An illustrative example**

### **Zena**

*Did you ever pick up a book and get so lost in it that you was right there where it was all happening?*

Zena was part of the morning adult education programs group at Woolville. I first met her while observing her class. Zena had shown me an autobiography she had written at the adult education programs. I thought to myself at that time - this is someone who enjoys literacy in her life on a regular basis. I wondered what she was like - why did she write so much and what was she doing at the adult education programs? While at adult education programs, Zena wrote an autobiography of her early life on the Mountain, talking about her father, who was a farmer. Her happiest times were spent there. When Zena was twelve her parents 'parted'. Then she and her mother and various siblings (she was from a large family) moved into the Woolville area. She wrote that it was the worst thing they ever did.

**Past experiences** Zena remembers her early days at home when her mother spent a lot of time with Zena and her sister. As she recalls these times her voice falters as she remembers her father's 'parting' from the family.

**Figure 2**  
**Storymap: Zena**

	<b>Self</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Community</b>	<b>Schooling</b>	<b>Work</b>
<b>Past Experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>parent separation made her sad</li> <li>she created security for herself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>mother sang to her</li> <li>mother beat her when she was home late from school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>isolated rural community</li> <li>home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>wrote as a child</li> <li>wrote ideas down to make sense of them</li> <li>had literacy</li> </ul>	
<b>Present Experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a reader, a thinker, an observer</li> <li>creates and recreates her story as she tells it</li> <li>a secure life</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reads at home</li> <li>talks with her family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>finds herself only in her rural community</li> <li>no love for towns and cities</li> <li>Woolville adult education program is her community as</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>still has literacy</li> <li>writes at adult education programs -- short stories, autobiographies</li> <li>a skilled writer</li> <li>rewrites, revises,</li> </ul>	

			well	edits	
<b>Future Intentions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>continues to make a safe life for herself</li> <li>will continue to think, observe, converse and write</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>will bolster family members, give comfort and provide an orderly peaceful existence for them</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>will continue to be rooted in her rural community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>she thinks of going to university</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>health problems may prevent paid work</li> </ul>

She says:

Mom used to sing to us. We lived on a farm. It was a long ways away from everyone else. In the wintertime my father worked in the woods. He had a woodlot. And Mom had a lot of time to spend with [me and my sister].

Zena talks about her mother's family as being people who liked to read. My questions to her about her past experiences with school bring forth a wry account of an incident that Zena has never forgotten, which occurred while her parents were still together.

When I was in grade 6, we lived about 10 minutes walk from school. Me and one of the boys didn't have our math done, we couldn't do it; so the teacher kept us in til' 6 o'clock. When I got home Mom and Dad were mad because I didn't come home. And I've hated math ever since. It seems to me like I'm going to make a mess of it whether I do or not. And now that I grew up it seems stupid to me. They could have sent [my sister] back to the school to see where I was and what I was doing. Instead of just being mad because I didn't come home.

When asked about the effect of this on her present views of schooling at adult education programs, she laughingly replies, "I know that Maria (the facilitator) is not going to give me a beating if I don't go home on time". Zena's good humour is restored.

**Present experiences** Zena begins by saying that she feels adult education programs are right for her as "it's not because I have to come, it's because I want to come." She started her return to school a few years ago, at the community college in the city. Zena made a "grade 12++" as she puts it on the entrance test.

But I don't like the city and I left the college. Now I love it [in small village]; it's a little place. I could never be comfortable in a place where ... people don't seem to care about one another. I guess it's being raised in the country.

She contrasts this with the adult education programs by saying, "when I went to the community college, the only time you spoke to anyone was when you went to the teacher for help;" whereas at the adult education programs, "we're like family." Zena continues by praising the homey atmosphere created by their facilitator, Maria. "If you make a mistake, you're not scared to go ask for help."

In fact, Zena has written some of the math GED tests, a subject which she finds difficult. Her favourite subject is English; she reads extensively for pleasure. Zena talks about the type of books and television she enjoys:

I love mysteries. If you read one romance you know pretty well how it's going to turn out, but a mystery book, it keeps ya . . . I said to Jason one time -he doesn't like to read - I said, "did you ever pick a book up and get so lost in it that you was right there where it was all happening?" "No!" he said, "I don't," but I get caught. I think it's an escape. It takes so much time but I love it. I hate to see the neighbours come and I have to put my book down. I wish they'd stay home . . .

Well [my husband] doesn't work in the winter time, he works in the gravel pit so he has [time] during Winter and Spring [and] he really gets hooked on TV, especially *Another World*.

We watched [two shows] the other week and the same thing happened on both of them. This guy was supposed to get killed but he came home on the day of his funeral. To me they're just stupid. My mother watched the *Edge of Night* and [it seemed to be] more real to her than what we are.

Zena's ability as a writer capable of creating storylines allows her to deconstruct television stories and to identify their apparently unreal description of life. She views printed stories in an entirely different light.

**Future intentions** Zena speaks little of her future except to say that she might like to go into 'geriatric training.' She thinks she might be eligible for a training allowance from the government. However, this idea is countered by her growing concern about her health. She found out recently that she had diabetes and thyroid problems and now she has developed carpal tunnel syndrome. Zena also wonders if she might be better off going to the university. Her son has encouraged her. "Mom," he says, "if you get a chance like that, go for it."

**Narrative core** Zena's early life events seem to guide her life story, or at least her self-narrative. She talks about her mother's family as being people who love to read; she is now an avid reader. She speaks about being beaten for getting home late from school, having been kept in because she couldn't do her math homework. She says she hates math however she is presently at the

adult education programs working hard on math. For the most part her literacy is situated in her home and to some extent in the adult education program in her own rural community.

She talks about the quiet, orderly, peaceful life on the farm and how her mother had time to sing to her. After her parent's separation, when she was twelve years old, the family was uprooted from their beloved Mountain home and moved to the village where she still lives. Because she prefers an orderly life, this upheaval has had a profound effect on her life. Two themes run through her story: obedience and the need for safety. Her distaste for the city and her love of her rural community; the lack of people who spoke to her at the community college in town, all reinforce her awareness that safety lies at home. In quiet family and community settings, Zena is able to find herself. She can write, read, converse and think in these settings.

### **Critical Reflection on the Narrative Analysis**

Some of the limitations of the narrative methodology are considered in the next three sections. Significant concerns are discussed in relation to: the illusion of causality, the significance of repeated patterns, and the possibilities and potentialities of transferability.

#### **The Illusion of Causality**

The patterns of a learner's self identity, their culture and community and any transformations that take place over time are telescoped by the learner in the telling of his/her story. As a researcher, I had to be mindful of the difference between "the events as lived and the events as told " and to avoid "the illusion of causality" (Connelly & Clandinin, [1990](#), p. 6). The storyteller's identity remains the same although the story may change; and this core identity may help or hinder when he or she is faced with new challenges. The challenge of the adult education programs may enrich, enhance, or affect a learner in ways that may not show to the outside world but may be incorporated in the individual's story. These changes may not be easily measured by events such as GED's passed, skills learned or jobs acquired, and should not be described in cause and effect terms. A learner might be transformed by the adult education program experience and become literate, but may not get a job or pass the GED. Adult education programs, change learners, but not in ways that are readily apparent to the observer or amenable to measurement using standardized tests.

#### **The Significance of Repeated Patterns**

The number of learners interviewed allowed for some comparison between story cases, which in turn can be used to understand how learners are affected by the communities within which they interact. No single story provides a full understanding of the journey toward literacy, but each provides "pieces for a 'mosaic' or total picture of a concept" (Marshall & Rossman, [1995](#), p. 88). Repeated patterns of behaviour and repeated storylines are important in understanding the total concept of literacy and can shed light on the learner's cultural consciousness and on "the interrelationships between collective and individual experience and behaviour" (Ferdman, [1990](#), p. 185).

The collectivity of case stories drawn from individual learners also enlightens the findings obtained from a learner survey (Richmond , [1999](#)) . The individual interviews explore literacy as it relates to community and family living and the shared culture implied by these settings. A shared culture derives from shared experiences and ways of looking at the world (Ferdman, [1990](#), p.185). For example, the larger society may view education programs learners as low literate and therefore marginal because they attend a literacy training program; the learners, however, may see themselves as literate because they are interested in reading and because they are quite capable of communicating within the context of their own culture.

### **Transformability: The Mutability of Stories**

The learners' talk allowed them to begin to think about what had happened in the past in their school and family lives, in their current practice in the education programs and the community, and to predict what the future might hold. A narrative is developed or constructed in the telling. My role as interviewer may have affected the stories as I asked for clarification or elaboration. The learners I met in large groups and later in individual interviews were engaged in a synthesis of their past, present and future. In telling their stories, the learners revealed or concealed themselves, presenting themselves in a particular way. The narrative tapped both their experiences and their potentialities. The process became "in part a shared narrative construction and reconstruction through the inquiry" (Connelly & Clandinin, [1990](#), p. 5). Bruner writes:

A life as led is inseparable from a life as told - or - a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold. Certain basic formal properties of the life do not change easily. (Bruner, [1987](#), p.137)

When examining the veracity of the learner's account, there is the possibility that learners tell you just what they think you want to hear. In order to reduce this, I tried to encourage the learners to re-listen to the taped interview with me after each interview was finished. In this way I hoped to verify the narrative. Narratives allow transformations to occur; and re-listening to the tape allowed the learner to make changes - rather than the researcher relying solely on her own interpretations. If a story was too fantastic, I did not use it as a case story.

As I listened to the interviews, I asked myself many questions. For example, would learners want to transform themselves and their stories as they experienced adult education programs? Would they be able to? In his study of autobiography, Bruner ([1987](#)) reports "that these formal structures may get laid down early in the discourse of family life and persist stubbornly in spite of changed conditions" (p.31). Does the learner reroute these realities as the narrative unfolds? To understand events in life, to organize and to develop a sense of self, the adult cannot turn to play as the child does (Peller, [1971](#); Piaget, [1962](#); Sutton- Smith, [1971](#)) but can turn to story telling. In adulthood, experiences cannot be played out as they are in childhood; to organize and make sense of one's self and one's life, the adult is likely to make extensive use of the narrative form (MacKeracher, [1996](#), pp. 36-37).

The incidents the learner includes in the interview are included no matter what they reflect. The narrative process reveals a learners' essential form of self-organization, even when that organization seems chaotic to the listener. In fact, this self-organization seems relatively immune

to change. Bruner (1987) writes that the "psychic reality" of the individual, in fact, may resist change. This is the paradox facing many adult learners; as in adult education programs, the learners want to change at least to the extent of learning literacy skills and getting their education. Some, however, may resist additional changes which might affect their self-concept or self-esteem, even when such changes might be very beneficial.

### **Usefulness of the Approach, Variations That Can Be Tried and Other Related Topics**

Using learners' stories and experiences as a text is a useful approach and provides all participants a deep and multi-layered understanding.. The deeply personal responses from learners can be described as implicit and subtle. There appears to be a relationship between the development of an individual's voice as an essential component in the development of their sense of self (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). The learners narratives can reflect a process of self - discovery. For example Zena's voice is - tentative or at least subtle in its expression. She acts as a self- directed learner, and is able to use her interests in literacy to obtain control over her life and live in contentment with her immediate family. The approach promotes the development of voice and self through critical reflection on one's life experiences and the circumstances of one's life.

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