

## Book Reviews

### *Narratives in the Making: Teaching and Learning at Corktown Community High School.*

Mary Beattie. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 192 pages.

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#### *Introduction and Content Overview*

This text is about an alternative Toronto high school, its beliefs in whole-child education, and the success underlying its teaching practices as portrayed from a broad base of varying school community perspectives. The author Mary Beattie states that the narrative portrait offered of Corktown Community High School (this is the pseudonym originally chosen by the teacher participants in the 1993-1994 study) "is a snapshot in time, a narrative that is continually evolving and changing, a narrative in the making" (p. 8). Beattie depicts the school's emphasis on interpersonal relationships and collaboration alongside its contextually developed curriculum as interwoven principles of its learning environment and integral reasons for its success as defined by its high levels of student retention, engagement, and achievement.

The book is divided into 7 chapters. The first two chapters "Origins Context, Culture, Community" and "Education is a Holistic Endeavor: Corktown—A Community High School" provide an overview of the school's educational philosophy, the community in which the school is located, and the origins and design of the study. Corktown Community High School, a publicly funded urban school with a "homogeneous, mostly white and middle class" (p. 36) student population of 120 students, was part of a larger national research study conducted in 1993-1994 (Exemplary Schools Project; Gaskell, 1995). The purpose of this research was to understand how these secondary schools were responding creatively to difficulties and tensions by "studying the culture and structure of their school communities and identifying and describing the practices which contributed to the various dimensions of each school's success" (p. 6). Much of the text is based on the research conducted during this study, and the book is organized according to the "patterns of distinctiveness" (p. 11) identified and used to describe the successful teaching and learning practices in this school. Corktown's success is attributed to its learning environment and the emphasis it places on close interpersonal relationships, student-centered learning, and community involvement. Interwoven in the overview of the research study and how the school is viewed in the community is a sense of Beattie's own research intentions and purpose and her justification of narrative

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methods as appropriate “to the study of experience” (p. 10) and her beliefs in the importance of collaborative research relationships.

The third and fourth chapters entitled “Relationships as a Context for Learning” and “Living and Learning: The School is a Learning Community” introduce the reader to the learning culture in the school and the value it places on independent thought, freedom of expression, and learning as individually paced. In these two chapters Beattie further layers the context by examining how the governing principles and programs of the school contribute to its success. Weaving in and out of various teachers’, parents’, and students’ voices Beattie offers the reader a portrait of a school community that is academically challenging, caring, creative, and democratic. Despite the many successes of Corktown, however, Beattie does not allow a seamless story to be told. She also acknowledges the challenges of this school as seen in its budget constraints, board policies, and lack of programming and equipment alongside the necessary multiple roles teachers must play if the school is to run smoothly.

The fifth and sixth chapters, “Independence and Interdependence in the School Community” and “Educating Global Citizens: Developing Connections and Commitment to Self, School, and Community,” are thought-provoking chapters as the voices of students and teachers who are a part of this small educative community come through strongly. Through this lens the reader is able to gain a better understanding of the school’s philosophy in fostering strong student voice in addition to its emphasis on connectedness of self, school, and community. Through narrative portraits of students, teachers, and of classroom moments, Beattie highlights how the school attempts to develop voice and connectedness in the classroom and with the wider community through its creative outreach program and in its attention to student voice in all governing matters that pertain to the school community. Underlying Beattie’s careful depictions is a sense of her own deep respect for her participants as she attempts to portray a story of school (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) that honors multiple individuals and their experiences in this community.

Chapter 7, “The Research Study,” is the final chapter in this text, and it gives a thorough and well-written summary of the study’s conceptual positioning, theoretical framework, research design, and methodology. Beattie explains how the case study of Corktown Community High School is positioned in qualitative research methods and narrative inquiry, drawing largely on Clandinin and Connelly’s (1986, 1990, 1991, 1994) beginning conceptualization of narrative inquiry. The approach taken to the collection and interpretation of data occurred collaboratively and in layers between members of the research team and with participants. Conceptually, Beattie draws on Dewey’s philosophy of progressive education and growth and principles of continuity, and Schwab’s notion of liberal education to explore the principles underlying Corktown’s learning environment. Beattie explains that all data were collected during the 1993-1994 school year and briefly mentions a period in 1997 when she returned to examine the school’s understanding of collaborative leadership.

### *Considerations*

This text is directed toward experienced teachers and administrators of schools looking for creative ways for student voice and community to be fostered in

school communities. Moving between conceptual self-positioning, relevant literature, and individuals' experiences, Beattie returns frequently to the collaborative, relational, contextual threads shaping the school's learning environment and community's emphasis that "individuals' lives are works in progress" (p. 84). In the beginning of the book there is a sense that Beattie depicts too broad a view of Corktown Community High School in her attempts to position school board officials and trustees inclusively in the larger landscape of the school community and their opinions about the merits of this particular school. In contrast to this point, however, I would not allow chapters 1 and 2 to dissuade the reader, for the remainder of the book is well written and peers in at the workings of a highly creative school during a particular period.

Beattie shies away from direct implications, freeing the reader to construct his or her own understandings as he or she interacts with the text. At various points throughout the book, she does briefly present her own research beliefs and purpose. However, as someone with a great interest in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I was disappointed that she resisted exploring what must have been a challenging scenario as a researcher attempting to construct a narrative portrait of a school through individual perspectives. Perhaps inquiring into this aspect of the study and repositioning herself within it would have been an interesting methodological consideration taking into account the length of time that has passed since the study's completion.

In addition, I was left to wonder why she did not consider how individuals' lives and narratives of Corktown may have shifted since the study in 1993-1994, and thus how the narrative portrait of Corktown may also have shifted. The rapidly changing demographics of Canada and the setting of the school in Toronto, as well as the growing emphasis on provincial achievement testing and teacher and student testing accountability, also left me wondering why Beattie did not consider her own understanding of Corktown as a narrative in the making. Reflecting on present-day Corktown in an additional chapter perhaps might have added an insightful layer. This in turn might have provided narrative coherence (Carr, 1986) for the reader and removed the school from the time in which the study was conducted rather than leaving it and the reader firmly positioned in history.

#### *Methodological Borderlands*

Drawing on Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) conceptualization of narrative inquiry, like Beattie I understand it "as both phenomena under study and a method of study" (p. 4) in which contexts, experiences in contexts, and their understanding are expressed as "stories lived and told" (p. 20). Throughout the book Beattie returns to her point of emphasizing that the narrative portrait offered of Corktown Community High School is a narrative in the making. As she does so, this metaphorical concept serves her well in the methodological emphasis she places on the narrative methods she employed as part of her research design and in her emphasis on the lives of the teachers and students at Corktown.

However, I wonder why she chose to remain strictly within the thematic constructs of the original case study and the "patterns of distinctiveness" (p. 11), which were used to construct an overall understanding of the school. Granted the narrative methodologies she was drawing from and using to

interpret the data were beginning conceptualizations, and hence it must have been a challenging undertaking on her part. Yet methodologies like individuals' lives are not static, and in retrospect it might have provided valuable insight if she had inserted herself in the text and reflected back on that study, its research design, and the lens through which she viewed the school and its members. There seems to be some tension in Beattie's case study adherence to generalized themes and her use of narrative methods "because of their appropriateness to the study of experience and to the acknowledgment of the values, intentions, and purposes of the individuals being studied" (p. 10). The emphasis of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) on individual lives as composed of unique experiences lived and told in which new experiences also simultaneously shape and inform previously lived experiences seems to be in direct contrast with "patterns of distinctiveness" (p. 11).

In my attempts to question Beattie's text, I draw on Clandinin and Rosiek's (2007) work, which considers conceptual cartography of narrative inquiry and the conceptual borderlands in which scholars find themselves as an area not composed of sharp lines, but as blurred paradigm borders. In relation to the themes characterizing Beattie's work, Clandinin and Rosiek state:

Some narrative inquirers search for ways to speak to a sense of "the universal case" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 32). Some narrative inquirers, unable to live with the tension produced by constantly proliferating counter narratives, search for ways to ameliorate this tension by seeking universal themes in which the narrative tensions can be contained. In that search, they move into the borderlands with post-positivist research, which takes the identification of generalizable patterns in human experience as its primary goal (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This desire to speak to the universal comes, we think, from being immersed in an academic world that encourages us to speak to the universal. (p. 60)

Their words encourage me to consider the academic context in which researchers find themselves; a landscape shaped by funding and the need for "hard evidence" influenced by notions of obligatory rationality, which has in turn led to assumptions about the nature of the mind and the solidification of research practices of discovery as opposed to exploration (Thomas, 1998). Clandinin and Rosiek caution about the manipulation of individuals' narratives in this manner. On one hand, they suggest, it can provide "new ideas and rich interdisciplinary dialogue," whereas on the other hand, it may also be a "cover for forms of academic violence" (p. 60) in that "the story is thus ripped from the personal history of the one living it and is treated as fixed data, much as one might treat numerical data" (p. 61).

Rather than criticizing Beattie's notions of narrative methods and the constraints under which I felt the individuals' narratives were placed, I reflect on a borderland composed of narrative inquiry and postpositivism to speculate about Beattie's own tension in her attempt to honor individuals' stories while constructing a broad story of the school within the constraints of format of the larger study. There is a strong sense of Beattie's deep respect for the individuals with whom she lived and worked collaboratively. As a result, this allows me to return to Beattie's text and conjecture about the tension she may have lived with as she attempted to uphold her study's expectations and as she grew to

know the individuals of Corktown Community High School. I believe that as researchers, this leaves us with larger questions about what researchers do with old data when the composition of the research site has changed and methodologies have evolved. Finally, I wonder what this text might have been had she named her struggles and allowed the narratives to remain in the stream of individuals' lived experiences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007).

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