Stories and the Adoptee’s Identity

NYS Citizens’ Coalition for Children
22nd Annual Foster Care and Adoption Conference

Robert (Bert) Ballard, Ph.D., & Sarah Ballard, M.A., LPC
University of Waterloo (soon to be Pepperdine University)
May 7, 2011

The story of our lives

- Our lives are a story or narrative, composed of characters, plots, events, drama, and tension.
- Each narrative, like each life, is unique. It is our identity.

- *It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others (and of ourselves). Alasdair MacIntyre, 1984, p. 212*
Narrative Inheritance

- The stories of those who came before us in our families and lives provide “a framework for understanding our identity through theirs” (Goodall, 2005, p. 497).
- Said different, “that which has come before influences what is to come next” (Ballard & Ballard, 2011, p. 73)
ADOPTED - THE COMIC

FAMILY TREE ASSIGNMENT

EQUIPMENT LIST FOR A BIOLOGICAL CHILD:

- 1 x Sheet of Plain Paper
- Ruler
- 1 x Writing Implement

EQUIPMENT LIST FOR AN ADOPTED CHILD:

- 10 x Sheets of Coloured Paper
- Foam Shapes
- Pipe Cleaners
- Glue Stick
- Protractor
- Safety Scissors
- Paper Clips
- String
- Tape
- Sharpener
- 10 x Writing Implements
- Brasses

Written by Crist Gallardo, Art by Jessica Enhardt
Joint Storytelling / Stories in the present

- How family members coordinate their roles and performances during the storytelling event (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006)
- Jointly, collaboratively told stories
- A “sense-making” activity
- How people (and families) become – connection between stories and identity
- Improves well-being – functionality, supportiveness, less stress
- Normative outcomes – children (adoptees) have a voice

“Pumpkins”
Narrative Momentum

• Inherent sense of movement and momentum toward an unfolding and emergent future
• How narrative continues to write, create, form, maintain identity
• “Narrative writes us”
• We can envision future stories
• Our “narrative momentum” is another’s inheritance!
Narrative Burden

• Our stories are:
  – Sources of our identity and who we are
  – Uniquely ours
  – Reminders of difference
  – Burdens to carry

So what does this mean?
The takeaways

• Accept that the past cannot be changed (“the life we were given”)
• Value of voice
• Stories are both sources of identity and reminders of difference and pain
• We are always becoming. There is always hope.
• As parents and professionals, we need to offer a safe space and supportive climate to make sense of who we are (not be “correct”)
• Stories are yet to be written . . .
Thank you!

- Robert (Bert) Ballard, Ph.D. – bballard@uwaterloo.ca
- Sarah Ballard, M.A., NPC – sballard@uwaterloo.ca

Resources and Disclaimer

- No part of this presentation or handouts may be distributed without express written permission from Dr. Robert Ballard (University of Waterloo, Pepperdine, and/or Adopted the Comic). *For private use only*. 