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## Negotiating identities through Canadian multicultural and Indigenous picturebooks: A collective autobiographical narrative inquiry

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### Abstract

*Canadian multicultural picturebooks greatly influence both children's and educators' being and becoming. Identity is closely related to our engagement with literacy practices. In this article, two researchers who immigrated from mainland China engage in autobiographical narrative inquiry, a methodology that asks the researchers to self-face, and to "world"—travel to our earlier landscapes, times, places, experiences and relationships. In personal, educational and academic settings, we tell and retell our storied experiences of critically reading four multicultural Canadian picturebooks. Such experiences are analysed through the theoretical lenses of transnational identity, immigrant parent knowledge, mirrors and windows, and no single story. The experiences of reading, reviewing, teaching and researching Canadian multicultural picturebooks have been constructing, mediating, engaging, and exploring our own identities. The personal nature of autobiographical narrative inquiry allows a transformational understanding of the construct of such multiple, complex and ever-shifting identities. We hope to shed light on the importance of negotiating one's transcultural and transnational identity in multicultural picturebooks, as little work presents minority educators' and adult newcomers' voices of reading Canadian multicultural picturebooks. By making visible our critical reading experiences, this inquiry opens space to maximise the outcomes of utilising children's literature in teaching and learning.*

### Keywords

Newcomer adult reader; multicultural picturebook; Indigenous picturebook; transcultural identity; autobiographical narrative inquiry

### Introduction

Canadian picturebooks have a long history of portraying themes such as multiculturalism. This clearly corresponds with the enactment of the Immigrant Act of 1967 that made immigration possible to individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Bainbridge et al., 1999). Throughout the



years, multiculturalism in Canadian picturebooks has seen an expansion in its meaning, becoming more inclusive. Multiculturalism is beyond diverse languages and skin tones. It includes characters with physical or mental exceptionalities, differences in socioeconomic, class and family circumstances, sexual orientations, religions (Brenna et al., 2017; Johnston & Bainbridge, 2013). In addition to the increasing number of multicultural picturebooks that draw educators', librarians' and parents' attention, an increasing number of picturebooks with Indigenous content and perspectives are being published in the Canadian market and used in schools (Brenna et al., 2017; Burke et al., 2019). Within contemporary Canadian Indigenous and multicultural picturebooks, a growing number of them are created by authors and illustrators from Indigenous and diverse cultural backgrounds (Brenna et al., 2021). Research has explored Canadian picturebooks that have potential to assist young newcomer children to better integrate into Canada (Liu, 2017). Exposure to multicultural and Indigenous picturebooks can enhance both Canadian and newcomer children's awareness of diversity and induce positive attitude towards differences and racial justice (Bainbridge et al., 1999; Husband, 2019; Mendoza & Reese, 2001; Wiltse, 2015). In addition, there is a close interrelationship between multiculturalism, Indigenism and hegemony (Daly, 2017). Hegemony is a notion which refers to dominant groups' perspectives and beliefs being pervasive in a society through media (Gramsci, 2000). Botelho and Rudman (2009) highlighted the importance of critically examining hegemonic relations, in order to learn and support diversity.

### Canadian multicultural and indigenous picturebooks and identity negotiations

Diverse Canadian picturebooks greatly influence both children's and educators' being and becoming (e.g., Hammett, 2013; Wiltse, 2015). Existing Canadian literature has explored the ways that practising and pre-service teachers negotiate their identities through reading Canadian multicultural and Indigenous picturebooks (Courtland & González, 2013; Hammett, 2013; Hammett & Bainbridge, 2009; Johnston & Shariff, 2013). One common discussion within these studies is around Canadian national identity and cultural identity (Hammett & Bainbridge, 2009; Ward, 2013; Wiltse, 2013). Reading diverse Canadian picturebooks provoked educators to reflect on their national identities and "promote[d] a cohesive and exclusionary view of national identity that can marginalise or exclude diverse immigrant and Aboriginal perspectives, or serve as a counter-articulation to such notions of a homogenous sense of nation" (Johnston et al., 2007, p. 75). These studies indicate that multicultural and Indigenous picturebooks have the power to break the "middle-class, white" cultural hegemony.

Despite the many studies done on the topic of Canadian picturebooks in multiculturalism, little work has specifically focused on the personal experience of reading such books from the eyes of immigrant educators and researchers. Identity is closely related to our engagement with literacy practices, where we use "tools or media for constructing, narrating, mediating, engaging, performing, enlisting, or exploring identities (Moje et al., 2009, p. 416). Identity is not linear, rather it is complex and related to every aspect in our everyday life. Our picturebook reading journeys are constantly influencing our identity negotiation, as new Canadian individuals, educators and researchers.

In this article, we (Emma and Yina) present the ways in which reading these four Canadian picturebooks, namely, *When I Found Grandma* (Balasubramaniam, 2019), *When Father Comes Home* (Jung, 2020), *When I Was Eight* (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2013), *My Day with Gong Gong* (Yee, 2020), can help us, as newcomers to Canada, to construct and negotiate our identities as immigrants, as well as readers, educators and researchers in education. We illustrate the connections among the past, the present and the future as we respond to various texts through the theoretical lenses of transnational identity (Zhang & Guo, 2015), immigrant parent knowledge (Guo, 2012), mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990), and no single story (Adichie, 2009). These books are about the lives and human experiences of Indigenous people and immigrants in Canada that we conceive as a "vehicle to fight the hegemony of the dominant culture in the publication of children's literature" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 279). We aim to show how Canadian multicultural and Indigenous picturebooks break

the hegemonic ideology of the mainstream ethnic cultures in Canada and how we shift our identities through our reading experiences. More significantly, this article provides insight into minority educators' experiences of reading the books and illustrates ways in which our learning of the host country and our identities changed along the way.

## Methodology

The method we employed in this article is autobiographical narrative inquiry. It speaks to us because the focus of its methodological umbrella—narrative inquiry—focuses on “lived experience—that is, lives and how they are lived” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii). Narrative inquiry attends through the metaphorical three-dimensional space that examines life experience backward and forward, inward and outward, and within and across situations (Clandinin et al., 2007). Within the three-dimensional space, the depth of our attention reached back to our first days in the new country, our early experiences with picturebooks, and even our childhood years. Responding in this way also involved attending to the places where our stories have unfolded, as well as making visible the events that have shaped our understanding of them, as well as our responses to them from a personal, practical and social perspective. With autobiographical narrative inquiry, specifically, we entered as both inquirers and participants (Chen, 2021; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and respectively and collectively brought stories of our identity-negotiation as an immigrant, a mother, an international student, a researcher, and all of our “selves ... always in the making” (Greene, 1993, p. 213), with us into this inquiry.

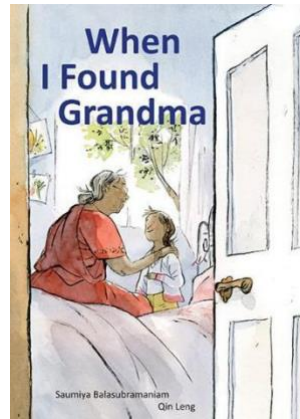
Over the past few years, during the life transition to a new country, we have written about our lived experiences in various forms: picturebook reviews, personal journals and social media posts. All the pieces, like scattered pearls, have been collected for this inquiry. They became valuable field texts that revealed our hidden memories and provoked deeper explorations. By looking at the tensions and bumping places we encountered during those times, we were able to develop a more thorough understanding of the impact of reading and thinking about these picturebooks on our multicultural identity-making. Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) point out, “The focus of narrative inquiry is not only on individuals' experiences but also on the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (p. 42). In this autobiographical narrative inquiry, we also had the opportunity to confront, digest and analyse these encounters in a larger context.

Understanding another person and culture is simultaneously understanding ourselves (Sarris, 1993). In other words, the inquiry described in this article looks outward into the stories in the picturebooks and, in the meantime, looks inward into our own lived experience. This process is “ongoing, an endeavour not aimed at a final and transparent understanding of the other or of the self, but of continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both” (p. 6). Through the following autobiographical tellings and unpackings into our lived experiences of critically reading multicultural picturebooks written by Canadian authors, we work to disrupt the taken-for-granted hegemonic thinking and start an ongoing communication about the role of children's literature in multicultural identity-making.

## Telling the stories of reading four multicultural picturebooks

### Emma's reading experience

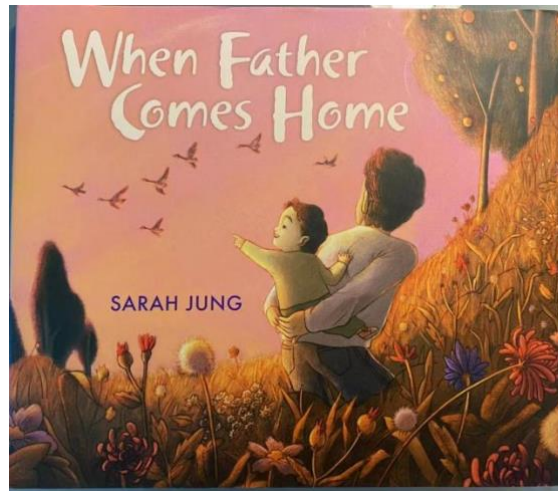
#### *When I Found Grandma*



**Figure 1.** Cover of *When I Found Grandma*. (Balasubramaniam, 2019)

Despite her wish that her grandmother could come, little Indian American Maya finds that Grandma's visit, even from thousands of miles away, is not as pleasant as she has hoped. Grandma wears fancy clothes, speaks loudly, cooks differently and mispronounces Maya's name. Grandma is more of an embarrassment and annoyance than a pleasant surprise. It gets worse—a promised island trip is replaced by a trip to the temple because of Grandma! When Maya is annoyed with Grandma, she hides the prayer bells, but then she sees Grandma's efforts—Grandma suggests that they pray on the island; Grandma even wears “normal” clothes and bought a baseball cap at the pier. The excitement Maya feels about the carousel leads her to let go of Grandma's hand and lose herself in the world of people on the island. Finally, Grandma's loud calling of Maya's name catches her attention when the cap bobs in the air. Maya finds Grandma and she is never happier.

I came to Saumiya Balasubramaniam's (2019) beautifully written story when my older daughter Molly just turned five, an age when consciousness and subjectivity start to emerge. We had the privilege of having Molly's grandma living with us. She is a lovely lady who loves and takes care of the kids with all her heart. However, as Molly's independent thinking grew, a hint of cross-cultural and cross-generational conflicts crept into the house, from what to eat for breakfast, whether or not Molly should wear an extra layer going out to the snow, what language should be spoken at home, to the proportion of decision-making by grandma for five-year-old Molly—the list goes on and on. Reading *When I Found Grandma* (Balasubramaniam, 2019), I saw in the story my family's experience. Molly and her grandma shared the deep bond and the precious grandmother-granddaughter connection, but, like Maya and her grandmother, they lived in two sometimes overlapping yet mostly different cultural worlds. Both generations showed unique struggles and confusions as well as the efforts to seek mutual understanding and empathy with someone who comes from a different cultural world from their own.

*When Father Comes Home*

**Figure 2.** The cover of *When Father Comes Home*. (Jung, 2020)

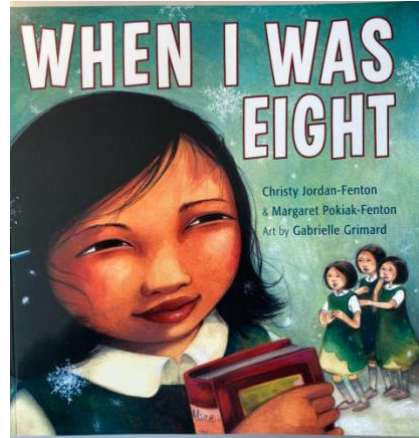
In *When Father Comes Home* (Jung, 2020), a young boy, June, tells the story of an immigrant family. June lives with his mother and brother Hyun in the new country, while his father works in their home country to support the family and to offer June and Hyun a better education. The days June spends without Father are long. Mother says that Father is like a goose. When the time comes, he flies home. Always. So June counts down the days to his father's arrival. Father's return makes the home a happier place—big smiles on mother's face and more yummy food on the table. Father has many brilliant stories to tell when tucking the brothers in at night. Father's presence makes June feel warm and safe. June and Hyun plant a tangerine tree with Father before he leaves once again. Tangerines are June's favourite fruit, sweet and sour. The boy takes care of the tree with a lot of love and attention, hoping he will see Father again shortly as the tree grows taller and bigger.

Though *When Father Comes Home* (Jung, 2020) is a beautiful and well-written story and the author intentionally uses a calm tone in the storytelling, I got emotional halfway through. It is important to have immigrant families' experiences recorded in children's books and shared with the young generation, especially when we live in an increasingly diverse world where families come in different shapes and forms. I see the family stories of my friends and my own in this book. I resonated with June when he accidentally broke the tangerine tree and feared his father would never come back because of it. When my three-year-old daughter had to say goodbye to her grandma for the first time since she was born because her grandma, who held a visitor's visa in Canada, had to fly back to China after six months, I saw how heart-breaking it was for both of them. As an immigrant parent myself, I could not help but empathise with June's mother, who supports her children in the new country all by herself. What is her experience? How does she feel on a daily basis? What kinds of challenges does she face? What kinds of strength and resilience must she have? The spaces left in the story invite me to endless wondering.



## Yina's Reading Experience

### *When I Was Eight*



**Figure 3.** The cover of *When I Was Eight*. (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2013)

This book is about an Indigenous girl, Olemaun (Margaret) Pokiak, who has to leave her family when she is eight. She is forced to go to an outsider's school, namely a residential school, where she is removed from the loving guidance of her parents. Before she starts her schooling, she is looking forward to the school experience, as she could learn how to read. However, the actual school journey is very different from what she expects. The nuns do not treat her well, without patience and kindness, as they try to break her desire to read and make her feel ashamed of her desire to read. One day, she is left in a dark basement by herself. Imagining her family members and their support, she gains courage to face the school life. Being a brave girl, she successfully learns to read the book aloud and overcomes the obstacles that the nuns put in her way to reduce her chances to become a proficient reader.

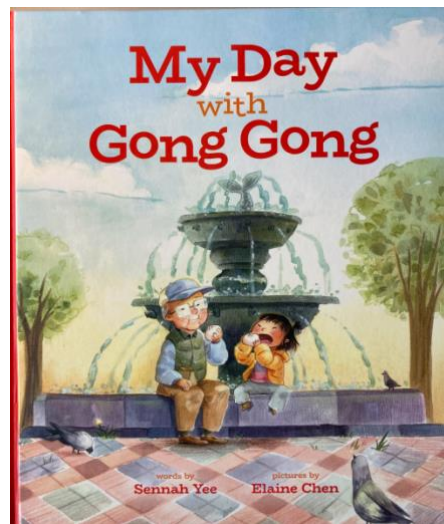
This book is a biography of the Inuit girl character, Olemaun Pokiak. I accessed and read this book at a children's literature book sale event in Toronto in 2017. Also, I went to a seminar where the writer, Olemaun Pokiak shared her unjust life experiences of being an Inuit woman pursuing education in Canada around the 1950s.

As a newcomer to Canada, this was not my first experience learning about the difficulties Indigenous people encounter when they access education. In the first course that I took in my first term at the University of Saskatchewan, three of my classmates were Indigenous teachers. They shared, in class discussions, childhood stories, family lives and lived experiences as Indigenous people in Canada, as well as what it was like teaching on reserves. Through their discussions, I learned some basic knowledge about Indigenous people and their history, regarding education in the past and present. In addition, I took another course, *Anti-racism Teaching*, in my first year, too, which specifically addressed the issues that Indigenous people have been facing. In that course, I read articles about Indigenous history and residential schools.<sup>ii</sup> Half of my classmates, who are from Indigenous communities, graciously shared the stories of their grandparents and mothers in residential schools. I was grateful that, as an international student, I could access these stories that were told by Indigenous people in-person. The survivors' experiences about how Indigenous people were treated in the residential schools, which were shared from a third person point of view, shocked me.

However, reading *When I Was Eight* (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2013) was my first time reading a story about residential schools from a child's perspective and how nuns and her classmates treat her in a mean and terrible way. From this book, I learned more details about life in residential schools. I could not imagine how any eight-year-old child could find the inner strength to deal with such injustice. No matter the unfair treatment, I admire that she was so brave that she did not give up. She

worked so hard to learn letters by herself. She fought back when people laughed at her. I ask myself, if I were her, what would I do with all of these experiences? Even as an adult, I would probably lower my head and give up my courage and my dreams. But Olemaun, as a young child, followed her passion for literature and literacy and fought back to continue to chase her dream.

### *My Day with Gong Gong*



**Figure 4.** The cover of *My Day with Gong Gong*. (Yee, 2020)

This picturebook tells the story of May, a young Canadian girl who visits her Chinese grandfather, Gong Gong, in Chinatown. She feels apprehensive about her visit—she does not speak a word of Cantonese, and her grandfather doesn't speak much English. After watching television with May, Gong Gong takes her shopping around Chinatown. While Gong Gong chats with friends and acquaintances in Cantonese along the way, May becomes annoyed, as she can't express herself and she thinks people are laughing at her. At last, May realises that Gong Gong cares and understands her, which changes her attitude and makes her appreciate her surroundings again.

As a newcomer to Canada, I have had many similar experiences as the first-generation immigrants who migrated from China to Canada, such as speaking Chinese at home and loving Chinese food. In order to learn about people living in North America, I watched many YouTube videos about American-born Chinese (ABC) and Canadian-born Chinese (CBC), where they shared their childhood and growing up experiences. I was interested in people from this cultural group because I thought we shared many commonalities since their family culture was Chinese. But to my surprise they saw themselves more as Canadian than Chinese, culturally and linguistically. They consciously pointed out the cultural differences between home and out-of-home contexts, which was beyond my initial assumptions. Despite my close attention to many ABCs and CBCs on YouTube, I did not know many peers who are Chinese Canadians in life. Rather, in the most recent two years of teaching in an after-school Chinese language programme, most of the students I had in my classroom are Asian Canadians. Working with young second-generation immigrants, I witnessed how they travel within, between and beyond the two cultures.

That was when I came across *My Day with Gong Gong* (Yee, 2020), a book about a young Chinese Canadian and her experiences with her grandpa, who is a first-generation immigrant in Canada. When I started to read the book, I thought I was familiar with Asian Canadians and their experiences and stories. However, I found myself surprised by the details that the book provided about the girl's thoughts during the day and the cultural differences between her and her grandpa. As I was born and raised in China and moved to Canada when I was 23, the grandpa's behaviours and thoughts in the book made great sense



to me. On the other hand, I never thought in the same way that the young girl understood and interpreted her grandfather's actions during the trip. In addition, I have heard many Canadian's impressions of Chinese immigrants, that they come to Canada in search of a better life. I am embarrassed to admit that I never seemed to question that taken-for-granted societal narrative, even though I am a member of the Chinese immigrant community myself. Reading this book provided me with an opportunity to see Chinese immigrants from a new and "inside-out" perspective.

## The disruption of hegemonic identity-making

### Unpacking Emma's stories

#### *Transnational identity*

Reading *When I Found Grandma* (Balasubramaniam, 2019) felt like looking into a mirror, with Maya, her grandma and her parents on the one side and my daughter Molly, Molly's grandma and myself on the other. The conflicts, compassion and love in our daily lives were magnified in the story and therefore could be looked into in a closer and deeper manner. Sometimes we need opportunities like reading such a story—a story that looks far away—to grant us a chance to examine it from the third-person's perspective; yet it is also so close to our own experience that it bridges the objective examination with personal emotions and reflexivity. While immersed in the interactions between Maya and her grandmother, I asked myself—a first generation immigrant, a mother to a second generation immigrant child, and a daughter-in-law to a senior Chinese lady who lives in Canada away from everything she was familiar with—Was it simply intergenerational tension when five-year-old Molly demanded to style her own hair without help even though Grandma thought "it was too messy"? Or was it a fight over power and subjectivity? What role did cultural backgrounds play in this scenario? And what about their lived experiences in two different countries?

The dominant discourse in academic literature often referred to immigrants as a problematic group stuck "between two cultures" (Gardner, 2012, p. 891). Our lived experiences tell a different story. I believe that Molly, as an immigrant child, expanded her identity in dimensions of culture, ethnicity and nationality, rather than being stuck, within the arguments, conflicts and even fights with Grandma. I saw that the different perspectives, customs, cultural norms and ways of living that Grandma brought into Molly's life challenged this young girl to negotiate the boundaries of diverse cultures, languages, ethical backgrounds and nationalities in our household. Such challenges buried a seed in her young mind about embracing differences, affirming similarities and always seeing and feeling love. Just like Maya found Grandma in the crowd with great joy at the end of the story, Molly and her grandma sorted out their arguments with hugs and kisses and shared delicious food together, every time.

Instead of being stuck between two cultures (arguably Chinese and Canadian), Molly had the opportunity to "[integrate] diverse cultural life-ways into dynamic new ones" (Hébert et al., 2006, p. 13). Growing up in a transcultural and transnational home environment, immigrant children experience cultures in a fluid way. Various cultural features are combined and/or lost, while others are generated in the process, resulting in the creation of new features and new cultures (Murray, 2010). Also, in the process, boundaries are explored and taken down; the taken-for-granted cultural dividing line in minoritised individuals and groups becomes blurry. Difference and diversity are reconceptualised as negotiable, intersectorial, strategic and mobile (Zhang & Guo, 2015).

Identity is a process of becoming (Deleuze, 1990; Semetsky, 2006). Our family experience echoes with such a post-structural view. I witnessed how the intimate relationship with Grandma and many other family members in China helped form Molly's understanding of the many abstract and difficult concepts of countries, cultures and identities. The transnational connections provided a "dual frame of reference to evaluate [her] experiences" in Canada (Louie, 2006, p. 363). The far away land, and its stories in current and past days were brought to life by Grandma, to Maya in the picturebook, and to

Molly in reality. Acknowledging their transnational identity “draws attention away from the binaries of ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ contexts, and toward relationships, linkages and flows” (Gardner, 2012, p. 894). Molly and Grandma both played and are playing a significant role in each other’s identity making because the transnational knowledge travels both ways.

### Immigrant parent knowledge

There was a page in the book *When Father Comes Home* (Jung, 2020) where June found his mother quietly crying in the kitchen when Father had to fly away again. I remember looking at that page for a long while. Images from when our family first moved to Canada flashed back. I felt connected with June’s mother, empathising with her unspoken sadness, uncertainty and loneliness. In the meantime, I knew how much resilience and grit she must possess to be able to raise her children all by herself when her husband had to find financial support for the family thousands of miles away. The rich knowledge she had, as an immigrant parent, built a solid foundation for her family’s life in another country. Immigrant parent knowledge (Chen, 2021; Guo, 2012; Khan, 2018) is at the centre of my doctoral research. Therefore, I am particularly grateful for children’s literature such as *When Father Comes Home* (Jung, 2020) to bring to the forefront a more authentic, strength-based and richer image of immigrant parents.

Current academic literature often examines immigrant parents from a deficit-based perspective, which discourages teachers and school administrators to recognise and appreciate the knowledge that immigrants hold about their children (Jones, 2003). Non-recognition of immigrant parents can be attributed to misperceptions of difference and ignorance of different cultures (Guo, 2009; Honneth, 1996). Differences are seen as deficits that bring about the belief that knowledge of others is incompatible, inferior and hence invalid (Abdi, 2007; Dei, 1996). While in reality, “immigrant parents bring their values, language, culture, religion, and educational backgrounds to our schools, enriching our educational environments” (Guo, 2012, p. 121).

Take June’s mother in the picturebook, for example. She told her sons the story of “goose dad”—a traditional Korean term to help the young boys to comprehend their daily lives without Father around and understand such a lifestyle through a meaningful and positive lens. The mother’s approach showcased the profound cultural knowledge and language knowledge she held and was able to pass on to her children. Khan (2018) has reminded us that “[as] culturally diverse parents move from home-land to host-land, they have a wealth of cultural knowledge that they transfer to their children as a critical piece to their identity” (p. 192). In addition, “goose dad” is a well-known term in the Korean language, with a rich story embedded within it. By explaining the term, June’s mother opened space for heritage language teaching and learning in the home context. Language is beyond words and expressions; it is closely tied with one’s identity. Immigrant parents, who have the knowledge of culture and language, can bridge immigrant children with the language and cultural contexts in their home country and host country.

As an immigrant parent and a teacher educator, I feel delighted to have picturebooks like *When Father Comes Home* (Jung, 2020) available to immigrant families and educators. Such stories make immigrant parent knowledge visible and call for a replacement of cultural hegemony with diverse images of ethnically minoritised groups. Such children’s literature is a significant complement to the current developing academic literature on immigrant parents’ strengths and capacities, especially in the field of education. Seeing and acknowledging immigrant parent knowledge can help educators utilise such knowledge on the school landscape, and hence provide immigrant children with better educational resources and opportunities.

## Unpacking Yina's stories

### *Mirrors and windows*

Before I started my Master programme at the University of Saskatchewan, which is located in Saskatoon, Canada, I had not heard about Canadian Indigenous people and Indigenous history, even though I did a lot of research on Canadian culture, Saskatchewan and Saskatoon. Through findings from the Internet and the sharing from people in my personal connections, nothing about Indigenous people came out.

After arriving in Canada, through both Indigenous classmates' sharings and the self-learning process of Indigenous history and culture, I did acquire substantial knowledge about Indigenous people in Canada, their cultures, their histories and their current living status. I felt compassion for Indigenous children and now for Indigenous adults who were forced to go to residential schools as they continue to suffer inequity. However, I couldn't understand the connection between historical events that happened to Indigenous people and myself. As a newcomer, I faced many linguistic, cultural and social challenges in the first several years living in Canada. I could not fully understand the challenges that the Indigenous people had and continue to have and how these previous happenings impacted their lives today.

After I read the picturebook, *When I Was Eight* (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2013), which shows an ordinary Inuit girl's residential school experience, I developed a deeper understanding, empathy and compassion for Canadian Indigenous people. This book acts as a window (Bishop, 1990) that assists me to see from a little Indigenous girl's perspective, to immerse myself in her story, to imagine myself going through the story with her. Bishop (1990) proposed the concept "windows and mirrors", where she argued that children's books could act as windows through which we see and learn about other people's lives, and mirrors that reflect our own life experiences. The books as windows could allow readers to explore others' experiences and overcome the limits of the readers' own limitations (Tschida et al., 2014; Wiltse, 2015). Loh (2009) stated, "[F]rom cross-cultural perspectives, exposure to literary texts about other cultures allow for the imagination of a world where self exists in relation to other" (p. 293). This book is based on the true story of the author, Margaret Pokiak-Fenton, which represents a reality of Indigenous people's lived experience (Reese, 2007). This book creates in me emotional connections with the Indigenous girl in the book, everything she has been through. I could "hear [her] ... own words, see [her] ... own face ... in the book" (Aldana, 2008). The story is not like pure knowledge or cold numbers that make the readers an outsider. This story as a window helped me see a real person's life.

Books as mirrors can reflect reader's identities and their cultural practices (Aldana, 2008; Bishop, 1990). This book is also a mirror in some ways because I could see my own childhood experiences. The girl in the book was away from her family and staying with other Indigenous girls and nuns in a residential school. The scene where the girl accidentally got locked in the basement, scared because she didn't know what would happen and missing her father reminded me of my childhood, where I stayed at my grandparents' place during grade one to five. I could still remember silently sobbing at night, while missing my mom. I have not experienced what the little girl in the book had gone through; however, as a human being, a lot of what was portrayed in the books resonated with my personal experiences. Building the connection with my own childhood experience, this picturebook enables me to develop empathy for this young Indigenous girl.

Importantly, I argue that the concept of multiculturalism should not include Indigenous people or culture (St. Denis, 2011). Indigenous people deserve the recognition beyond the label of multiculturalism. St. Denis (2011) argues:

The prevailing and prevalent policy and practice of multiculturalism enables a refusal to address ongoing colonialism, and even to acknowledge colonialism at all. This leads to the trivializing of issues, to attempts to collapse Aboriginal rights into ethnic and

minority issues, and to forcing Aboriginal content into multicultural frameworks. (p. 315)

Indigenous picturebooks could act as windows which allow non-Indigenous readers to develop “understanding, empathy, and mutual respect” (Brenna et al., 2017, p. 53) to the First People of Canada. Indigenous children’s literature plays a significant role in “the connection between the past and the present [which] makes the manner in which a nation communicates its history to children, who represent the present and the future, particularly significant” (Galway, 2010, p. 115). I would like to highlight that Indigenous picturebooks also play a significant role for newcomers in Canada. This picturebook allows me, a newcomer in Canada, to explore “historical perspectives, and to make a difference today and tomorrow” (Wiltse, 2015, p. 33). From reading this picturebook as well as connecting to the recent news about the discovery of Indigenous children’s graves in many residential school locations across Canada (Davis, 2021), it makes me think about what action I can take at this moment.

### No single story

Adichie (2009) brought up the notion of the danger of single story, which is a theoretical lens for me to retell my story after reading *My Day with Gong Gong* (Yee, 2020). “The single story created stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story” (Adichie, 2009, para. 24). Much contemporary children’s literature shows one perspective and one side of a community.

Many Canadian picturebooks on historical issues regarding Chinese immigrants are portraying Chinese Canadians as labourers. For example, many books are about Chinese railway construction workers, such as *Ghost Train* (Yee, 2013) and *Canadian Railroad Trilogy* (Lightfoot, 2010). *Ghost Train* tells a story of the dangers Chinese Canadians face during the process of building Canadian railways. These books portray Chinese Canadians as people who are not really part of Canada, instead, they are from some other places. As a Chinese immigrant reading these books, I acknowledge that these are part of the Canadian history, and it is valuable to use it in classroom to have young readers and pre-service teachers to learn that “particular groups of immigrants to Canada faced hardships, racism, and injustice in the ‘last best west’” (Wiltse, 2013, p. 67).

Looking at contemporary Canadian picturebooks about immigrants and refugees, they usually show difficulties and challenges that newcomer adults and children encounter. For example, *Stormy Seas*, (Leatherdale, 2017) and *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family’s Journey* (Ruurs, 2016) illustrate the hardships that refugees face travelling to a new country and finding a better life. These books do a good job of presenting real migration journeys and they are well-used in today’s Canadian classrooms.

Moreover, a large number of North American picturebooks, which are popularly used in Canadian classrooms, focus on the contemporary issues of immigration, especially issues newcomer children face in school. Books such as *Lailah’s Lunchbox: A Ramadan Story* (Faruqi, 2015), *The Day You Begin* (Woodson, 2018) and *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003) truly present the challenging adaptation newcomer children experience in their transition to a new school in a new country.

However, a cultural community is complex and people within this community are diverse. It would be dangerous to present monocultural practices of one community to readers (Tschida et al., 2014).

*My Day with Gong Gong* (Yee, 2020) presents a third-generation Chinese Canadian spending a day with her grandpa, who is a first-generation immigrant to Canada. Different from many books focusing on the challenges and cultural differences from a group of newcomer immigrants or refugees, this book shows the story of family, love and cultural acceptance. Here, the cultural acceptance is not that newcomers accept Canadian mainstream culture or multiple cultures in Canada, but a Canadian-born girl with Chinese heritage, accepts her heritage cultures, from the experiences of spending time with her grandpa. It demonstrates to readers the diversity of ethnicities, cultural routines and even uses culturally grounded phrases throughout the book. This book is reflective of many different relationships because

between the generations there is often a language barrier. However, this book demonstrates that even with the language barrier, the love one holds for their family can overcome those barriers and be shown through actions.

This shows another story of an immigrant family in Canada. It fulfils the richness of immigrants' life experiences in Canada. Adichie (2009) warns readers of the danger of a single story and multicultural children's books could help disrupt the single story of Canada and Canadian children from dominant culture. As a Chinese immigrant reading *My Day with Gong Gong* (Yee, 2020), it helps me to embrace my immigrant identity. It acknowledges the diverse lives that Chinese Canadians have, rather than just hardships and challenges that newcomers face in a new country.

### Closing thoughts

In the autobiographical narratives we shared in this article regarding each of our own experiences of reading Indigenous and multicultural picturebooks written by Canadian authors, we have made visible how children's literature focusing on critical issues can and will provoke meaningful thinking on one's own identity-making. The stories and the unpacking of the stories we presented, from the eyes of adult immigrants who have transcultural and transnational backgrounds, showcased that identity development is "fluid, contextually and socially negotiated, multidimensional, and intersectional" (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017, p. 122). The four picturebooks we carefully selected acted as catalysts at a certain moment in our lives, respectively accelerating and stimulating the long-existing and ever-evolving inquiries we had in terms of "who am I" and "who am I becoming". These books are among a growing body of contemporary children's picturebooks about Indigenous and multicultural children in Canada (Brenna et al., 2021). We believe they act as a vehicle to break the dominant cultural hegemony by showing multicultural and Indigenous worlds to the reader.

The telling and unpacking of our reading experiences showed that identity is more of a perspective than a fixed concept. The process of identity-making longs for an active cultural surrounding that can positively interact with one's self-searching and -affirming. Botelho and Rudman (2009) have pointed out that children's literature can be used to break the hegemony of a dominant culture. We also saw these opportunities in children's literature. Such opportunities allow re-readings of hegemonic ideas that construct minoritised groups' identities as fixed and disrupt boundaries and redefine "difference and diversity as negotiable, intersectorial, strategic and mobile" (Zhang & Guo, 2015, p. 5). Zooming out to a broader field of vision, Daly (2017) found that

studies of diversity in terms of ethnicity, family, disability, and languages in children's literature, on the whole, show limited diversity is present in children's literature, and this means that young readers are being exposed to an inaccurate representation of their world: one which supports a white, middle class, able bodied, heterosexual, monolingual hegemony. (p. 175)

Many authors, illustrators and scholars have been trying to break the hegemonic representation Daly (2017) mentioned in the field of picturebooks. We believe that when children's literature that represents minoritised groups in their own words and through their own eyes are brought to the forefront, authentic and meaningful conversations start to emerge. We need more authors from diverse cultural backgrounds. In the meantime, we need more readers who would read, discuss, think about, and ask questions about Indigenous and multicultural picturebooks. The responsibility of transcultural and transnational identity-making should not fall only on the shoulders of minoritised people themselves. Through this article, we hope to call for more purposeful and critical readings of Indigenous and multicultural picturebooks in the landscapes of schools, community libraries and with families from all backgrounds. Each reading is a ripple in the fabric of space and time. We are full of hope that the ripples that travel outwards, though gradually and slowly, will reach far and wide.



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### Appendix: List of picturebooks cited

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<sup>i</sup> Note: Each author has equal contribution to this article.

<sup>ii</sup> A system of residential schools was put in place by the Canadian government and administered by churches in the 1880s and into the late-20th century. There were approximately 150,000 Indigenous children separated from their families for residential schools (Government of Canada, 2020). The system purposefully destroyed the Indigenous rich cultures and identities and tried to assimilate the children into Euro-Canadian ways of life.