

Using Narratives in Qualitative Research: An Example

Aïjsja Snoeck (2007) interviewed immigrant mothers with young children attending day care centres. One of the mothers (B.) is 29 years old and from Beirut, Lebanon.

Resume of the first interviews:

After her Belgian mother left her when she was five, her Lebanese aunt raised B. in Beirut. She is accountant and looked for job opportunities in Belgium, Lebanon and Dubai. She found work in Belgium and lives there since 2003 with her husband and their single child. She says that she lives rather isolated and that they do not have many friends. She regularly phones with a niece in London and her aunt and a friend in Lebanon, with whom she discusses educational matters regarding her daughter. Her niece is worried about the sexual education of her daughter in Belgium and advocates to send her to the grandparents in Lebanon when she is 10, in order to avoid that she may date boys. B. does not agree and thinks she should – as a mother – talk with her daughter, rather than ban her from the western world.

B. thinks education is very important and expects the same from the day care centre. Before the start of the care, B. has high expectations about the care, about the carers being friendly and loving. But she also attaches importance to setting rules. She would like the education in day care to be similar to home, but accepts that some things will be different (such as food and language). At home she speaks English and she expects the day care to speak Dutch with her daughter. She also expects the day care to be a socialising environment. And she hopes her daughter will learn to eat fruits there.

At the start of the day care, B. and her husband went different times with the daughter and discussed with the staff. This enabled her to get acquainted. In the first months of using the day care, B. experienced that her daughter learned to eat fruits, laughed a lot, played and shared with other children. She also says to experience a good relationship with the staff. An example of this is that she asked the staff to change her daughters' diapers every hour when she has an irritated skin and to put her daughter to sleep in the carers' arms and the carers responded positively to this. She also asked the staff for advice about what kindergarten to choose, but in the beginning, the carers objected, and said it was much too early to discuss this. Only later did the staff agree to discuss this.

After six months in the day care, B. went to stay one month with her daughter in Lebanon, with her family. About this period she says:

Yeah my aunts, they had a lot of impact (laughs). And it was really a good one, because it's really nice when you are surrounded by people who already raised children and who know how to deal. It's not how to deal, but they already know what to expect and what should be done or not. Even though we say they have very ancient methods and I don't know whatever and maybe the modern methods they are better, but it's really ... it gives you a lot of insight and a lot of things you think about... Ancient people, they always feel that children should eat a lot, and I don't feel that they should eat a lot.

After the stay in Lebanon there was a discussion with the day care staff. Her daughter slept with her in the parental bed. B. does not think this is problematic, but the day care staff claimed that this was not good for her autonomy.

In the last interview, B. says that she loves her daughter very much, not only in her hearth, as they say, but everywhere inside and that feeling is very big and warm. "It is beyond my comprehension. I never loved someone like that".

In one of the interviews, B. looks back at the first months in the nursery, when her daughter was almost one year old. B. had repeatedly asked the staff to put her daughter on a potty after her nap. After many discussions, the staff accepted to partially do what the mother was asking for:

In the day care centre they are against it, because she's very young and ... they don't train the baby's until they are two. Sometimes in the day care centre when she wakes up, they put her in the potty, but it's always too late. Because the moment the child has to wake up, you have to take him, take his diaper and put it on the potty, you see. But in the day care centre for example a child... many children would wake up at the same time, so you have to deal with one child at the time. And until now she don't know that she has to control her muscles, maybe she, I think that she can do it now. So she has to learn how to do it. So most of the time it's too late, but they try to... I think even though they don't agree with me, but they do it. And I think it's amazing you know, because for them, err..., when you put a child of two years on a potty, there's not a lot of responsibility. Because you don't have to watch him. You don't have to sit, and he has to finish and he will call you when he's done. But with X [names her daughter], she's very young so someone has to keep an eye on her. And it is not really logic when you have 21 children. You see, so I think it's amazing even if they don't do it every day. The fact that they do it from time to time. I think it's amazing, yeah.