

Helping Experienced and Future Teachers Build Professional Interaction Skills through the Writing and Reading of Narratives

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She had done it again. Stepped on someone's toes. The teachers in the faculty meeting fell silent after the altercation between Rachael and a more experienced teacher. When Rachael advocated the adoption of a new reading series, how was she to know that the more experienced teacher had the informal title of the school's "reading guru"? Now, both women had raised their voices and uttered accusations filled more with emotion than truth. Rachael was embarrassed, frustrated, and confused. All she was trying to do was apply some of the theories and practices she had learned in her recent reading methods course to the selection of curriculum materials. Wasn't that what she was supposed to do? After the meeting, Rachael shared her feelings with the teacher across the hall. This teacher rested her hand gently on Rachael's shoulder and said: "There are just some things that can't be taught in your teacher preparation program. They have to be learned on the job."

The widely accepted premise that teachers must inevitably go through a series of blunders and missteps during their first few years of teaching presents teacher educators with a formidable challenge. With half of all new teachers leaving the profession within their first five years (Graziano, 2005), it behooves us to squarely address some of

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the biggest challenges new teachers face. While some may argue that the primary reason for new teacher attrition is low salaries, Graziano (2005) found that,

... new teachers, however naive and idealistic, often know before they enter the profession that the salaries are paltry, the class sizes too large, and the supplies scant. What they don't know is how little support from parents, school administrators, and colleagues they can expect once the door is closed and the textbooks are opened. (p. 41)

In their research, Chubbuck, et al. (2001) found that new professionals are most concerned about feeling both personally and professionally safe. They state:

In the context of constant demand and intense uncertainty, novice teachers are particularly vulnerable when faced with the potential disconnect between preservice training and 1st-year experience. (p. 373)

While case studies and narratives are often used in teacher preparation programs, the focus of these materials is usually upon the examination of effective strategies in instruction, assessment, and classroom management. Teacher educators must wade with our students into the often-murky waters of professional relationships in the workplace. To avoid this arena is to ignore critical survival skills our students will need.

The investigation described here examined the value of teacher stories about professional interactions for both the writers of the stories and the future teachers who read the stories. It is useful to begin with a brief visit to the literature on the use of narratives (or stories) in the teaching/learning environment. Following this is a description of research designed to investigate the power of narrative (stories) to foster reflective thinking about *professional interactions* between teachers and (1) students, (2) parents of students, (3) principals, and (4) fellow teachers.

The Pedagogical Value of Narratives/Stories

In the past 30-40 years, narrative has found acceptance in educational research. A significant anthropological turn began to emerge from the work of Heath (1983), the early case studies of Emig (1971), Graves (1983), and Calkins (1983), and from the feminist theories of knowledge shared by Witherell and Nodding (1991) and Neumann and Peterson (1997). Narrative focusing on teacher development/education with emphasis on both reflection and action has grown within the last several decades. In tandem with this movement has been the influence

of Paulo Freire's concept of conscientization (Freire, 1986). Freire speaks of learning and knowing as a process of both action and reflection. Conscientization involves the active naming and narrating of the concrete realities around us. From this process comes a greater understanding of our personhood and our professional purposes.

Because the present investigation focuses specifically on professional interactions, it is important to look at the use of narrative in moral/ethical development. It is not enough to help teachers understand the social interactions of their workplace. They must also be challenged to build the skills they will need to make decisions and choices that reflect a strong moral/ethical foundation. From Bruno Bettelheim (1975) to William Kilpatrick (1993) to Robert Coles (1990), educators have extolled the telling of stories as a powerful pedagogical tool. In his book, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner (1986) contends that narrative thought more than logical thought gives meaning to life.

In "The Moral Power of Good Stories," William Kilpatrick (1993) discusses the differences he sees in his students when they are presented with two different situations designed to get them thinking about ethics and values. When presented with a Values Clarification dilemma, *The Lifeboat Exercise*, students tried to decide who should be "thrown off" the lifeboat and who should stay. They proceeded with this task in a logical, fairly detached manner. However, when the same students viewed the film, *A Night to Remember*, their judgements about who escaped from the sinking Titanic and who stayed on ship were laced with much more passion and conviction. Kilpatrick postulates that these profoundly different reactions exemplify the power of stories, in this case, a film story, to engage our basic senses of right and wrong beyond a dispassionate classroom exercise. Indeed, Kilpatrick contends that story and morality are intimately connected:

The question is not whether the moral principle needs to be sweetened with the sugar of the story but whether moral principles make any sense outside the human context of stories. (p. 27)

For better or worse, we are not moved to moral action by statistics, we are moved by stories. Information about the number of African men and women brought to this country as slaves did not move White people nearly as much as Harriet Beech Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Alex Haley's *Roots*. We may glaze over statistics on crime and violence in American high schools, but stories of Columbine, Santana, and Red Lake High Schools compel us toward moral action. Hurricane Katrina's devastation was felt most profoundly in the heart-wrenching stories of her victims. Presidential campaigns are mostly about weaving stories of

this or that candidate kissing babies, riding tractors, wearing hardhats or flak jackets, and throwing baseballs. Indeed, campaigns that have relied too much on pie charts and graphs or abstract, ideological rhetoric have not fared too well. Our senses of good and bad, right and wrong are evoked through our own stories and those of our fellow human beings.

We can learn a tremendous amount about ourselves as we reflect on the way we respond to different characters and events within the stories we are told. What things bring us feelings of joy, comfort, laughter, and/or inspiration? What is it within a story that might bring sadness, defensiveness, and/or anger? Why do some stories move us to great compassion while others are quickly forgotten? Much of our response to a story depends upon the intentions we attribute to those within the story. Feldman, Bruner, Renderer, and Spitzer (1990) assert that our responses to stories help us better understand our own everyday behaviors and beliefs. These same scholars remind us that “No doubt the cognitive processing that we use to interpret human intentionality in stories is related to the processes we use to understand human intentionality in life encounters with other people” (Feldman, et al., 1990, p. 3).

Narratives hold tremendous potential for helping new teachers better understand themselves and their interactions with students, parents, principals, and their fellow teachers.

Process

Both experienced teachers and student teachers participated in this study which was designed to look at the power of narrative (stories) in fostering reflective thinking about *professional interactions* between teachers and (1) students, (2) parents of students, (3) principals, and (4) fellow teachers.

The Writers of the Narratives (Experienced Teachers)

Fifty-five (55) experienced K-12 teachers (32 elementary and 23 secondary) enrolled in a Masters program at a public southwestern university were asked to think about their first two years in the teaching profession and write about a challenging professional interaction that had a profound impact on them. They were instructed to avoid directly identifying people and places in their stories. If they found it awkward or ineffective to tell their story without using proper nouns, they were to create fictitious names.

One week after submitting their stories, the experienced teachers were asked to share their stories with the class (other experienced teachers) and write reflections on their story-writing experiences. Specifically, they

were asked to write about any impact the writing of their stories had on their understandings of professional relationships at school. These data were collected and the information was organized into categories that emerged during analysis.

The Readers of the Narratives (Future Teachers)

One semester after the experienced teachers wrote their narratives, 32 future teachers (20 elementary and 12 secondary) enrolled in an educational psychology course at the same university read and discussed selected stories written by the veteran teachers. The instructor structured each reading session by placing the future teachers in groups of five to six and asking each group to: (1) avoid voicing criticism about anyone's actions in the stories and (2) generate questions as they read each story (e.g., What more do they need/want to know about the problem? the context? the people?). These questions then served as the springboard for discussion about the professional interactions described in each story.

Experienced Teachers' Narratives and Future Teachers' Questions

Four categories emerged from the stories written by the experienced teachers: (1) teacher/student interactions, (2) teacher/parent interactions, (3) teacher/principal interactions, and (4) teacher/teacher interactions. Of the 55 stories written, 16 (four in each category) were selected for use with future teachers. Below are four example stories (one in each interaction category). Each story is followed by a sample of questions generated by the future teachers.

Story #1: Teacher/Student Interactions

The worst experience I have ever had was also my first year teaching. I had a little boy in my class who went through terrible mood swings. If a lesson became too boring for him he would get upset, run across the classroom and sit in the corner. Sometimes he came to school looking very tired and I knew that he was not going to have a good day. On those days he would lose it after two lessons. He would start to complain and throw fits. He even started running out of the classroom. I had already advised the school psychologist and the school counselors. They were seeing him on a daily basis and coming up with different interventions. When we spoke to the mother we found out that the child was on five medications. We notified the school nurse and she was shocked.

As the school year went on I tried to teach my lessons around this one particular child because I was scared that if he became bored he would run out of the classroom. I felt very inadequate, but as I spoke to other teachers they told me that I was doing a great and that they would have probably sent the child to the counselor's office every day. As I listened to the teachers I still felt that I wasn't serving this child well. The situation became worse so the district behavioral specialist was brought in. She did an outstanding job working with the child and myself. Unfortunately, the problem became too great for any of us to handle and the child was taken out of the classroom and placed in a local hospital. Even to this day I feel terrible that I was not able help this child.

Sample Questions Generated by Future Teachers

- Can we count on the same resources that this teacher had? Do all schools have school counselors, school nurses, and school psychologists? Do we go directly to them or should we talk to fellow teachers and our principal first?
- This teacher felt terrible about not being able to keep this child in the classroom. How do we know when we've done all we can for a student?
- What does it mean to "meet the needs" of all students? It seems like the other children were suffering because the teacher had to structure so much around this one student. At what point does that become unfair?
- How do we interact with parents in these situations? What if parents think we're blaming them?

Story #2: Teacher/Parent Interaction

It was a sunny June morning just a few weeks before school was out for the summer. I was at school early putting together materials for my 10th graders to take with them when they left for the year. Rather abruptly, a parent of one of my students barged in and demanded to talk with me. She was obviously upset about something, so even though my heart was racing, I tried to remain calm and listen to her concern. She began raising her voice and saying that she was very upset about what I had allowed to happen yesterday in my classroom. I had no idea what she was talking about, so I continued to listen. She said that her daughter, Tina, told her that I let another parent come into the classroom, pull Tina out of class and yell at her for being mean to the other parent's daughter. Of course,

this was completely untrue. When I told her that I had no recollection of such an event, she said that her daughter said I was not paying attention because I was working with another student. It was then that I started to second-guess myself. Maybe it really did happen and I was completely unaware of it. Tina's mom said that she was going to go straight to the vice principal and the principal. I was devastated. I felt wrongly accused, and didn't know what to do. With panic, I went over to the teacher next door and told her what had happened. I actually thought I might be fired! Eventually, I was able to contact the parent that was accused of yelling at Tina to see if it really happened. The parent couldn't believe it and said that she was at work all day (she's a teacher), and that she did no such thing. As my principal investigated the matter, he found out that Tina had lied to her mother. She made the whole story up just to get attention. However, did I ever receive an apology from Tina's mother? No. She never spoke to me again. I remember this situation so vividly because I felt like this woman held my career in the palm of her hand.

Sample Questions Generated by Future Teachers

- This is one of our biggest fears—parents! What are our rights if a parent starts yelling at us? Could we really be fired for something like this?
- What are some effective ways to calm a parent down? Should we try not to be alone with the parent?
- We think this would definitely negatively affect our attitudes toward both the student and the parent. What happens when you have a student in your class that you don't like? We know that's probably a terrible way to feel, but it's real. How do we go about "building the bridges" again?

Story #3: Teacher/Principal Interaction

I had a student who cried every day. I was used to some crying with Kindergartners but it was usually brief, not lasting more than a few days at the beginning of the school year. But this child cried every day for 142 days. He cried when he came to school. He cried when it was time to go home. Sometimes he threw such a fit that he got to stay home. I tried everything. I talked to the parents. I tried rewards. I talked to psychologists. I tried to ignore him. I picked everyone's brain I could. I was in constant contact with the parents because this child lied as well. I knew that there was a new baby in the house and that mom worked full time and that dad traveled. But the parents assured me that he never cried at home. I was convinced that the parents were not telling me all of the

information. Toward the end of the year I was called into my principal's office and told that the parents wanted to have a meeting. The meeting resolved nothing. After the meeting, my principal accused me of picking favorites. She basically told me that I was the problem. I left the meeting crushed. I did not feel that she supported me. She did not treat me like a professional. I went home and started re-thinking my career choice. I had always tried to treat all of my students with respect. I know that I was not the cause of this child's crying all year. But it does not change what happened with my principal and the parents. Even today, I am not sure how I could have handled this situation differently.

Sample Questions Generated by Future Teachers

- What is the role of the principal in situations like these? We thought the principal should have been more supportive of the teacher. Were there other "bad" things this teacher had done?
- If we're having a problem with a student, should we tell the principal? We don't want to be perceived as weak or whiney, but we do want support.
- We've heard that some principals always side with parents. If we get a principal like this when we start teaching, what can we do to try to keep situations like the one in this story from happening to us?
- How are the roles of the teacher and the roles of the principal different with respect to communication with parents? This is important for us to think about so we can be sensitive to the needs of our principals.

Story #4: Teacher/Teacher Interaction

I will never forget the time during my first year of teaching that I got yelled at by another teacher. It was during the week of SAT 9 testing and everyone's nerves (teachers and students) were frazzled. In my 5th grade classroom, my students had just finished their first long test and we were all exhausted. It was time for recess so I told them to go outside and "let it all out." Well, you can't use expressions like that with kids. Once they went outside they went wild! A few minutes after I excused them, a teacher down the hall burst open the door of my classroom and proceeded to yell at me. I had a parent in the room who was proctoring and watching this. The teacher told me how she couldn't believe I was ignoring all the testing rules by letting my kids out. She said a couple of them were popping the lids of their soda cans and chasing each other with soda streams everywhere. She was livid and wouldn't let up. I told

her I thought it was recess and that testing wouldn't be going on. She proclaimed that I obviously didn't read the schedule where recess was changed to a later time during testing. As she said this it dawned on me that I had forgotten about the change in the schedule. I apologized and told her I would go outside, gather my students, and talk to them about their behavior. The parent volunteer in the classroom looked like she felt bad for me. I was so humiliated! I went outside, got my kids and explained to them what happened.

Needless to say, I avoided eye contact with this teacher for the next week or so. She never came back to apologize and I never confronted her. We actually worked together on a project later that year and got to know each other better. I understand that she's a little high strung and doesn't do well under pressure. If I was in her position I also would have been upset at the new teacher who let her kids run wild during testing.

Sample Questions Generated by Future Teachers

- This was a bad mistake. What are some of the critical things new teachers need to know before starting the year?
- As students, we remember testing week as being particularly stressful for us. Guess it's stressful for teachers too. What kinds of things can we do to make it less stressful for our students and ourselves (and our colleagues)?
- How do you patch something like this up if the more experienced teacher doesn't make the first move? What are some strategies for mending fences or, better yet, keeping them well-maintained in the first place?

Findings

The Usefulness of Narrative for Experienced Teachers (Writers)

As stated previously, one week after they submitted their stories, the experienced teachers were asked to share their stories in class and write reflections on the impact the writing and sharing had on their understanding of professional relationships at school. Their written comments reflected insights they had about themselves and the nature of their interactions with their students, parents, administrators, and peers. Many teachers wrote about the *cathartic nature of writing* their stories:

- *I became very emotional during the reliving of my incident.*

- *I found myself digging deeply into a place I had buried long ago when I wrote about my experience. I was surprised at the anger and hurt that I still held. It was good to finally talk about the emotion bottled up within me.*

For others, writing their stories caused them to *think more about their students*:

- *(This activity) ... reminded me that everything I do in the classroom has some effect on my students. It is important to be aware of how the students are reacting to the lessons and my attitude. It is also important to be aware of things outside the classroom that may reflect in the students' behavior and learning.*

Still others reflected about their *interactions with peers*:

- *The activity made me more conscious of the relationships I have built with my peers. It alerted me to be more sensitive to others so that I don't become one of their negative stories.*
- *Writing these stories made me remember how reluctant I was to ask for help. I didn't want to look stupid. Now I would tell first-year teachers that asking for help doesn't make you look stupid, it makes you look normal!*
- *I realized that my school is so much more than my classroom. It's the relationships I build with other teachers, my principal, the custodian, the librarian, etc. They all matter.*

Some experienced teachers concentrated on the *emotional impact of the sharing of their stories with their peers*:

- *In the process, I was battling an inner voice that wanted to "edit" what my first/strongest memories were. I thought, "How might these experiences sound to others?" and I wondered what they would think? Would expressing the negative put a doubt about me in someone's mind or give validity to what the person had said to me that was so hurtful? In the end, I wrote from the heart. That's what made it real.*
- *I think the process by which the stories were shared amongst my peers was the most emotional and profound experience I have ever experienced thus far in my career.*
- *The stories I chose to write about are experiences that really*

made a huge impact on my life as a teacher. This was a very useful activity, especially when we shared them with others. It was also a very emotional activity!

- *I hope that the experiences of all of us are able to touch others who read them as profoundly as they touched those of us who sat in this room and listened to them. It makes all of us realize what a complex, rewarding, under valued and absolutely amazing profession this is.*

It's instructive to note that both the writing *and* the sharing of narratives were powerful for these teachers. While teacher educators can certainly find pedagogical value in sharing the stories of others with new teachers (e.g., case studies, critical incidence), the opportunity for teachers to write and share their own stories cannot be understated. One of the possible reasons for this is the fluid nature of memories. Drawing from both the psychological and neurobiological sciences, we know that our memories of past events change as we have new experiences. For example, we may remember an experience in our adolescence very differently now than we did when it happened or even a couple of years ago. We are, quite literally, seeing the experience through changed eyes. We see this phenomenon at work in the written reflections of the experienced teachers. As they revisited painful and/or traumatic experiences in their early professional lives, they saw those situations with a more seasoned perspective. It may well be the case that we can learn just as much from 'old' experiences as we can from new ones if we nurture reflection opportunities like these teachers had. This power of writing and sharing personal narratives is heightened when teachers use this reflective process to identify benchmarks in their own professional growth. The self-professed increase in interpersonal awareness expressed in the experienced teachers' written reflections indicates that this was a valuable skill-building endeavor.

Usefulness of Narrative for Future Teachers (Readers)

A careful examination of the questions generated by the future teachers reveals several important findings. First, in many cases the future teachers were able to move beyond the specifics of the story to raise broader issues. For example, for the teacher's story about a very difficult student, future teachers asked the penetrating question: "How do we know when we've done all we can for a student?" In the story about the student who lied to her mother, one small group asked the blunt question: "What happens when you have a student in your class that

you don't like?" These are just two of numerous examples of the future teachers' questions that reached beyond the specifics of the stories to the broader issues the stories evoked.

Second, the sets of questions assembled by each small group reflected an understanding of the multifaceted nature of the problems described in the stories. For instance, in the story about the new teacher who let her students out to recess during SAT 9 testing, the future teachers' questions indicated consideration for both the context (testing week) and the broader interpersonal communication challenges that may arise between teachers.

Finally, the questions reflected genuine concerns of these future teachers thus increasing their motivation to learn more about ways to: (1) prevent negative professional interactions and (2) effectively approach negative interactions they will inevitably encounter during the course of their careers.

The course instructor used these student-generated questions to develop role-playing scenarios, provide pertinent readings, and guide the future teachers to other appropriate resources (both print and online). But it is the richness of the questions themselves that provided fertile ground for skill-building in reflective thinking that will bode well for these future teachers as they travel toward a myriad of complex professional interactions.

Reflections

The use of narrative for helping teachers build skills related to professional interactions was effective for both experienced and future teachers. For the experienced teachers, the impact of writing and sharing stories was profound. The process involved the combination of emotional introspection, cognitive thought and human interaction that makes learning extremely meaningful and memorable. Brain-based learning theorists Caine and Caine (1995) speak of *natural knowledge*, saying that it is "... what we have come to call 'second nature'. It is what results when information, felt meaning, and deep meaning come together" (p. 99). The process of writing their stories provided experienced teachers with opportunities to appreciate their own growth as they remembered their first years of teaching. Sharing their stories with peers strengthened bonds of trust and support that these teachers may continue to build with one another.

For future teachers, the reading of the stories and the accompanying question-generation activity helped them develop a schema for addressing difficult professional interactions they will surely encounter. This process

of question-generation is absolutely critical because it compels future teachers to consider the broader context in which each story takes place. Framing the stories in this way requires thoughtful reflection. This reflective behavior discourages snap judgments and hasty decisions because it grounds the future teachers in the complexities of each situation.

While the stories of other teachers will not hold the same emotional impact as their own personal experiences, these new professionals will bring with them a powerful set of skills for addressing problems related to professional interactions.

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