

TEACHER STORIES: THE LANGUAGE OF LEARNING IN TEACHING

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My experience of probing into the role of stories to enhance teacher understanding of their practice has been a challenging and complex undertaking at times. However, I learned through conducting a study with eight experienced elementary/middle school teachers, who were enrolled in an online reading course, that sharing such stories and then reflecting on them inevitably leads to greater knowing and insight into practice. Many researchers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988; Florio-Ruane, 2001; Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Matheson & Pohan, 2007; Orr & Olsen, 2007, Rosiek & Atkinson, 2007) support this belief and point out that the study of such narratives can be a window through which a person's experience of the world can be interpreted and made meaningful. This paper discusses the power of sharing and inquiring into stories as a way to help teachers gain knowledge about their teaching. It also highlights the belief that because teachers predominantly use stories to communicate their classroom experiences we, as researchers, must value the stories they share and attempt to elicit their meaning.

Each week during our online course a teacher began a discussion thread to which other teachers responded by sharing connections and links they made with their practice. Through this process of sharing stories they were challenged to examine their teaching in a myriad of ways. They gained insight into what it means to comprehend text and read critically, to use focused and explicit instruction in their teaching, and to engage in thoughtful and intentional planning as a means of opening up learning for students in new and engaging ways. Goodson, Biesta, Tedder and Adair (2010) concede that, "people *learn* from their lives 'in' and 'through' the stories that they tell about their lives" (p. 3). The following conversation between two teacher participants in this study illustrates how knowing comes in sharing stories and by inquiring into their meaning (through) stories:

Teacher 'A':

I was reminded of how some kids manage to "*fly under the radar*" throughout school without having gained the skills necessary to help them learn reading strategies and skills. I recall one such child my first year teaching Grade 6 Language Arts. Assessment results indicated this child did not meet expectations in reading. I would not have known otherwise. He was affable, gregarious, and articulate with oral language, and written conventions, and I had missed how he was unable to gather meaning from what he read. When writing a learning support plan for this student for the first time, I

remember not feeling confident about what I might do to help this child. This is still an area where I feel unsure and amiss with what to do.

Teacher 'B' Responds:

I was struck by your comment about children *flying under the radar* throughout school and not gaining the necessary strategies and reading skills. As a teacher I find myself reflecting on my own personal experiences as a young reader. In elementary school, I can remember the entire class reading in unison. I can remember having to regurgitate information from texts. I can remember sitting quietly, and independently reading from an assigned grade level reader. However, I do not remember learning reading strategies and skills. I do not remember digging deeper or making connections to texts. Perhaps my teachers too followed the assumption that "if they read it, it will come." I continued to fly under the radar until graduation.

In relating the above story, Teacher A is awakened to the fact that sometimes as teachers we do not identify students that struggle with reading because they have acquired many coping skills and they can present as very successful. This illumination may prompt her to know her students more authentically in the future and to uncover their true capabilities as readers. Teacher B recalls learning how to read, and her struggle to keep up with other members of her class as they read in unison, along with her attempts to read without the skills or strategies that would enable her to read with the level of independence expected of her. Recalling her schooling in this way may help her to realize the importance of attending to these matters for her own students by imagining a different story for them.

Stories can bring our experiences to consciousness in a very poignant way and take what is *under cover* out into the open. When we go public with our stories in this manner, we come to the realization that "learning is not merely situated in practice - as if it were some reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of a generative social practice in the lived world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 35). Stories are meant to be shared, and when we share, our understanding of teaching can often be transformed in hopeful and promising ways.

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Biography:

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