

CH. 6: TRANSFORMATIVE STORYTELLING AS CRITICAL PRAXIS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

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Introduction

Considered “data with a soul” by Dr. Brené Brown (2010), stories can strengthen the connections within a network of individuals while they collaborate to create educational experiences that are culturally-sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017), liberatory (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) and, ultimately, more equitable. Stories are powerful because they provide individuals a *window* into recognizing and understanding another person’s humanity while also helping people make sense of their own lives through a *mirror* (Bishop, 1990). In the case of education, stories can provide a window into the lived experiences of students and their families as well as other educators and educational leaders; at the same time, stories can serve as mirrors for educators, students, and educational leaders to critically examine their own practices, perspectives and experiences. For educational leaders, in particular, storytelling as praxis offers an opportunity to build meaningful, authentic working relationships with their colleagues, faculty, staff, students, and the broader community in order to create more equitable teaching and learning environments.

Storytelling involves the act of creating and sharing one’s own stories, while also authentically listening to *and* hearing (Delpit, 2006) the stories of others. The best storytellers are those who paint pictures with their words—who illustrate their worlds and open portals for others to participate in those worlds, a shared experience if you will. In this way, they believe in and embrace the transformative power of storytelling, to (co)create, (re)create, rupture and (re)build across time. Counter-storytelling, in particular, can be a powerful tool for learning, growth and change, as the process surfaces and highlights stories that are typically hidden, ignored or distorted by the dominant narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In educational contexts, counter-storytelling can become a form of critical pedagogy, a method guided by a critique of oppressive systems *and* a belief that radical change and liberation are possible (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Freire, 1970/1995; Giroux, 1988; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2003). In other words, stories can serve as the vehicle for educators to examine oppressive systems and build connections through community in order to bring more equitable, liberatory realities to life.

In this chapter, we illustrate how educational leaders can utilize storytelling in their daily practice as a form of critical pedagogy that both disrupts existing power structures within/beyond formal learning environments, as well as humanizes students and educators beyond performance data. Grounded in the theoretical work of bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Tara Yosso and Daniel Solórzano and in the pedagogical practices of the authors, we explore the origins, applications and possibilities of storytelling in educational spaces. In the following sections, we highlight the ways in which storytelling can support educational equity, we share our own stories about how we came to embrace the power of storytelling, and we provide concrete strategies for educators and educational leaders to utilize storytelling in their practice in order to create more equitable environments for teaching and learning.

Storytelling for educational equity

In the field of education, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework for understanding the pervasiveness of institutionalized racism and it emphasizes the power of storytelling as a method for highlighting and challenging dehumanizing perspectives, practices and policies (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT has expanded as a theoretical lens—from its founding in examining the intersections of race, law and power in the United States as a Black-white paradigm (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995)--to be applied to highlight and critique power inequities from other racialized and marginalized contexts (e.g. BlackCrit, LatCrit, AsianCrit, TribalCrit, Critical Whiteness Studies, Critical Disability Theory). Each of these frameworks can be useful for understanding the power of storytelling as a tool of transformation by deconstructing, decentering and disrupting harmful paradigms. The epistemic importance of storytelling to CRT means these additions to the field are generated directly from personal narratives and counter-stories. Counter-storytelling, a method for centering marginalized stories while simultaneously “exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 138) is a powerful way for educational leaders to actively resist and dismantle dehumanizing norms in their own educational communities, while cultivating new, more equitable, practices and policies for supporting students and educators and building more authentic relationships.

One of the reasons that storytelling can be so profound in educational contexts is that the telling of stories can shift the culture of professional learning from one emphasizing decontextualized “best practices” to one developing a living curriculum based on mutual understanding between leaders, teachers, and students. Educators often spend hours in professional development sessions that bullet recommendations for teaching, assessing, and behavior management. While there is value in learning research-based practices, these top-down recommendations are often provided without consideration of the local context. Such a professional learning structure reflects a “banking” model of education, one that positions teachers as vessels to be “filled” with knowledge (Freire, 1970). By creating a space for educators to tell their own stories, professional learning does not begin with the identification of “best practices” to be implemented, but rather from a place of establishing connection and understanding—of the teacher, their students, and their school contexts. It is a place where teachers can uncover and investigate their wonderings, curiosities, insights and confusions

about their practice and their school community. It is from this place where critical reflection, professional growth, and ultimately action, can occur.

In addition to re-framing professional learning, storytelling can also build community. Storytelling is a relational act that creates a “dialogic engagement” between the teller and the listener (Clandinin & Connelly, 2014). When we tell and retell our stories to each other, we must not only open ourselves enough to being vulnerable with what we share (despite not having control with what is done with our stories), but we must also be open enough to authentically listen. Thus, educational leaders who integrate storytelling as a form of ongoing professional learning—for themselves and their colleagues—create opportunities for collective meaning-making regarding the systemic issues facing their schools. Through the telling of stories, educational leaders and teachers can disrupt hierarchical power structures that might hinder their ability to understand the experiences of the other, as well as develop alternative narratives that not only recognize the strengths of their school communities but also envision alternate futures for their schools.

Finally, storytelling can serve as a basis for re-imagining curriculum and pedagogical practices to be more inclusive, responsive and culturally-sustaining. When we take the time to listen to the stories that exist around us, we begin to notice ways in which we need to change both our content and our approach to delivering that content. Admittedly, teachers and educational leaders have varying degrees of freedom when it comes to curriculum and pedagogy but we all have agency. Even with tight restrictions in place, we can find ways to humanize our curriculum and pedagogy. By creating avenues for storytelling, we open up the space for people to share their funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2006) and we create deeper connections with our students and our colleagues. Ultimately, with a greater understanding of the funds of knowledge that exist around us, we can begin to create more humanizing approaches to teaching and learning. When you listen to people’s stories about their lives and about their past and present learning experiences, you are in a better position to “make teaching and learning relevant and responsive to the languages, literacies, and cultural practices of students across categories of difference and (in)equality” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). Alternatively, if we don’t take the time to listen to our students’ stories, we will never be able to ground our teaching practice in the reality of our students’ lives. Emdin (2016) describes reality pedagogy as: “meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf...where there is a role reversal of sorts that positions the student as the expert in his or her own teaching and learning, and the teacher is the learner” (p. 27). Storytelling is powerful because the storyteller is the expert. The rest of us are listening and learning. When someone has the courage to share their story with us, we have the responsibility to deeply listen and to consider the ways in which their story might help us to improve our practice as a teacher and/or leader.

Unfortunately, stories are sometimes used in de-humanizing or essentializing ways. Adichie (2009) cautions us about the dangers of a “single story,” or stories that come to be understood as representative of a larger group. When we use storytelling intentionally for cultivating educational equity, we must ensure that stories are not treated as currency, as weapons or in essentializing ways.

Oftentimes, the stories of people living in the margins are either tokenized, used to promote a school or organization for funders, or used to reify stereotypes or justify dehumanizing practices and policies. People do not necessarily do so intentionally or nefariously, but in the same way microaggressions can unintentionally cause a great deal of harm, so too can tokenizing stories. As educational leaders we must be critically aware of how, why and to what end we ask students and teachers to share their stories, and also how those stories are then being used.

Finally, storytelling should not be a one-off event and educational leaders must provide *multiple* opportunities for people to tell (and in some cases, retell) their stories. Stories are dynamic, ongoing, generative, and reflective of multiple/shifting realities; they are not isolated, static, or totalizing entities. When we tell stories to others, we're not only reflecting on experiences and selecting what details we are willing to share, but the listener is also receiving and interpreting the story through a lens crafted by their own experiences. Further, the more we tell stories over time, the more they are reshaped to reflect our new understandings. Storytelling is the basic way people make meaning of their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2014), and through storytelling and dialogue, meaning can shift and change. As such, storytelling should be built into the culture of a teaching and learning environment, not brought in as a singular event. When educational leaders facilitate the ongoing exchange of stories within their community, and when they create 'brave spaces' (Arao & Clemens, 2013) for authentic storytelling to occur, they are in a better position to create more equitable environments for teaching and learning.

Embracing the Power of Storytelling

Maxine Greene (2003) talks about the beauty in imagining "not what is necessarily probable or predictable, but what may be conceived as possible" (p.63). In this sense, stories can help us to imagine alternate realities as we work together to create change. Each of us have come to embrace the power of storytelling over the years and in this section we briefly share how/why we value storytelling in our lives.

Janay

As an interdisciplinary scholar, my work is informed by my lived experiences as a Black and Chicana woman, mother, and lifelong educator/learner. My research and pedagogy are guided by formal theories that feel liberatory in the storying of people akin to myself and my ancestors (e.g. Motherwork and Black feminism), through the ways they centralize storytelling as a vital method to generating collective knowledge. Throughout my academic and professional career, storytelling has been my primary way of connecting with colleagues, building community, finding congruence and navigating discord. As a window, it has helped me cultivate a deeper understanding of others and identify more humanizing, authentic approaches to research and leadership. As a mirror, storytelling has helped me find opportunities for self-work, check my ego and take accountability. It has also helped me make meaning of moments of confusion, miscommunication or precarity as it relates to issues of power in teaching and mentorship.

Storytelling as an educational leader then, *is* an educational practice of freedom. Inspired by hooks (1994) who described her early educational experiences as freeing because she was taught by Black educators who knew her *and* her family, her learning situated in an intergenerational context, my goal as a teacher was to cultivate similar practices (hooks, 1994). For me, this looked like creating a learning experience that was meaningful and useful for my students' *lives* and by extension their families.

My deepest heartwork took place with my students in Long Beach, CA where I served as a restorative justice coordinator for a credit recovery high school. As an RJ practitioner, I was trained to facilitate storytelling through community building circles, a formal practice modeled after indigenous storytelling circles, designed to scaffold trust building through learning each other's personal histories. Eventually, after much practice, community building circles become spaces to openly discuss harm and healing, in an effort to develop healthy strategies for taking care of ourselves and navigating conflict. Other times, storytelling took place organically during lunch or transition times by way of music creation, spontaneous rap cyphers or journaling. My classroom was a co-created space of healing for students, grown through word of mouth; after school, guardians stopped in to talk as well, an result of what they heard about the work we were doing on campus.

After several months of witnessing the power of storytelling in our lives and relationships, I looked for opportunities to deepen connections and expand our storytelling practices. After speaking with several students, I volunteered to teach an after school hip hop pedagogy course. We deconstructed hip hop lyrics, analyzed music videos and recast words and images to make sense of our own stories. In this practice, my students felt safe enough to be more of their authentic selves, even if only in my classroom, with each other. The course was one way we all developed relationships of mutual caring and respect. Over time as students learned the stories of their peers and courageously shared their own, they began to stand up for one another and hold each other accountable ("Hey, you coming to Ms. Janay's class today, right?"). I never needed to lean on the school's punitive discipline guidelines and eventually, students would come talk *first*, as a way to avoid harmful confrontations with peers and other school leadership. Students were not only building stronger relationships with each other by rethinking ways they added to the learning community, they also reconsidered their relationships with other adults, including school leaders like our Principal and Dean. To be clear, this was not without those school leaders also engaging in some form of shared vulnerability through storytelling.

Laura

I currently wear two hats: one as the director of a Master of Education program focused on developing educational leaders who are agents of social change; the other as the associate director for the Division of Leadership and Excellence in Academic Development at my university. With these two hats, I have the honor of developing educators and educational leaders across primary, secondary, and tertiary contexts. And while the differences across those contexts are at times profound, so too are the similarities. I have found storytelling to be a powerful learning tool across all contexts, regardless of which hat I am wearing. In my current role(s), I weave storytelling into the

teaching and learning experiences in a variety of ways to help people to create, analyze, share, listen to and learn from stories (Colket, Penny Light & Carswell, forthcoming). I do this because some of my most profound learning experiences have come from storytelling.

Growing up, the stories I heard were all grounded in the White, Euro-centric, male, able-bodied/minded, heteronormative, cisgender perspective. Even when a story was about the ‘other’, that story was still being told through the lens of the dominant narrative. For me, the profound learning came when I heard stories that shattered that narrative. Unfortunately, in my K-12 school experience, those moments were virtually non-existent. I grew up in a White suburban bubble world outside of Hartford, CT. Although I fit the mold entirely, I never felt at home. I felt a compulsion to break out of the bubble. And every time I did leave, even if just for a moment, I heard bits and pieces of stories that I had never heard before, and that is where the real learning began for me.

One of the reasons I have found storytelling to be a powerful tool is because stories highlight our shared humanness while also allowing us to see the importance of beautiful textures and new perspectives. Stories are deeply personal, yet they extend beyond the individual as they serve as an entry point to understanding the broader social, cultural, political context. Stories also have the power to simultaneously critique and break the dominant narrative—a narrative which I think, desperately needs to be broken. Because stories have had such a profound impact on my educational journey, it is not surprising that I ended up focusing on storytelling as a form of critical pedagogy in my role as an educator and educational leader today.

Mia

Before I learned about storytelling as a pedagogical tool, I grew up writing my *own* stories—through the creation of comic strips—that I would publish in my school and local newspapers. Similar to the reason Frida Kahlo painted mostly self-portraits, my comic strips centered around my own experiences as a young Black woman as a way for me to “paint my own reality.” As a child, I buried myself in reading Calvin & Hobbes, Zits, Foxtrot, and Boondocks, and while I was able to connect with the characters and their stories, I never felt like I truly saw my own perspectives reflected in my favorite comic books. While I was not knowledgeable about the relevant literature surrounding counternarratives at the time, at a young age I understood the power that stories—particular those from perspectives that are missing or ignored—wield in terms of serving as a window into people’s lives and as a medium for connecting people to one another.

I started using stories as part of my own praxis during college. During my time as a student at Stanford University, I felt a lot of imposter syndrome; I was surrounded by so many students whose talents and experiences I perceived as being more indicative of their belonging than my own. However, these moments of insecurity would start to melt when my peers (especially the ones I admired myself) expressed similar feelings. As I noticed these parallel stories being shared more—particularly among my friends belonging to marginalized social groups—it motivated me to start a mental health program during my time working for the Black Community Services Center for

students to share their experiences about various topics (e.g. parental pressures, body image issues, dating, etc). These stories not only created a foundation of mutual understanding amongst us all, but provided us a space to notice and articulate the roles societal and institutional structures play in shaping our feelings of inadequacy, particularly those structures rooted in White supremacy. Through storytelling, we were able to not only form new meanings of our experiences but we were also able to reflect on ways in which structural inequities impacted those experiences.

Utilizing storytelling as a vehicle for critical reflection has further become both a pedagogical and methodological tool in my research. As a critical maker educator and researcher, I am interested in the ways in which youth design physical, programmable artifacts that reimagine alternative realities based on current injustices. For example, in one project, a group of Black girls designed an interactive paper quilt that reimaged the field of computer science had it been founded by a Black woman. Through the activity, the girls shared their own experiences with computer science, as well as their experiences as Black girls who felt as though they did not see themselves in the stories of their childhoods. They were then inspired to create a quilt illustrating four Black women in different stages of their life doing computer science. For the girls, storytelling became a tool to not only illuminate the lack of representation of Black women in computer science but to also create new stories of a more just world. As we consider ways to tell stories as a form of critical praxis, we see that storytelling not only supports us in reflecting on the systemic injustices surrounding our students and their families but can be leveraged as a medium for action, particularly when we actively work to create new stories—stories based in love, equity, and freedom.

Utilizing Storytelling in Practice

Now that we have shared why storytelling is a powerful tool for creating more equitable teaching and learning environments, and shared our own stories of how/why we believe in the power of storytelling, we will provide concrete storytelling strategies that you can use in your own practice as an educational leader. Educational leaders can use storytelling in a variety of contexts as they are working to facilitate ongoing professional learning, build community and re-imagine curriculum and pedagogy.

Below, we share several strategies we have used to encourage storytelling within our educational communities. Across all of the examples shared below, it is important to remember that leaders must model what they are asking. As educational leaders, we should follow the advice of Brené Brown and “let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen” (2010). So, when we ask others to share their stories, we must also be prepared to share our own. Through modeling, we can illustrate the ways in which storytelling can encourage us to critically reflect on our experiences and question our assumptions, approaches and perspectives.

Strategy 1: Educational autobiographies

Ask your colleagues to critically reflect on and share pieces of their educational autobiographies. You can use a format such as think/pair/share, gallery walk, small group discussion, speed dating, asynchronous discussion forum, etc. to facilitate dialogue around questions such as: *What defining moments did you have as a student? Did you have any resources, supports, people or strategies to help you overcome the struggles you faced as a student? What are you most proud of when you look back on your time as a student? What are you most surprised or concerned about? If you were to go back to talk to your teachers now, what would you tell them?* Depending on your context and your goals, you could have everyone reflect on and share the entirety of their story(ies), or you could ask them to just share one word, sentence or paragraph that they are comfortable sharing. They can then elaborate as much as they feel comfortable to do so.

Below, consider the two stories shared by one of the chapter's authors, Janay. One story is about her experience as a student and the other is about her experience as a teacher. In what ways might educators and educational leaders be able to create, listen to and learn from stories such as these for the purposes of professional learning, building community and creating more re-imagining curriculum and pedagogical practices?

Story #1

I was born and raised in Stockton, CA, a big-little city hailed for its diversity, yet known historically for its rampant structural inequities, from housing to schooling and everything in-between (Galvin, 2020). Raised by a single mom (with the support of our village of families, friends and eventually my stepdad), I was all too familiar with the day-to-day implications of those structural inequities. Most vivid however, were the ways my white and wealthy peers, thought of, spoke about, and treated me with disdain in schools. For me, this looked like classed, racialized bullying- I vividly remember where I was on the elementary school playground the first time I was called a racial slur. I also remember the first time I showed up to school in white faux Adidas sneakers and was ridiculed by peers. My shoes had too many stripes, indicating they were in fact, off brand. Educators, administrators and other school leadership, communicated low expectations for my academic performance but hypervigilance in regard to my perceived "home life." I remember clearly one particular administrator at my elementary school going to great lengths to prove that my mother was using an out-of-district address for me to attend, aiming to have me expelled from school as a result. I was given a formal letter of investigation at the end of the school day and asked to give it to my mother. I read it, cried, and later asked my mom what I had done wrong. Research tells us that my experience is not an anomaly.

Story #2

My first teaching experience was as a lead teacher for a Head Start school in Daly City, CA. My classroom had 19 students, ranging in ages 3-5, from a wide range of racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. It was a beautiful first teaching experience, though I often felt underprepared to do well. Though I had been placed at a school with a great director and strong senior peer teachers to learn alongside, I found the families and guardians of my

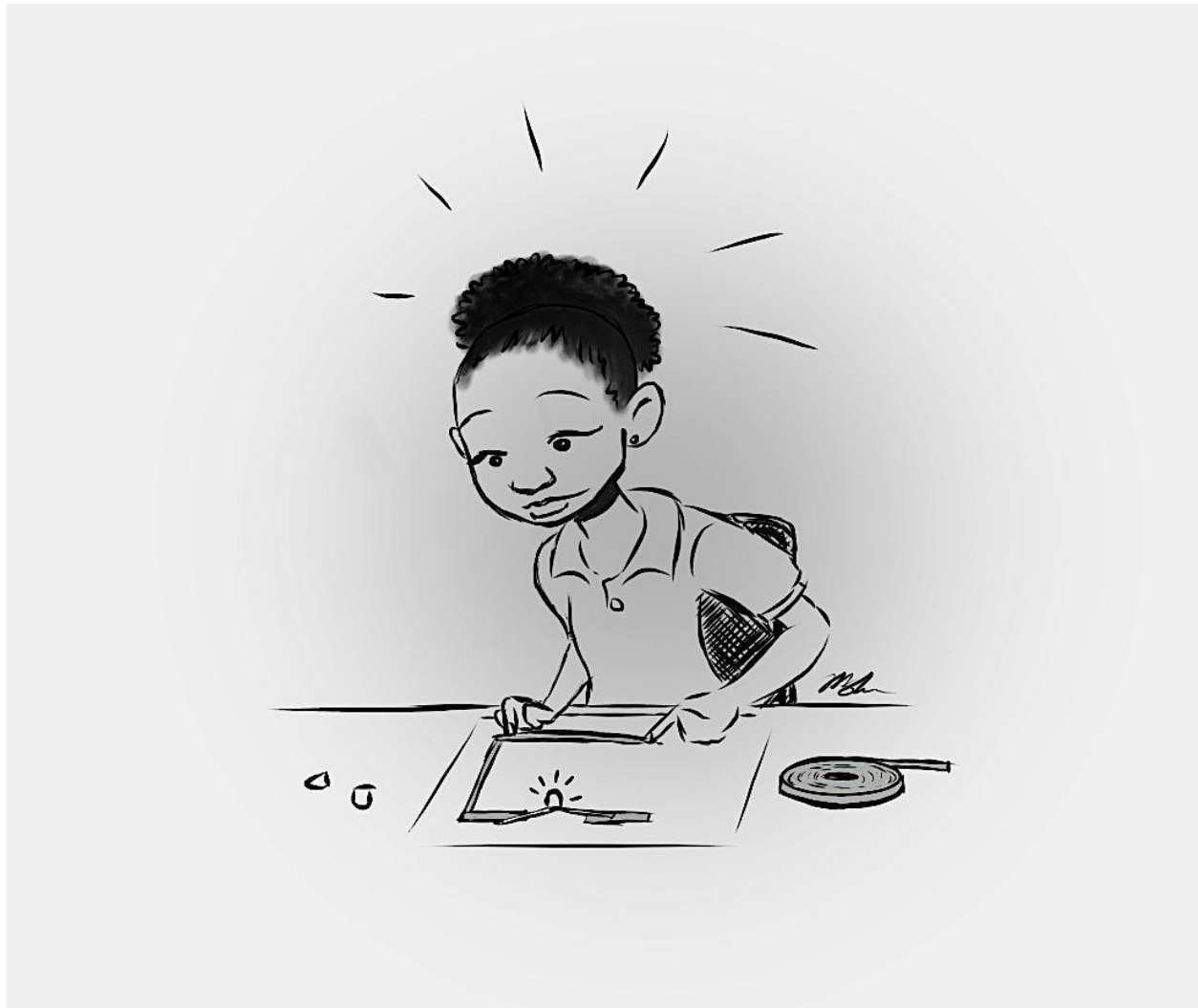
students to be the most critical to our success as a learning community. By spending time with each family exchanging stories through a process Dr. Pérez Huber (2019) calls *shared vulnerability*, I learned so much about my students, including what worked well for them in and out of the classroom (p. 2). We also moved beyond the context of the classroom and academic measures, imagining the many possible futures for their babies. We did so through utilizing formal structured time like home visits, parent conferences or IEP meetings, and inviting guardians to volunteer. We carved out time to specifically learn about our tacit theories around care, education and the role of family/educators in community, to ultimately become collaborators in the care and education of their children. At minimum, we forged a mutual trust, much needed particularly when looking after the youngest and smallest of learners.

Strategy 2: Three-word, six-word and one-sentence stories

You can start by asking everyone to write a three-word story (Chen & Patel, 2018) about their learning or teaching experiences. They can share with a partner or the entire group, as a way to enter into a meaningful dialogue. Consider a few examples shared by Laura here. A three-word story might be something like: *inquiry supports inclusiveness*. Once someone shares their words, they can elaborate on the meaning those words have for them, the stories behind them. You can then ask people to come up with a six-word story, for example: *I never thought I would teach*. Sharing the six words opens the door for meaningful discussion and more storytelling. Finally, ask people to share their one-sentence story. Someone might say: *When I was in 7th grade, my Social Studies teacher made me feel like I wasn't smart*. After sharing their one-sentence story, the floor then opens for meaningful dialogue. These story-telling strategies can happen over the course of a day-long professional development session or they can happen in pieces over the course of a semester or year. Think about your goals as you engage in this process and get creative with how to dive into this. It is a fun and also deeply powerful activity!

Strategy 3: Draw a powerful learning experience

Ask your colleagues to draw a powerful learning experience they've had (this could be as a student or in their professional life). Drawing might be fun and exciting for some and for others it might push them outside their comfort zone, but in productive ways. The drawings can be simple stick figures, crayon drawings, or even abstract sketches. When you invite your colleagues to represent their experience visually instead of just thinking or writing about it, it supports deeper learning (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999) and forces them to imagine details in ways they might not have otherwise. Those new details provide excellent fodder for the stories and productive dialogue that will emerge. Below is an example of a visual story about a powerful learning experience from one of the authors of this chapter, Mia.



Strategy 4: Oral history

Ask your colleagues to interview someone in your educational community. Depending on your context and your goals, this could be another educator, a student, a parent, etc. You can provide a set of interview questions ahead of time, or you can develop them collectively. You can refer to the educational autobiography activity for a list of potential questions. Make sure to also create a consent form so the person interviewed understands how their stories will (and will not) be used, and whether or not their identities will be shared. Once everyone has interviewed a community member and collected their stories, everyone can share/read each other's interview transcripts or summaries and collectively discuss what they are learning from listening to other people's stories.

Across all of these examples, make sure not to stop at the listening. As the leader, it is imperative to encourage people to move into thinking about next steps. What changes can/need to be made based on the stories that emerged in order to create more equitable teaching and learning environments? How did the storytelling process help you to identify the inequities and to imagine alternate

possibilities? What resources do you need in order to create the changes you've collectively envisioned?

Conclusion

Storytelling as critical pedagogy is a pathway for connecting with our broader school communities in ways that are humanizing and disruptive to a status quo that confers power on some and steals dignity from others. When the stories about education shift away from de-humanizing numbers and deficit-oriented narratives, and instead focus on creating, listening to and learning from stories (particularly stories from the margin), our relationship with education and with each other changes fundamentally and we are finally able to re-imagine and re-create teaching and learning experiences that are more equitable and more liberatory.

Storytelling can be a powerful tool for educators and educational leaders in that stories can serve as a starting point for inquiry. Stories can help educators and educational leaders re-imagine and re-claim professional learning. Stories can humanize learning. In the process of doing so, stories can build community. And as a result of all of those, stories can spark the change that is needed to create more equitable spaces for teaching and learning.

There is great vulnerability involved in crafting and sharing personal stories, but also great power. It requires both humility and empathy to truly listen to other people's stories. When we choose shared vulnerability, we honor one another by trusting each other as the truth tellers of our own lives. Listening with empathy, with the intent to understand, can move us past using storytelling as a currency, and move us toward creating more authentic and meaningful connections with the people around us. Through storytelling, we can then learn with the people around us, grow with the people around us, and create more liberatory teaching practices with the people around us.

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