

The Power of Narrative Inquiry to Transform both Teacher and Mentor

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Renetta's teacher research demonstrates how narrative inquiry can help early childhood professionals recover their voices and reclaim their knowledge and understanding of what they do as central and legitimate sources of information about teaching young children. Hers is a courageous and powerful story and analysis of the problematic and often contradictory tensions between her roles as a student, a Head Start program director, and a Native American female who sought to change current constructions of what it meant to educate young children in her culture.

For a number of years I have worked with Renetta in various capacities as a mentor, a teacher, and a collaborator. During most of this time, she has been the director of a tribal Head Start program in northeastern South Dakota. We have made several presentations together at NAEYC and Native American conferences, telling and retelling the story of her program's evolution to what has become known as the Sisseton Wahpeton Approach to Early Childhood Education, a Reggio-inspired approach based on the Twelve Virtues of the Oyate ("people").

The journey to reclaiming these virtues and making them the core of the curriculum has not been easy, as Renetta makes clear in her narrative. My primary work as her graduate advisor has been listening to her story, and encouraging her to be self-reflexive and critical in analyzing her narration of experiences that have been painful to share, both orally and in writing. Her question: "How has narrative inquiry enhanced my understanding of

early childhood education and my role as a director?” has not been easy to pursue. As a researcher, she has been challenged to deal with several problematic and often contradictory tensions between her roles as a student, a director, and a Native American female who sought to change current constructions of what it meant to educate young children in her culture. As a mentor, I have been challenged to find ways to support her efforts to reconstruct her understandings and experiences within the historical and cultural context of her tribal community. It was a new mentoring challenge to respond to her struggles to come to terms with what it means to be an educated Native American woman who teaches and leads, nurtures and supports, and desires to reclaim her voice through writing and inquiry.

Renetta has chosen to explore these influences and tensions through narrative inquiry, a method of studying and understanding experience through storytelling or narrative. This is a meaningful and culturally relevant method of inquiry to the Dakota people, who see stories as a way of connecting past and future. As noted by Momaday (1976), “notions of the past and future are essentially notions of the present. In the same way an idea of one’s ancestry and posterity is really an idea of the self.” The story Renetta tells and retells is both hers and of those who have lived and remembered what it was like to be educated in her tribe. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) note, narrative inquiry produces a mutually-constructed story out of the lives of both researcher and participants. It is through our shared stories that we become fully known to ourselves and others, and see new possibilities for educational change.

Renetta’s inquiry involved the examination of archival data; writing an autobiographical account of her experiences and perspectives; and using reflective journaling to gain insights into her own and others’ views. She also listened carefully and respectfully to the words of children, who are viewed as sacred beings; parents and extended family; and elders whose stories held the truths, values, and beliefs important to life in her culture. These methods allowed her to both reflect on the stories of others and to tell her own story in order to make sense of the experiences (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr 2007). This included stories of the “dark days” of boarding schools; the significance of her name; remembrances of schooling and the outdoors; and her early experiences in Head Start, all of which have influenced the current narrative on early education in her tribe and her emergent understandings and questionings of herself as a Native American woman and educator.

For Renetta, the process of narrative inquiry changed her perspectives of early childhood education, from its evolution of children viewed as sacred beings to the dark times of education viewed as an opportunity to change the culture of tribal people across the North American continent. This latter image of “school” was being replicated by adults, themselves “products of

boarding schools,” who were teaching at the very Head Start she attended. She realized that children’s choices were not valued, and many limits were placed on them. Children were not learning their native language or incorporating cultural values. Her Head Start experience defied the Dakota view of a child as sacred being; children were seen as objects to be molded by teachers, not as equal partners with adults in the sacred act of learning.

However, through her educational experiences at South Dakota State University, and work with me, she developed the Sisseton Wahpeton Approach to Early Childhood Education at the Head Start program she directed. This incorporated Oyate values about children, education, and community into the curriculum. Among these are Honor, Sacredness, Respect, and Humility, all of which are consistent with principles of the Reggio Emilia approach. They are conveyed when teachers help children to honor and pursue life’s most meaningful questions, like: “Who am I?” “Why am I?” “What is life’s purpose and what meaning does it have for me?” In the Sisseton Wahpeton Approach to Early Childhood Education, teaching is a spiritual act. It indicates the steadfast human quest for connectedness with something larger than ourselves—with our souls, with one another, with our culture, with our world, and with the mysteries of life. Helping children in this way, teaching and learning are sacred activities, and worthy of respect. Such teaching honors children for who they are—for their gifts, for their differences. Humility comes from being in the presence of sacred things and knowing the simple quality called respect.

Through the process of reflective inquiry, Renetta has gained appreciation and respect for the stories and the storytellers’ image of early childhood education. By situating her narrative inquiry within a larger historical and cultural context, she has been able to “break with submergence and transform” (Greene 1986, 429).

Working with Renetta has been an enriching and transformational experience for me as well, as her advisor and as an early childhood teacher educator. While helping Renetta attain an active voice and presence in her own story, I’ve developed a new understanding of her vantage point within the context of her personal and professional experience. For example, I have come to appreciate her exemplar of the virtue of *Wicowahba* (*Wee co wa ha ba*), or humility—to be humble, modest, and unpretentious; to choose the quiet path. Although this virtue has at times made it difficult for her to tell her story (as a Native American female), it has deepened her appreciation of indigenous storytelling as a strength offered to her community.

Listening to each other’s stories, we have been able to construct responsive relationships leading to new insights into each other’s prior and current life experiences. Renetta’s evolving story has prompted me to rethink my own narrative as a teacher educator who has tried, and often failed, to

engage tribal teachers in coursework and other professional development activities. It has led me to question, for example, how to be more sensitive to the cultural and localized beliefs and values of tribal groups, their ways of knowing, their perspectives on child rearing, and the historical context of American Indian education, so that they are honored and incorporated into teacher education curriculum. Further, it has increased my awareness and understanding of the limitations of applying “universalist” perspectives of child development and early education to minority populations.

Renetta’s research demonstrates that narrative inquiry is not only about studying one’s experience in the world; it is also an exploration of the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which those experiences were constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Narrative inquiry provides a process or method for teachers to gain insights into who they are as developing professionals. Likewise, teacher educators must continually examine their professional roles through self-reflexive and critical lenses. Teacher educators must approach teaching and mentoring with similar intents if they are to better understand the social, cultural, and institutional factors influencing who they are and their assumptions about teaching.

Through narrative inquiry, teachers and teacher educators may experience shifts and changes in their identities—shifts that create changes in the way they view themselves as teachers and learners, and in the way they will experience future interactions and relations with others (Pushor and Clandinin 2009). As narrative inquiry can transform the identities and practices of both the teacher researcher and the mentor, it should be seen as an essential method in the investigation of teaching and learning and what it means to teach.

Our work together has demonstrated that the powerful processes of finding our voices as professionals and creating spaces for collaborative and critical inquiries about education are not definitive, bounded events but constantly emerging and contradictory. In this time when teaching is largely defined by those outside the profession, teacher research can help teachers and teacher educators to be more thoughtful, more reflective, more analytical, and more responsive. Engaging in teacher inquiry and adopting an inquiry stance should and need not be the sole domain of academics and university-based researchers. It demands self-scrutiny, self-awareness, and self-discipline; but it promises greater fulfillment and intentionality. And, it offers hope—the hope of recovering our voices, of elevating our status, and reclaiming our profession.

References

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