Finding Our Voices — The Power of Telling Stories

by Margie Carter

"The stories we hear and the stories we tell shape the meaning and texture of our lives at every stage and juncture."

— Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings
in **Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education**

I've been amazed at the proliferation of recent literature on the role of storytelling for all levels of teaching, informal and professional. Perhaps this comes, in part, from our interest in multicultural education and the discovery that storytelling is central to the culture, family life, and education systems of nearly every country outside our own. Stories can illustrate and illuminate, cause us to wonder, and confirm what we already know. They are powerful teachers. They can make us laugh and remember.

In my own personal and professional journey, I've encountered the power of storytelling in classrooms with children, the consciousness raising groups of the women's movement, the educational theory and pedagogy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, and the remarkable writing of women of color, telling stories of lives so different from my own. These stories have dramatically impacted what I know and how I am in the world.

Stories teach us about ourselves as well as other people. The process of *finding our voices*, *naming our lives*, and *telling our stories* is central to what I understand about the experience of empowerment. Early childhood educators know that children tell stories as part of their developing identity and self-esteem, and we provide for this in our classroom culture — "Use your words," "It's time for show and tell," "Let's listen to someone else talk now." In these ways, we help children gather their sense of self and belonging and begin to notice how others are doing this as well.

I wonder how often we provide parallel experiences for adults to develop in their identity and roles as teachers. Unless teachers know themselves well, the values and influences that steer their lives, they are likely to merely react, rather than be sensitive and intentional in their interactions with children, parents, and co-workers. And, with the work of child care so undervalued in our broader culture and economic system, how can teachers nurture self-esteem in children if they don't have it themselves? Teachers don't just need the right techniques. They need to discover their authentic voice with its hopes and fears, questions and confusion.

Adults Telling Our Stories

In a chapter entitled "Story and Voice in the Education of Professionals" in **Stories Lives Tell**, Celeste Brody and Carol Witherell relate a curriculum model at the Lewis and Clark Graduate School of Professional Studies centered around narrative stories and dialogue to explore the core knowledge of the program. To develop reflective practitioners around the core knowledge of early childhood education, we would do well to explore such a model. There are simple pieces of it we can pursue in our routine in-service training.

Various forms of storytelling can be used for self-awareness and team building among child care staff. Personal stories can bring insights about the roots of

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tensions that may be festering among teachers. They can engender new appreciation across cultural differences. Try opening or ending each staff meeting with some of the storytelling forms outlined below. If you make storytelling a tradition, while varying the strategies, teachers will experience the value of telling stories and most likely expand their repertoire with children.

Strategy: Tell us a story about . . .

A quick go-around in a staff meeting can ask teachers to tell a story about such things as a time when they were naughty as a child, when they did something that was exhilarating, when they felt powerful, their most embarrassing moment, and so forth.

You can also ask them to tell a true story about themselves in the form of a classic fairy tale, a mystery to be solved, or a poem. For the latter story form, I borrow guidelines described by William Ayres in **To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher**.

1st line:	Tell your first name
2nd line:	Use three words to describe yourself
3rd line:	Name something you love
4th line:	Name something you hate
5th line:	Something you fear
6th line:	Something you wish for
7th line:	End with your last name

Strategy: Tell the story of your name

Elise Bryant taught me this simple strategy that simultaneously promotes awareness of one's own background and that of others in the group. Ask people to introduce themselves by telling a short story about how they got their name.

I begin the process, providing an example of the kind of things that might be said. For instance, "My birth name was Margaret Jane Allison. My mother came from a large Irish-Catholic family and named me after her favorite sister, whom she called Margie. She always told me that Aunt Margie was the sweetest, dearest person in the world and she hoped I would be just like her. She gave me my middle name, Jane, after my father's sister, whom she said was just a bit wild and outrageous, something she wanted me to have a touch of as well. I think I've followed in these footsteps more than my mother ever imagined!"

The stories this activity calls forth almost always create interest in getting to know each other better. People get a flavor of the history of this country and how their family related to the "melting pot." Sometimes teachers have no awareness of how they got their name, or reveal they were given a name popular at the time, or named after a famous person. Euro-Americans often discover that their backgrounds include more than the shopping mall culture.

This activity often sends teachers off to investigate more about their family history and the larger social context of the times in which relatives lived. This self-awareness is critical and will lead to more sound anti-bias practices in helping children form solid identities.

Strategy: Milestone stories

Use handouts or paper stepping stones on the floor to indicate milestones in identity formation around which teachers can tell their own stories.

- My first memory of someone different from myself.
- My first memory of being part of an identity group.
- A time I discovered something different about myself apart from my identity group.
- A time I felt powerless because I felt unnoticed or unheard because of my identity group.
- A time I felt powerful because of my group identity.

If the steps are laid out on the floor, teachers move to the different milestones, taking turns telling their stories. This can be done in a parallel fashion, pointing to the different milestones written on individual handouts. The ongoing debriefing process and the concluding summary can highlight how positive and negative influences have shaped our identity and ability to act on behalf of ourselves and others.

Strategy: The story of how my family did it

Most of us carry on practices in our adult life that we learned as children. Often these are taken for granted and we haven't given much thought to the *why* of it. In the book **Alerta: A Multicultural, Bilingual Approach to Teaching Young Children**, the *What*, *How*, and *Why* of culture are explored as three different levels of culture. Incorporate this idea into

> The more stories you read to children, the more of their stories you listen to and act out, the more reflection you have upon your own childhood stories and dramas, the more ready you are to begin the habit of storytelling. Once you begin, nothing can stop you. But it has to be your own voice. It can't be someone else's voice.
>
> — Vivian Paley in Storytelling, Spring 1993

an activity by asking teachers to tell a story of how things were done as they grew up with regard to such things as caring for a sick family member, getting food on the table, or correcting a child who disobeyed or transgressed.

Information in the form of words or short phrases from these stories can be plotted on a three column chart paper under one of the headings **Alerta** suggests — *What*, *How*, *Why*. A chart might look like this:

What	How	Why
Health care practice (i.e., treating a cough)	• Rubbing ointment on chest • Coining • Using a vaporizer • Drinking herb tea • Taking cough medicine before sleep	Concepts about physiology • Belief systems • Tradition passed down from mother to daughter • Instructions from doctor, tribal healer, etc.

Most of what people will say falls into either the *What* or *How* column. For instance, treating a cough would be put under the *What* column, while rubbing ointment on the chest or coining the back would be listed under the *How* column. Raising questions about the *Why* of these practices is where less obvious information and insight gets uncovered. This usually results in new understanding and respect, if not agreement, on how things are done in different cultures.

Strategy: Persona stories about children

There are any number of variations of the persona story strategies adapted from Kay Taus and described in the **Anti-Bias Curriculum Book: Tools for Empowering Young Children**. This one alerts participants to possible stories behind children's behaviors.

In small groups of classroom teams, give teachers a prop such as a doll, face mask, or puppet around which to create a story. Ask them to think of a child they are puzzled about and have them describe his or her typical behavior in the form of a story. After each team has worked together to create their persona story, have each told one by one to the whole group.

Following each story, ask the group to formulate some questions to ask the child and have one of the storytellers answer as the child might. This process helps change teacher attitudes about children's behavior from one of labeling to curiosity. Describing behaviors in the form of stories often reveals new patterns and meaning.

Expanding Our Repertoire with Children

I've been encouraging teachers to expand their practice of storytelling with children to include a regular review of classroom activities in the form of a story. This builds a sense of belonging and of community and group history; children begin to see the personalities, interests, and contributions of their individual classmates. Here are some strategies that work well with children. How might you develop training for teachers to explore them and invent their own versions of such storytelling activities?

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Strategy: Nap time stories about our morning

A simple storytelling routine can be done as part of getting children settled down for naps. Using a similar format and style, each day teachers can begin with the same phrase, perhaps "And now for the story of our day, June 2, 1994" or "This is the story of a special day (or an ordinary day), a day when 14 children came to Good Beginnings Child Care Center."

The story can chronologically go through the morning, or focus on a theme or feeling for the day, but should include something about each child. This not only gives each child a role in the story, but heightens the teachers' awareness of each child during the morning so as to be able to tell the story at nap time.

Strategy: The time of our lives

Children love hearing stories of when their parents were children, and stories of when they themselves were younger — "Tell us about the time when. . . ." To build a parallel sense of connectedness and history for those who spend the bulk of their waking hours in a child care setting together, teachers can tell the story of their field trips, special projects and adventures, not just once but over and over again during the year. As these stories become familiar, they can be retold in new forms such as a parable, myth, or folk tale, thereby engaging children's experience with the larger life themes they will encounter.

Strategy: Learn from Vivian Paley

When it comes to conveying the life of a classroom, Vivian Paley is a model storyteller. Her numerous books, which are simple to read, immediately spark a new way of seeing the events of a classroom as a story unfolding. Whether they actually want to adopt her specific techniques or not, teachers benefit from hearing how Paley observes, listens, and weaves her curriculum around the stories of three to five year olds in her preschool. Check out Paley titles such as **Mollie Is Three, The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter**, **The Uses of Storytelling in the Classroom**, and **Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays**.

Strategy: Teaching as storytelling

A very specific strategy, with detailed examples of using the story form model for planning elementary school curriculum, is discussed in Kieran Egan's little book, **Teaching as Story Telling: An Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School**. Egan describes how to identify the themes underlying the importance of any curriculum topic and then organize the content into a story form around these themes. As I read through this book, I could imagine not only school age child care teachers making using of his approach but preschool teachers adopting and integrating it into their storytelling repertoire.

Egan reminds us that it is the affective meaning of stories which provides us not only access to knowledge but engagement with it. This understanding, along with the sheer fun of telling tales, is enough to nudge almost any teacher into becoming an avid storyteller.

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