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Storytelling in Advisement

Nina Jaffe

For many years, I have worked as a storyteller and folklore educator with children and adults. This core interest led me to consider the role of storytelling as it occurs in advisement, not as a performance art but as the primary mode of communication in group meetings and individual conferences. This article represents an initial study.

"One theory in educational research holds that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). There is a growing body of writing and research on the role of storytelling and narrative in the educational process. From the intimate classroom observations of Vivian Paley, to the theoretical explorations of Kieran Egan or Jerome Bruner, to the compelling insights of Robert Coles, among scores of others, the power of narrative in formal and informal interactions is pointing to a new way of looking at ourselves as learners and as human beings.

In his most recent book, *Tell Me a Story*, Roger C. Schank (1990), a leading researcher in the nature of thinking (both real and artificial), concludes that the ability to create, retrieve and tell stories is the basis of human intelligence.

All we have are experiences, but all we can effectively tell others are stories....Communication consists of selecting the stories that we know and telling them to others at the right time. (p. 12)

Advisement at Bank Street offers professionals at all stages a unique opportunity to explore the meaning of their own stories in the context of work with children and adults in educational settings (Hirsch, 1987). In analyzing what occurs during any given conference group, over a short or long period of time, it is useful to consider what kinds of narrative themes emerge from the students and how, if at all, the advisor can guide or facilitate these "tales of teachers" in and out of the classroom. How can we, in fact, build on this "group memory bank" to refine and clarify our work as teachers and administrators?

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*Ms. Jaffe is a professional storyteller and the author of several books of folklore for children, including *The Three Riddles: A Jewish Folktale* (Bantam Books, 1989).*

After some reflection, culling from ongoing notes, and calling up my own memories of last year's group, it seemed to me that several categories, or strata of narrative, could be gleaned as constants throughout. I would like to suggest these as possible ways of conceptualizing and thinking about the very special kind of communication that occurs in advisement at Bank Street.

Narrative Categories

Autobiographical

These are personal stories, which may be triggered by an incident in the classroom or as part of an ongoing group discussion. Some of these recollections are deeply personal and revealing. Their substance and meaning, both to the teller and the listeners, belong within the confidential boundaries of the group itself, where trust and mutuality have slowly developed. However, some of these stories can be retold here to show their function in professional growth and self-awareness. For example, one of my advisees, in her first year as head teacher at an inner-city early childhood learning center, was concerned about the informal visits of one of her children's grandmother. Although she welcomed informal visits from parents and other caretakers, this particular person seemed to claim authority over the children that my student felt was inappropriate, and would often direct them to behave in ways contrary to what my student was trying to initiate and model for her children.

She was not sure how to discuss this issue with the grandmother. She felt intimidated. She told me a story about her own grandmother:

From when I was a little child, my grandmother—my father's mother—lived in our house with us. She was very strict and forbidding. Even my mother was afraid of her. She had the run of the house. I remember one time, she was cooking a meat stew. We had a little pet cat. Somehow, the cat had crept into the kitchen and started licking the bowl of meat on the counter. My grandmother got so angry, she picked up the cat, threw it across the room and killed it! I was always afraid of my grandmother and her anger.

After telling me this story, my student laughed with relief, saying, "No wonder I don't want to talk to Danny's¹ grandmother!" Although I did little more than listen, this story seemed to free up my student's ability to think of ways to cope with the grandmother in her classroom. She was able to take the authority back into her own hands in a way that preserved the positive aspects of this adult's visits, and helped her feel more confident in her very new role as head teacher.

Concrete/Situational

I suspect that these types of stories take up a good portion of conference group or individual sessions. For these are the stories that teachers *need* to tell in order to gain perspective on the unfolding events in their daily work with children and their families. These are also the stories that many teachers may not have the time to relate during other times of the day, but which really highlight the issues they are grappling with on a much larger scale. Some of these stories relate to an individual or group of children's experiences with specific learning concepts or curriculum. Others emphasize more the social/emotional aspects of classroom interaction. For example, one of my advisees came into conference group mid-fall with a look of consternation on her face. A new child in her nursery school setting had been showing particular difficulty with following routines, moving about the room to the different activities and, in general, not relating well to the other children. My student expressed some concern about this child, but more on an intuitive level. Something, she felt, was wrong. She told this story:

The children had finished snack, and had gone outside for free play in the playground. Robin was digging in the sand with a shovel, near Lisa. All of a sudden, without any provocation whatsoever, he whirled around and hit her on the head with the shovel! The other teachers rushed to separate the children and Lisa got a mild bump on her head, but meanwhile, now I know that we need to speak with Robin's mother!

In telling these situation-related narratives, whether short or more complex and layered, teachers also have an opportunity to step back from the situation, and begin to problem solve and plan for future interactions, either with the conference group or in their own thinking.

Speculative/Conditional

It is impossible for teachers to know everything about their students. Yet teachers are often confronted with the effects, both positive and negative, of children's experiences outside the classroom. There is a certain amount of wondering and imagining that goes on in teachers' minds as they try to put together an informed picture of their children's lives. These musings, when shared with the group, I call speculative stories. For, in fact, it is only in the imagination of the teller and the listeners that the story is completed.

Joan teaches in a well-off suburban private school of long standing in the community. A kindergarten teacher, she works with children who are mostly from high-income homes, where the parents are very busy professionals. She

talked about Charles, who had few playmates in the school and tended to isolate himself in all areas of the room. "I know he has a nanny who picks him up every day. They live in a enormous house. But his parents work at all hours and he never has play dates with other children." It was up to each of us in the group to construct a "scene," the story for Charles, and the group did fall silent, in almost nonverbal agreement, on the pictures we might be creating in our minds—a large suburban house, with a small boy wandering from one big room to the next, opening the kitchen door, sitting down in front of the TV, waiting for his parents.

As the year progressed, the teacher developed stronger rapport with both Charles and his parents. In individual conference, she confided that the parents were accepting her recommendations (such as arranging more play dates with classmates after school) and that, slowly, his social connectedness was developing. But it was through the speculations, the imaginings, that the teacher was able to create a picture of what his life might be like and how best she could address his needs. These shared imaginings also led the group to a discussion around the issue of problems facing "children of privilege"—and the importance of introducing the children to other value systems and social interactions within the school setting.

Issue Clarifiers/Group Support Stories

Isolation is of the most insidious problems in the teaching profession. In too many schools, teachers are expected to "shut the door," keep the children "under control" and do the required paperwork (until standardized testing month arrives, when all the new test-taking techniques are punted to the staff). Even in private schools this isolation can occur. For working teachers, conference group can be an empowering experience in group support.

Ann is an older woman teaching in a public school in Brooklyn. She came to teaching late in her career and is extremely idealistic and committed to the children. During her first years at the school, she was bolstered by a group of experienced and older teachers. The year of conference group, they had all retired or left for other sites, and Ann felt particularly bereft. Not only that, the replacement teachers were all young, inexperienced, and extremely aggressive in their outspoken criticism of administrative policies and, sometimes, the school population. One day in group, Ann said, "I just don't know how to be assertive. I know what's right for the children, but I can't bring myself to disagree with these new colleagues or the administration." Almost immediately, a spontaneous and sometimes wild and hilarious chain of stories emerged from group members about their own coping strategies with colleagues. Alina, also in her first year at a prestigious private school (although not a first-year teacher)

said that, despite the open setting, none of the teachers talked to each other and were very territorial over their children and materials. Alina said, "But I don't care. I say good morning to them anyway. If I go to the coffee table, I offer to bring them a cup. I ask to borrow their materials and do an exchange. Little by little, I'm training them. That's my way." Sally described a confrontation, in her first year of public school teaching, with a colleague who yelled at her in front of her children for allowing them to walk down the hall without being in a straight line! "I yelled right back at her!" said Sally. "I told her, these are my children and the only person who has the authority to tell me what to do with them is the principal!" These stories, direct from the reality of colleagues' working in schools, gave Ann other models to think about for her own situation. Later in the year, she began to tell us stories about her own new steps—initiating workshops on reading methodologies and voicing opposition to administration policies.

Discussion

Whether the issue is self-assertion, curriculum, child abuse, separation, children with special needs or others, the recounting and retelling of school-related experiences helps teacher in advisement to broaden their outlook and build professional insights and self-esteem.

In societies that rely upon an oral tradition, both children and adults are brought into critical stages of development through the relating of stories and myths by elders. In the case of children, these elders may be older children; in the case of brides-to-be, the guides may be older, married women, and so on. In any case, the stories or relevant practices taught relate specifically to the knowledge needed for that particular life passage or new situation.² In our more multi-layered and complex society, these initiation rites do occur, sometimes in ritual, but often in more diffuse or random settings. (The locker room comes to mind, or sleep-over parties for preadolescents. For adults, getting to know a new workplace means, essentially, learning the stories—all the interconnections that will enable that adult to function effectively and appropriately within the organization. Cafeterias, elevators, bathrooms, or even the ubiquitous drinking fountain are often choice locales for these ongoing initiations of new employees.)

Advisement offers something more to students—an opportunity to "hear themselves think," without being bound by the sometimes stringent protocol of the workplace (schools, day centers, or hospitals). In his book, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, Coles (1989) relates a conversation with William Carlos Williams, in which the old doctor/poet says to him, "Let's have

some heart-to-heart stories to tell each other, the folks who are teaching medicine and the folks who are learning it."

In advisement, we have the opportunity to experience a true community of learners such as Williams seems to be alluding to, in which the telling and sharing of stories enriches the context of our teaching, builds our fund of teacher lore, and validates who we are as evolving professionals and members of the educational (and human) community. ♦

Notes

1. All names of children and advisees are fictionalized for confidentiality.
2. A brief but informative discussion on this topic can be found in Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition as History*, Chapter 2, pp. 47-48.

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