

EDUCATION



IN A DEMOCRACY

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Democracy in Action: Teacher Narratives on Equity in the Classroom

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Honoring Teacher Voice as Professional Development: A Democratic Imperative

by Rhonda Jeffries, Terrance McAdoo & Michele Myers

Educators who are learning at every degree level, including pre- and in-service teachers, are often required to explore their professional voice through a plethora of methods courses stemming from various curriculum paradigms. One of the most powerful concepts covered in many of these courses comes from the qualitative research tradition of narrative inquiry that asks practitioners to first examine their personal perceptions as a means of understanding classrooms as educational spaces designed to promote and instill democracy. It is certainly in these learning environments that novice education students who are growing into teachers and experienced teachers who are growing into leaders grasp the power of narrative, their verbal and written perspectives, to profoundly drive educational outcomes. The teacher voice is consistently cited as one of the most meaningful contributors to impactful professional development that effectively addresses the contemporary goals of educational institutions (Hammersley-Fletcher, Clarke & McManus, 2018; Haug & Mork, 2021; Liefshitz, 2020). With teacher voice being a fundamental component of democracy, it is fitting that written teacher narratives, their perspectives through their stories, are featured in *Education in a Democracy* as professional development work supported by the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER). The teacher narratives included in this special issue support the four pillars intended to advance democracy in education and embody the mission of NNER to:

- Provide access to knowledge for all children (“equity and excellence”);
- Educate the young for thoughtful participation in a social and political democracy (“enculturation”);
- Base teaching on knowledge of the subjects taught, established principles of learning, and sensitivity to the unique potential of learners (“nurturing pedagogy”); and
- Take responsibility for improving the conditions for learning in P-12 schools, institutions of higher education and communities. (“stewardship”) (Goodlad, 1994).

With teacher voice being a fundamental component of democracy, it is fitting that written teacher narratives, their perspectives through their stories, are featured in *Education in a Democracy* as professional development work supported by the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER).

Furthermore, NNER’s recent partnership with the National Center for Clinical Practice in Educator Preparation (NCCPEP) helps to affirm a common purpose centered on highlighting the pedagogical expertise of educators via their “voices as the best advocates for our nation’s children . . . unapologetically and boldly” (NCCPEP, n.p., 2021). These timely teacher narratives highlight six teacher voices as they critically examine their professional practices and their greater purpose as educators.

This collection of teacher narratives articulates the clarity that comes from an exploration of one’s experience and the acceptance of multiple perspectives as an essential aspect of professional development in teacher education. These manifestations of teacher voice describe a process that drives teachers to achieve equity and excellence in the classroom; to pursue learning opportunities that challenge their various positionalities; to design curricula that are culturally relevant and nurture all students to understand systemic oppression; and to adopt a stance of responsibility to challenge those identified policies and procedures that replicate oppression and deny democracy in education.



Teachers Expressing Equity and Excellence

Many practicing educators reluctantly acknowledge that they are unprepared to effectively teach for equity and excellence and even more hesitantly admit that they are not aware of the manifold ways that systemic oppression is present in policies and practices that govern their teaching. Teacher narrative offered our featured educators a space to work through these realizations and confidently explore their limitations and more importantly, their growth as educators working for democracy. Recognizing limitations in teacher practice is the first step to addressing strategies for growth. When Jessie Guest, Program Manager of the Carolina Transition to Teaching Residency Program, noticed “a teacher that wasn’t listening with her eyes and missed Jacob’s desire to learn, a teacher who is doing the best she can but lacking tools of awareness and an understanding of how to see this particular child” she recognized the inherent lack of equity in the teacher’s response to this student and the inability of the student to achieve excellence under the given classroom circumstances. In response to instances like this, she and her colleagues created a dual-purpose social-emotional learning professional development series aimed at self-reflection. This self-introspection was designed to clearly have teachers examine their practices and to “[learn] to see the impact of getting to know their students — to see their students with more than their eyes.”

Touching on the first pillar of advancing democracy by providing access to all children, Assistant Principal Roy Blakeney painstakingly deconstructed the discomfort he experienced by uncovering his eyes to institutional racism in his narrative when he stated, “I was unable to comprehend that I could be part of something so insidious.” Finding his father’s voice as the seed that planted his discomfort, Roy accepted the opportunities to “make a few folks uncomfortable with the hope that we can . . . cause them to seek to understand how they can take action to diminish the effects of racism in our schools.” These teachers overtly adopted a stance of responsibility to effectively address embedded inequities that crush the culture of democracy upon which every act of education should be built.

Statements of Social Enculturation for Democracy

Realizing that she was functioning with blinders on after almost two decades in the profession, secondary science teacher, Stephanie Bailey, “started seeing the underlying presence of race in almost every aspect of American life” which made her further “confused as to why, after 18 years in the classroom, I had never heard anything about culturally relevant pedagogy.” Her life-altering professional development experience removed the veil and enabled her to see the ways in which many educational practices and policies are antithetical to the intended goals of education for democracy. She also began to shift the culture of her class to support democracy by “approach[ing] my classes from a place of learning as well as teaching. I ask my students who they are and learn about their experiences. I ask their parents who their children are to get to know them better. I tailor my lessons around the people who are in my room. By tapping into the experiences and expertise of my students,” Bailey was able to decenter the white, Eurocentric curriculum that drives most classrooms in the United States and begin to highlight the diverse cultural voices represented in a democracy.

Bethany Reilly, early childhood and elementary special education teacher, used her voice and shifted the cultural landscape to expand her classroom beyond the neurotypical student experience. Creating a culture of inclusivity, she actively engaged her efforts in Project Au-Some where she realized that by “providing exposure we can do great things, but it doesn’t end there. Exposure isn’t enough. We leverage this amazing opportunity to actually teach students about disabilities and diversity within those experiences.” The critical aspect of cultural shifts is acknowledging the time needed to earnestly affect ingrained behaviors and alter long held and unexamined beliefs. Project Au-Some addresses this barrier to creating a culture for democracy in that it spans multiple grade levels and instructs students “that they have the power to change lives and understand that their words and actions have lasting meaning.” Her statement holds true for students and teachers alike and addresses the second pillar of advancing democracy.



Practices of Nurturing Pedagogy

Teaching content knowledge couched in compassion for students' cultural diversity comprises the basis of the third pillar of advancing democracy, and Brandy Meyers, fourth/fifth grade teacher, tackled this task with her TED Talks assignment. These powerful and highly personal student creations enabled Brandy to address mandated state standards and more importantly to increase student engagement since they "had the opportunity to authentically learn from one another. I watched the students in my classroom shift from shock to understanding and empathy." This narrative provides further evidence (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Celik, 2019; Jennings, 2018) that grounding curriculum in principles of equity and justice do not detract from the delivery of content knowledge but rather increase effectiveness through student commitment to the work in and out of class.

Stephanie Bailey's voice also spoke to the third pillar when her narrative questioned: "What could I do as a science teacher?" Her answer to, "teach science framed around social justice," definitively sought to make field specific, standards-based knowledge culturally relevant. Her curriculum decision to use student-centered inquiry as the starting point for units resulted in molecule lessons on food deserts, coastal environment lessons on Gullah peoples, and DNA modeling lessons on academic property theft and the Innocence Project. And again, classroom engagement was positively impacted with students experiencing the power of being involved in the democratic process.

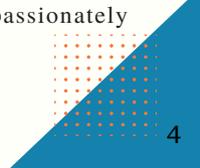
Showcasing Stewardship

As educators, we are all entrusted to the careful and responsible guidance of the students with whom we work and this stewardship, the basis of pillar four for advancing democracy, is evident in Bethany Reilly's Project Au-some. The magnitude of this work not only reminded teachers to promote opportunities for learning but also had profound consequence on elementary and emerging middle level students: "While I worked hard to ensure students had opportunities to build and grow themselves, I also realized through listening that this could become much more than we ever imagined. We discovered by teaching about behaviors and reflecting on their experiences, it has empowered the fifth graders to

lead." The project instilled a sense of citizenship and responsibility for others and fully developed the students' sense of responsibility to sustain a state of democracy.

In the role of steward, Matherine Dixon spent her career guiding and supporting the improvement of learning conditions for students in her position as teacher and currently as literacy coach. Her narrative expressed this agenda as she stated, "I taught my students to be lifelong learners and conditioned myself to do the same. Each time change reintroduced itself, I embraced it. After all, it was an opportunity to learn something new." Certainly, in her quest to meet the needs of all students using equity pedagogies for democracy, she continued to recognize the changing landscape to which teachers must be accountable. Experiencing racial equity battle fatigue, she later realized the importance of self-care for educators on this demanding journey (Acuff, 2018; Winters, 2020). She stated, "Change is a pathway for our journey. Respect it. Embrace it. Yes, there will be grief and mourning of at least an idea that we've nourished, so take the time to celebrate what once was, but don't stay there." As teachers change throughout their professional practices, a priority of being good stewards of the profession fundamentally means taking care of oneself first in order to effectively take care of others. Matherine's call for personal change is echoed across the teacher narratives in this special issue as each of our contributors are shining examples of stewards of education for democracy.

In its quest to sustain a culture of democracy, The National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) supports the professional development of educators through the sharing of best practices intended to overcome limitations and barriers that prohibit the maintenance and evolution of justice in schools and communities. Furthermore, NNER acknowledges the role of teacher voice in school improvement and supports evidence that suggests teachers who voice their experiences and expertise are more invested in their careers, more likely to set and reach goals that positively impact education outcomes, and more likely to become leaders and create student leaders who influence the preservation of democracy (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Quaglia & Lande, 2016). We hope these teachers' voices inspire you to tap into your own voice as a source of professional development as you continue to teach for equity and excellence, create a culture in schools that supports democracy, and compassionately lead toward a just society.





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Can You Hear Me?

by Jessie Guest, Program Manager, Carolina Transition to Teaching Residency Program

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

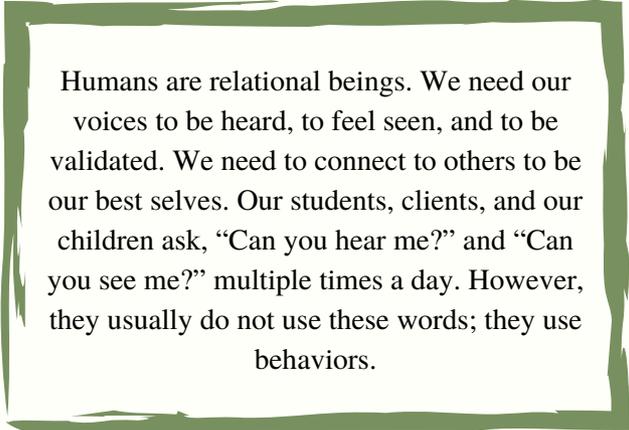
These are the first things we hear as students log in to their virtual classrooms, clients log in for virtual telehealth counseling sessions, or our colleagues log in to virtual meetings. Due to the pandemic, many of our interactions with others now take place in a virtual space. However, “*Can you hear me? Can you see me?*” are not questions that are unique to the use of virtual platforms.

Humans are relational beings. We need our voices to be heard, to feel seen, and to be validated. We need to connect to others to be our best selves. Our students, clients, and our children ask, “Can you hear me?” and “Can you see me?” multiple times a day. However, they usually do not use these *words*; they use *behaviors*.

I am reminded of the many children I worked with as a full-time professional counselor. One in particular asked “*Can you hear me?*” and “*Can you see me?*” to every adult he encountered.

Jacob was a tall, skinny, five-year-old, African American boy in kindergarten. After a couple of weeks meeting with Jacob in my office, I was asked to observe him in his classroom as his behaviors were escalating. Jacob had transferred to a new school halfway through the first quarter. His teachers described him as loud, aggressive, disrespectful, and a distraction to his classmates. His principal said he was not completing any of his work, his behaviors were erratic and unpredictable, and that she believed he was “psychotic” and in need of medication.

On observation day I enter the back of his classroom and sit in a corner. Jacob was not aware I was coming and did not see me enter the room. I watch Jacob sit calmly and quietly at his desk in the back row with a piece of writing paper and pencil. He is watching his teacher explain to the class that they are practicing writing their names. She instructs the class to begin practicing and says she will stop them in about five minutes to move on to the next writing activity.



Humans are relational beings. We need our voices to be heard, to feel seen, and to be validated. We need to connect to others to be our best selves. Our students, clients, and our children ask, “Can you hear me?” and “Can you see me?” multiple times a day. However, they usually do not use these words; they use behaviors.

Jacob begins writing his name. After a few marks, he lets out a small huff and starts erasing. He begins writing again and very soon after, erasing...again. He continues with the process of writing and erasing, writing and erasing, writing and erasing, for the entire five minutes. Each time he stops, he lets out a small huff or pounds his fist on the desk in frustration. After the five minutes are up, his teacher asks the students to stop and take a seat on the floor in front of the chalkboard to transition to the next activity. Jacob, (without raising his hand) says, “I’m not finished with my name.” His teacher responds, “You had plenty of time to write your name. You shouldn’t have wasted your time.” Jacob replies, “I kept messing up. I need more time.” His teacher asks him to join the rest of the class on the floor. Jacob gets angry, rips his paper, and storms to the other side of the room where he sits on the floor away from the other children. He says he is going to read instead of listen to her “stupid directions.”

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

The teacher continues the lesson and has the children help her spell out words like pumpkin, orange, and Halloween as she writes them on the board. Jacob continues to sit on the floor, removed from the class, book open but upside down. As the teacher works with the class spelling out words, Jacob peeks over the book at the board and follows along, mouthing the letters to himself.



After all three words are on the board, the students return to their seats to copy the words onto their papers. Jacob returns to his seat slowly and with his head down mumbles to the teacher, “I need a new paper.” His teacher responds, “Why did you rip up the other paper?” Jacob replies, “I was mad.” His teacher continues to tell him that he needs to treat his things with respect as well as respect her and then hands him a new paper.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Jacob stares at the board from his seat in the back and gets up to move closer. His teacher asks him to sit down. Jacob explains that he can’t see as he continues to walk to the board. Jacob’s teacher walks over to Jacob and tells him he needs to sit down and if he doesn’t he will get his star moved from yellow to red (it was already moved from green earlier in the day). Jacob throws his paper, kicks the desk in front him, and turns around to walk away.

Then he sees me.

He sits down and begins to cry. I walk over to Jacob and he immediately asks me, “What are you doing here?” I tell him I am here to see him. He stops crying and shows me his cubby. We move to the side of the room and color together. I ask what the other students are doing. He tells me about the writing activity and he says it was “stupid” and he “can’t do it right.” I ask if he wants to do it with me and he says, “Okay.” As Jacob works, he gets frustrated and stops. I provide encouragement, reminders that it is practice and doesn’t need to be perfect, and that I can see he is working hard. He ends up finishing the activity and is excited to show his teacher all the words he has written.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

What I see is a little boy trying to do his work, wanting to do his work, but struggling and getting frustrated.

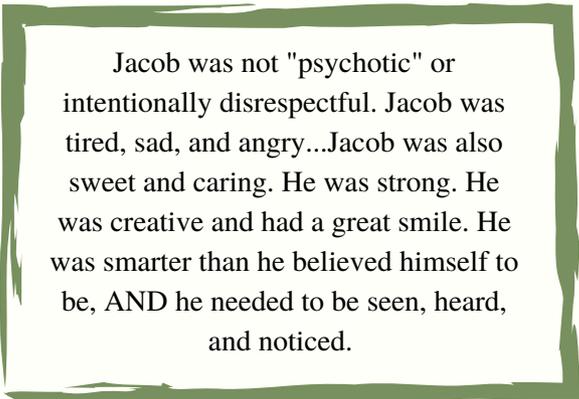
What I hear is a child asking for what he needs with words, body language, and behaviors.

What I see is a child who wants to learn.

What I see is a child paying attention even if it isn’t in the same way as the other students.

What I see is an emotionally drained and frustrated child who struggles with self-esteem.

What I also see is an overwhelmed teacher — a teacher who has many children in her class with individual needs, a teacher that wasn’t listening with her eyes and missed Jacob’s desire to learn, a teacher who is doing the best she can but lacking tools of awareness and an understanding of *how to see* this child.



Jacob was not "psychotic" or intentionally disrespectful. Jacob was tired, sad, and angry...Jacob was also sweet and caring. He was strong. He was creative and had a great smile. He was smarter than he believed himself to be, AND he needed to be seen, heard, and noticed.

Jacob transferred to the school in October because his mother was unable to care for him and his siblings. Jacob’s mother brought her children to the Department of Social Services while she attempted to find a better job and housing for their family. Jacob was separated from all his siblings and moved to three different foster homes in less than two months. Jacob witnessed domestic violence, neglect, and abuse from his mother’s previous boyfriends from a young age.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Jacob was not "psychotic" or intentionally disrespectful. Jacob was tired, sad, and angry. He missed his siblings and his mother. He was adjusting to being in school for the first time. He lacked consistency. Jacob was also sweet and caring. He was strong. He was creative and had a great smile. He was smarter than he believed himself to be, AND he needed to be seen, heard, and noticed.

As a professional counselor and a counselor educator, I have learned, (and continue to learn), to listen with my eyes and not just my ears. I try to see what the child is communicating through their behaviors or actions. Is the child acting out in class truly angry at his classmate for knocking his elbow as he is writing or is he tired and irritable because

he doesn't sleep well at his dad's new house? Is the child that can't sit still, intentionally not focusing on the teacher's lesson *or* is she anxious or scared due to living in a home with domestic violence?

As the Program Manager for the Carolina Transition to Teaching Residency at the University of South Carolina, I was unsure how my professional background would be helpful in a teacher education program. However, I quickly saw the need and the desire of our teaching residents to connect with their students and attend to their students through a more holistic lens. The residents were bursting with passion to help the children in their classes and eager to build a sense of community in their own classrooms. To answer this need my colleagues and I created a social-emotional learning professional development series throughout their time in the program. The focus of the social-emotional learning series is twofold. First, the residents are learning to understand their own social-emotional needs. By better understanding their own social emotional needs, they are better able to understand their reactions to students, increase empathy and patience, and enhance curiosity about their students. Second, the residents are learning how to facilitate social emotional learning in their own classrooms. The residents are learning to see the impact of getting to know their students — *to see their students with more than their eyes.*

Although it is not the teacher's job or focus to provide counsel to students, teachers are on the front lines. Teachers are the ones that know the pulse of the school and student body. During the school year, teachers are the adults that interact with children the most. If aware, teachers have the power to notice subtle and overt changes in students and connect them to those who can help. Teachers are more than educational tools or vessels of knowledge; they are the eyes, ears, and voice of our youth. AND they need tools to help them see, hear, and advocate for our children.

Teachers are more than educational tools or vessels of knowledge — they are the eyes, ears, and voice of our youth. AND they need the tools to help them see, hear, and advocate for our children.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

All eyes to the front of the room, please.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Please stop fidgeting with your pencil.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

Please keep your head up and not on your desk.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

That's not the way we speak to our classmates. Please apologize for being rude.

“Can you hear me? Can you see me?”

“Can you see that I am nervous? Stressed? Tired? Hungry?”

“Do you know the things I am responsible for at home? That I want to be here, and I like your class? That I want to learn? That I have many strengths and not just needs?”

“Hear me.”

“See me.”

“Know me.”



Jessie Guest received her Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision from the University of South Carolina (UofSC). Jessie is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, teaches graduate courses in the Counselor Education Program at UofSC, and is the Program Manager of the Carolina Transition to Teaching Residency Program focused on teacher preparation and retention in rural counties throughout South Carolina.



Why Comfortable is a Four-Letter Word

by Roy Blankeney, Assistant Principal, Dreher High School, Richland County School District One

“Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.” John Lewis (2020)

I had no idea that attending a conference in 2019 would cause so much “good” trouble.

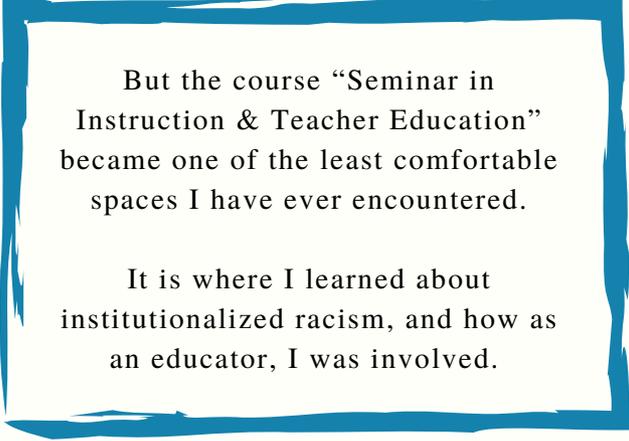
As a fairly shy person in crowds, I felt a new freedom being around so many people wearing the same nametag. This shared comradery made it easy to speak with complete strangers and provided a sense of security. So, while speaking with a group of attendees I mentioned I was with The University of South Carolina’s (UofSC) *Professional Development Schools Network*. The group told me one of their friends had accepted a position with the UofSC, and I felt comfortable inviting this stranger to have coffee with me when she moved to Columbia. Rarely do people take messages back to others from casual encounters, and rarely do complete strangers take you up on an offer to have coffee.

This one did, and my days of being fairly comfortable with my world came to an end. This was the beginning of my “good” trouble.

Meeting this complete stranger and forming an instant friendship with her led to a discussion about my abandoned doctoral work. She inspired me to go back to work on my doctoral degree and offered to become my dissertation chair. Working with my new doctoral chair required a different academic focus and structure to my daily life. It meant returning to class and moving away from my comfortable beliefs. As an adult learner, I generally find the classroom to be a comfortable environment where it is easy to form new relationships. We may come from different places and life experiences, but in class, we come together to learn and focus on a shared subject.

But the course “Seminar in Instruction & Teacher Education” became one of the least comfortable spaces I have ever encountered.

It is where I learned about institutionalized racism, and how as an educator, I was involved.



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It is where I learned about institutionalized racism, and how as an educator, I was involved.

This class resulted in zero comfort and was one of the wildest emotional rides ever. The class demographics included a white female professor, two of my black female colleagues from our school district, one black male, and another white female who had a black husband and son who joined our discussions. There were also two white males — me and a much younger man. These nine people took away my comfort, and I love them for doing it.

Throughout the course we focused on understanding why students of color do not succeed at the same rates as white students and how white supremacy and colonialist perspectives are overrepresented in schools. It became apparent that most of my classmates believed that I was a product of white privilege and not hard work.

I was hurt and confused.

I went home after the first three hours and told my wife that I had made a serious mistake and felt attacked. I discussed dropping the course and telling my new dissertation chair that I had reconsidered. I was unable to comprehend that I could be part of something so insidious.

To make things worse, my church was entering a time of reflection of racist practices called “Gracism,” and I had been invited by our new African American minister to be a part of the initial

conversation. If I declined this opportunity, I would be turning my back on more than one person who believed that I may have something different to offer.

Still, I could not wrap my head around the thought that I could be considered racist.

But a memory of my father changed my mind. He used the word “privileged” to describe white people 40 years ago. He tried to explain the idea to me then, but I was a new teacher with a new wife and had other things to worry about. I needed to continue my privileged and very comfortable life. I was not unlike other white folks cited in an article from the *Pew Research Center* indicating that only 53% of white people think that the United States still has work to do to make equity real in our country, and 38% feel as if no more changes are needed.

My father was wise enough to know that he needed to listen to and consider others’ opinions and ideas. He welcomed being challenged and often used his wide understanding of different topics to challenge my brother and me during supper. The “discussions” were often spirited, flustered my mother, made small children cry, and ran off more than one of my brother’s girlfriends. We continued until we had exhausted the topic, had dessert, and retired to the den to enjoy the rest of the evening. Now, years have gone by, and my father is no longer here to bring further enlightenment. But the memory caused me to see what an opportunity I would be throwing away if I walked away.

I remembered what *uncomfortable* felt like and knew I could do it again.

I persevered through the doctoral program and engaged in deep work through the church. I believe that my understanding has grown enough to make me a beginning “anti-racist.” I can hear the word “racist” without becoming angry, even if it is being used to describe me. Instead of walking away from a conversation, I seek to understand and then ask for help in learning how to change or explain myself when misunderstood.

Our staff is engaged in ongoing work to become *trauma-informed*. We are also taking the energy and

This is why I believe comfortable can be a four-letter word. When we are comfortable, we tend to leave things alone. We can say, “That’s not my problem,” or “America gives everyone the same opportunity.”

Words that allow us to remain aloof, disconnected, and uninvolved.

empathy developed in that process to focus on dismantling institutionalized racism in our school. I hope that by understanding the trauma that racism causes, our staff will find new energy for the work and the reflection necessary to have this difficult conversation.

This is why I believe comfortable can be a four-letter word. When we are comfortable, we tend to leave things alone. We can say, “That’s not my problem,” or “America gives everyone the same opportunity.”

Words that allow us to remain aloof, disconnected, and uninvolved.

Comfort can lead to being complacent.

I plan to make a few folks *uncomfortable* with the hope that we can provide an environment where their resilience will sustain their interest and cause them to seek to understand how they can take action to diminish the effects of racism in our schools.

Are you comfortable? We should not be while any type of racism exists.

We are teachers. We are used to being *uncomfortable*. Look for ways you can personally change your approach to be more culturally relevant, inclusive, and actively anti-racist. Start a hard conversation in a safe space, be open to new ideas about institutionalized racism, take your new understanding, and make a difference.

Get into some good trouble.



Roy Blakeney is an Assistant Principal at Dreher High School in Richland County School District One in Columbia, South Carolina. He is responsible for recruiting and developing teachers, mentoring new faculty, maintaining teacher certification, and evaluation of faculty. He has served as the Professional Development School administrator in the University of South Carolina’s partnership since 2002.

Finding a New Lens: How Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Shifted My Practice

by Stephanie Bailey, Science teacher, Airport High School, Lexington County School District Two

An atom is an atom.
A cell is a cell.
The tides follow the path of the moon.
Gravity pulls objects toward the earth.
There's no culture involved. Right?
Well, maybe.

Let me set the scene. Fall of 2017, there I was, 40 years old, 18 years of teaching high school science under my belt, and in my first semester of the doctoral program in Teaching and Learning at UofSC. I saw a flyer for a symposium topic that I didn't know much about, but I thought it would provide a chance to network with others.

Little did I know that this experience that would set the path for my doctoral program and change how I viewed the world.

I sat down and Dr. Gloria Boutte introduced Dr. Lamar Johnson, a professor from Michigan State University. Dr. Johnson started presenting about the responsibility of teachers to ensure that Black students have the chance to connect with their culture and be seen and heard within the context of their learning. I listened to all the creativity the other participants shared.

Everything sounded amazing. The possibilities seemed endless for ELA, social studies, and the arts — but science? I mean, it doesn't matter what culture someone is from, an atom is still an atom, and a cell is still a cell, right?

So, with complete confidence I declared, "But I teach science. It's facts and objective observations. This doesn't fit in my class."

With care and tact, Dr. Johnson asked me, "But *who* does the research? Who gets the funding? And for what reason?" Also, he asked did I know that race isn't even biological?

Hold up! What?

The symposium continued with other people sharing and asking questions, but I'm not sure I heard much after that. I said my goodbyes, thanked Dr. Johnson, and walked to the parking lot. I got in my car and headed home. My mind was reeling; I had so much to think about. I was buzzing with possibilities and feeling disoriented. How had I missed this? How did I not recognize that everything we teach is pretty much from only one perspective? This short, two-hour encounter would create a crack in my awareness that I would seek to break wide open over the next several years. It would ultimately be the greatest influence impacting my classroom instruction and set the path for my dissertation work. This encounter completely changed not only how I view the classroom, but the world.

Monday morning after the symposium I walked into my school, and although it was the same classroom it had been for years, with the same students I had known for months, it felt different. I looked at the faces looking back at me. I had always prided myself on knowing my students and on being compassionate and understanding. But could I truly know them if I didn't understand their experiences? Could I truly understand who they were if I didn't know the first thing about their culture?

How had I missed this? How did I not recognize that everything we teach is pretty much from only one perspective? This short, two-hour encounter would create a crack in my awareness that I would seek to break wide open over the next several years.

Dr. Johnson's voice sat on my shoulder (just like in the cartoons), nagging at me as I taught. I heard inner doubts nudging me to consider what I

presented and question whether it was the best way or the only way. I heard suggestions to consider other scientists and perspectives worthy of study. As registration for the next semester approached, I signed up for courses on Educating African American Students and Critical Race Theory. And I started seeing the underlying presence of race in almost every aspect of American life.

I was hooked!

I was also confused as to why, after 18 years in the classroom, I had never heard anything about culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP).

Enter CEEAAS: The Center for Education and Equity of African American Students.

The annual conference for Equity in Education was my first opportunity to network and learn what other teachers were doing in their classrooms surrounding CRP. What could I do as a science teacher? My mission became clear: teach science framed around social justice.

I started adjusting my lessons, adding perspectives, and paying more attention. I included the usual references to Black and Latinx scientific contributions, but we went further and deeper. My students studied not only the coastal ecosystems but how they would be managed from an Indigenous perspective had colonization not stolen their lands. We studied genetic inheritance and critically analyzed the use of traits like skin color and hair color as signifiers of race. And my students? They responded with variations of, “We never talk about stuff like this in other classes.” Kids who were quiet started perking up. They started bringing examples from their lives, past experiences, and personal observations to science class.

Now, I approach my classes from a place of learning as well as teaching. I ask my students who they are and learn about their experiences. I ask their parents who their children are to get to know them better. I tailor my lessons around the people who are in the room. By tapping into the experiences and expertise of my students — as well as the people who aren’t in the

This shift has given purpose to my doctoral research: how do students connect science to issues of social justice? And it’s given me a relevant and inclusive focus for my classroom instruction.

room — we acknowledge the voices and perspectives of others. I also relinquish control where possible to follow their lead. When a student asked why people with fatal disorders continue to have children, we did a study of eugenics in the United States from the perspective of inheritance traits.

Instead of just studying the molecules within our food, we connect the nutritional values to *food deserts*. Rather than studying the development along beaches, we study the cultures who depend on them: like the *Gullah* peoples of the Southeast. Instead of learning that James Watson is one half of the duo credited with discovering the structure of DNA, we critically analyze not only his nefarious theft of the work of *Rosalind Franklin* but also his blatantly *racist public comments*. When studying and modeling how DNA samples can be compared, we connect this content to the important work of the *Innocence Project*.

This shift has given purpose to my doctoral research: how do students connect science to issues of social justice? And it’s given me a relevant and inclusive focus for my classroom instruction.

And what about you, fellow teacher?

Has your district offered PD in culturally relevant teaching?

What perspectives are taught in your class?

Whose culture is represented? Whose is missing?

Need a place to get started or ready to learn more?

Check out the resources at *Learning for Justice* where you can find lesson plans for all subjects and grade levels.

What will you do?



Stephanie Bailey has taught secondary science for 21 years. She was a 2017 Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching finalist for South Carolina. She is currently working on her dissertation focused on using social justice issues to frame scientific instruction with high school students. You can follow her on Twitter @SBaileyinSC.

Everyone Can Be “Au-Some”

by Bethany Reilly, Special education teacher, Harbison West Elementary, Lexington & Richland County School District Five

As I walk down the hall of Harbison West Elementary school, I hear a large commotion coming from the area by the cafeteria. It’s past 1 p.m. so I know it’s not lunchtime anymore, but the noise continues to grow. I hear laughter, cheering, and music playing. Once I turn the corner and get a view of the cafeteria, I see a group of fifth-grade students playing with a parachute, bowling balls rolling down a line toward small plastic pins, and bubbles in the air. I have just walked in on Project Au-some’s end-of-year celebration.

I immediately catch the eyes of a student we will call Dylan, whom I have watched struggle academically and behaviorally through the years. He is a quiet force to be reckoned with. You know those students, the ones too “big and bad” to be doing anything at school. When the fifth graders began visiting the preschool classroom, Dylan was often apprehensive and disengaged.

I scan the rest of the cafeteria and watch as the fifth grade students take their “Little Buddies,” (our preschool special education students) through different stations set up throughout the cafeteria. I smile. I look back at Dylan as he approaches Laura. Laura is one of the preschool students who uses a wheelchair and has severe delays in communication and motor skills. She is sitting on the sidelines with her aide. After Dylan and Laura’s aide exchange words, Dylan takes Laura through the parachute. I stand there speechless — I’m in awe of what is taking place.

Dylan was the only student that day that noticed Laura wasn’t engaged in any of the activities. Her aide was sitting with her on the sidelines and having her “watch” the fun. For Dylan, that wasn’t enough. He became her sidekick during the celebration and ensured that she was an active participant for the remaining stations and games.

This is one of the many stories of fifth graders at Harbison West who have participated in Project Au-Some. Students continue to grow their social-emotional skills through exposure, experience, and teaching.

Exposure isn’t enough. We leverage this amazing opportunity to teach students about disabilities and diversity within those experiences.

Project Au-Some began in 2015. It is a concerted effort to build empathy and acceptance within fifth grade students, as well as build social skills within preschoolers with special needs. The purpose of *Project Au-Some* is to take opportunities teachers create for exposure and teach practical social emotional learning skills through these experiences. Our exposure begins with teacher-led activities within the classroom. By providing exposure we can do great things, but it doesn’t end there. Exposure isn’t enough. We leverage this amazing opportunity to teach students about disabilities and diversity within those experiences.



After each visit, I (as the special education teacher) take the students to a quiet area to reflect. Through these reflections teachable moments surface. I begin by asking open-ended questions including: What did you like? What surprised you? What scared you? What would you do next time? After an open discussion, each “Big Buddy” has an opportunity to draft a written reflection. In these reflections, students began asking for more and advocated to plan and teach lessons. While I worked hard to ensure students had opportunities to build and grow themselves, I also realized through listening that this could become much more than we ever imagined. By teaching about behaviors and reflecting on their experiences, it empowered the fifth graders to lead.

These images capture a few of the lessons developed after choosing an objective from a list of developmental skills, then planned and taught by the fifth graders. But this was only the beginning. The students began to research different disabilities and found that our library housed only two books that featured students with disabilities. We wrote grants to gather more books and the students created the PAL (Project Au-Some Learning) Library that now has more than 250 books.

Throughout the years our fifth graders have chosen to be community activists for change. Each year they select a different organization to write to for their opinion writing project.

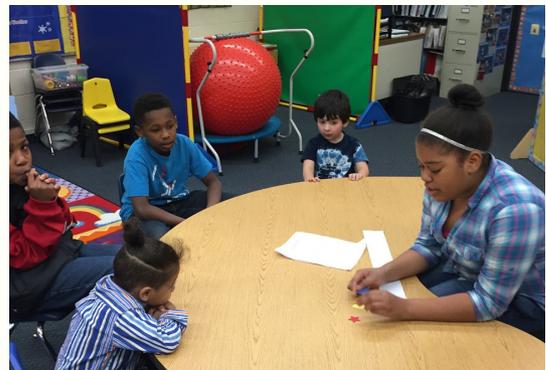
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A lesson plan in progress. The objective was to support the developmental area of gross motor skills, specifically focusing on access of the stairs and walking up and down reciprocally.



This lesson was developed to address fine motor skills and letter knowledge. The fifth graders had students identify and write the letters in their names.



This lesson targeted copying and extending patterns. Students started on the floor by creating patterns with musical instruments, then moved to the table to use colors and shapes to create and extend patterns on a sentence strip.

In the spring of 2017, our fifth graders learned about the adaptation of one of their favorite books, “Wonder” by R.J. Polacco. Each student wrote to the *Children’s Craniofacial Association (CCA)* requesting our school host a premier of the movie. In the Fall of 2018 we received a call from the director of the CCA and became a premier presenter. We raised money and Project Au-Some provided a free viewing for more than 700 students and families. Our students' letters to CCA were displayed to promote the work they did to make changes within their community.

Students were invited back to experience the day, demonstrate that they have the power to change lives, and understand that their words and actions hold lasting meaning.

Project Au-Some students have changed minds, lives, and perspectives. It all started with taking opportunities for exposure and creating moments to intentionally teach. Not only did these opportunities provide a platform for action, but they also changed the fifth graders’ perspectives. Students were given an empathy survey at the beginning and end of the year to help document their experiences and measure how their mindsets changed. In three years of documentation, we have seen an average of 78% growth in our

fifth graders. We have seen students like Dylan grow from 15 to 35 points on the empathy scale.

Students are continuing to write their stories while growing in their compassion and empathy because a group of teachers knew exposure alone wasn’t enough.

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Have you given your students the ability to learn about diversity and differing abilities? Have you given your students the ability to make connections across grade levels? If not, I encourage you to give your students the opportunity to lead and learn about diversity and disabilities. The opportunity to ask questions and be exposed to others that are different from themselves. The opportunity to be agents of change.

It starts with you.



After earning her degree in Special Education from Winthrop University, Bethany Reilly entered the classroom and found her passion for working with students on the Autism Spectrum. Bethany has been teaching for the past 14 years, working with students ranging from early childhood to elementary special education. She continues to support the inclusion and acceptance of all students and teaches diversity awareness school-wide with the Project Au-Some team at Harbison West Elementary in Columbia, South Carolina.



Power Up by Giving Up Power

by Brandy Meyers, Fourth and fifth grade teacher, Oak Point Elementary, Lexington & Richland County School District Five

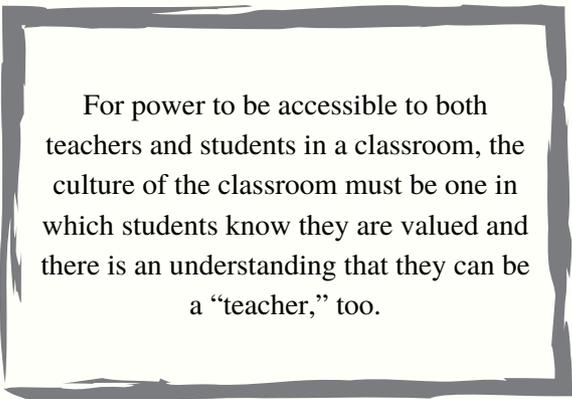
In May of 2020, my fourth grade students presented their *TED Talks* to our class via Google Meet. This was something my students had poured their hearts and souls into for four months. I was not going to let a pandemic stop our class experts from sharing their knowledge on topics they were passionate about. When I started this process, I had no idea how it was going to turn out. I had no idea that Omar, one of my students, was going to teach me by sharing an understanding and perspective that I had never considered before.

Omar's topic for his TED Talk was xenophobia. Omar is Muslim. As he prepared for and presented his talk, he openly shared his own and others' experiences with racism and anti-Muslim acts. His pain and sadness about this hatred was evident through the words he chose, the way he spoke, and the emotions he showed as he shared his thoughts. Giving Omar the time and space to research a topic and the power to have a voice taught all of us what it is like to be Muslim in America.

Today, there is an educational movement focused on student-centered learning. As a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Technology at the University of South Carolina, I have focused my research on utilizing inquiry to deepen student understanding on topics that are personal to them while also addressing the standards. Inquiry is one way to make learning student-centered, as it allows students to share in the holding of power regarding knowledge in our classroom. This is accomplished by the teacher removing themselves as the "knower" of all information.

When I positioned myself as a learner alongside my students, I gave them power to utilize inquiry, to become experts on topics, and to be the primary holders of knowledge.

TED Talks allowed my students to draw on their own experiences, knowledge, and passions to choose topics they wanted to learn more about. They became class experts on real-world problems and issues as they utilized the inquiry process, and they developed voices that were truly heard and honored. Allowing my students to share in the power paid off as students were engaged and had the opportunity to authentically learn from one another. I watched the students in my classroom shift from shock to understanding and empathy as Omar shared his personal and heartfelt TED Talk. This meaningful moment would have never happened if I was the one holding all the power and delivering the information.



For power to be accessible to both teachers and students in a classroom, the culture of the classroom must be one in which students know they are valued and there is an understanding that they can be a "teacher," too.

For power to be accessible to both teachers and students in a classroom, the culture of the classroom must be one in which students know they are valued and there is an understanding that they can be a "teacher" too. This culture evolves through mutual respect for one another, allowing time to talk and share, and honoring and celebrating differences. For me, a white woman, I understand that I will never have some of the experiences that the students in my class will. Having a classroom culture of acceptance and inclusivity allows us to learn from one another.



It creates a space for all students to hear other voices and perspectives. This results in achievement and engagement.

As Omar prepared for his TED Talk, he touched my heart during a writing conference as he spoke about the stigmatism associated with 9/11 and Muslims in America. He shared his frustration that his name was the same name as one of the hijackers of the airplanes. His love for America is deep, and he was hurt by the events of that day and his own connection to it. I learned so much from Omar as I gained understanding about the Muslim experience through his eyes. The learning for me extended beyond the walls of the school as Omar and his family taught me about Ramadan and invited me to have a glimpse into their beliefs and traditions.

We, as teachers, have so much to learn from our students. If schools truly want to be about their students and their learning, then they need to give students time, space, and power to become experts on topics that matter to them. Students need to know we will listen to their authentic voices and that they will be heard. They need to know that we, their teachers, want to learn from them. By doing this, students can have real ownership of their learning and can become powerful lifelong learners.

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Watch Omar's TED Talk by clicking the image above.



Brandy Meyers is a 4th-5th grade teacher at Oak Pointe Elementary School in School District 5 of Lexington and Richland Counties. Brandy received her undergraduate degree in Elementary Education and a master's in Language and Literacy from the University of South Carolina. In 2021, she earned her doctorate in Educational Practice and Innovation from the University of South Carolina. Brandy enjoys being at a University of South Carolina PDS school and learning alongside her students, interns, and colleagues.



When the Spirit Speaks: My Battle with Change

by Matherine Dixon, Literacy Coach, Arden Elementary, Richland County School District One

Have you ever loved something so much that it made you crazy? Perhaps not in the sense of being deranged, but out of your mind. Maybe even literally?

I was a teacher. A song-singing, esteem-building, data-analyzing teacher. I poured everything I had into my chosen profession, and I reaped the benefits. Being with my students gave me energy, and that energy fueled more creative ways to reach them. Throughout my eleven years as an educator, that never changed.

That never changed.

The legislation changed. The standards changed. My schools changed. I changed states.

There was always change.

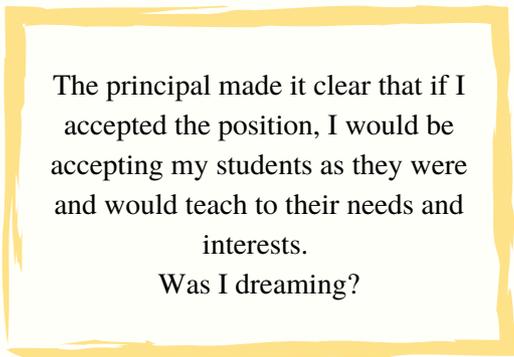
So, I taught my students to be lifelong learners and conditioned myself to do the same. Each time change reintroduced itself, I embraced it. After all, it was an opportunity to learn something new.

Then one day, the turns of each change left me emotionally entangled and sobbing on my classroom floor. In that moment, my personal expectations of motherhood became the bricks that weighed on my chest, while each task at work built the walls that enclosed me. The safety net that I crafted from tenacity, perseverance, and flexibility crumbled. And there I was, drowning in obligation and sinking in a pit of change.

How did I get here? How could this be happening to me? Was I dreaming?

As I stand in the gift of hindsight, I now realize that I should have seen it coming. My behavior patterns were shifting around the same time I experienced my meltdown. My attention to detail and passion to engage in critical dialogue were no longer a match for the endless emails and piles of grading. The internal struggle was overwhelming. My duties and my desires were set against each other on a pendulum.

As if the inundating tasks were not enough, I had been feeling an overwhelming pull to return to a school with students who were not afforded the advantages of my current ones. A place where parents were not always able to provide support in traditional ways. I applied for a transfer, and the timing could not have been more perfectly aligned. A new school had positions available. A new school whose heart and veins pumped Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. The principal made it clear that if I accepted the position, I would be accepting my students as they were and would teach to their needs and interests. It was as if God himself had given me that nudge in order to prepare me for this opportunity, and I took it.



The principal made it clear that if I accepted the position, I would be accepting my students as they were and would teach to their needs and interests.
Was I dreaming?

I learned so much during my investigations with my new students and colleagues. The rigorous instruction I learned to deliver from my previous school was a North Star that guided my work with my new students, while the responsive teaching of my current school laid the foundation that bridged a pathway for my students' success.

My situation and hardships remained, but the novelty of my environment and the professional learning sustained me. The bricks that weighed me became a boulder of support and a new string underpinned the tattered ones.

But the contentment did not last long.



Around the same time that I wept in silence, I was accepted into leadership training programs with my district and the state department. Apart from emphasizing the importance of leading from one's current position, the sessions opened my eyes to other entities of the educational system beyond what was visible each school day. My love for mentoring also bloomed as I welcomed preservice teachers into my classroom and mentored new colleagues. I blindly relished in these opportunities, filling a missing void. But the void was replaced with dissonance as the training sessions and mentoring seemed counterproductive to my self-proclaimed calling as an elementary school teacher.

I wanted to do more. I needed to do more.

I must admit. I was intrigued. Was God guiding me down a new path — something different than the one I chose? If this was indeed the case, I ignored the signs again. That was not a change that I was ready to accept. My students needed me.

My students needed *me*. In my mind, I had to be the one delivering instruction and building efficacy. The students who were placed in my class were assigned to me with purpose. I couldn't fathom passing the baton to someone else.

Yet in my eleventh year of teaching, the walls closed in even closer. The tears I once cried morphed into a sea of paralyzing anxiety, engulfing much of the motivation and joy that I relied on to fuel me. I couldn't repeat the cycle another year. I knew in my heart that it was time to leave.

I can only remember the peace that came with the decision, but in this moment a trail of tears traces my face as I relive the memory. I loved teaching. But at some point, I had to ask myself, "Did teaching love me back?"

I loved teaching. But at some point, I had to ask myself, "Did teaching love me back?"

My passion for students and public education was unwavering, but for the sake of my sanity the role I played had to change. The skills I acquired during this most challenging period in my career ended up being exactly what I needed to propel me into my next phase as an educator. The impact of the change was nearly instantaneous. The walls crumbled, and the bricks became feathers.

In the spring of 2019, I accepted a position as a literacy-based instructional coach in Richland School District One. It was love at first sight. The marriage of two worlds that I had grown to absolutely love merged as one harmonious balance between leadership and coaching. I listened to my spirit and have been in a constant state of awe at the results.

Changing positions led to my professional learning experiences with the *Center for Teacher Quality* (CTQ), and CTQ's partnership with the *University of South Carolina's Center for Educational Partnerships* has led to this moment: me sharing my story. Not a story that is complete, but a story that is whole. A story that is intertwined with various support systems and relevant to a purpose and plan designed for me. The changes and the frustrations were all necessary learning posts that served as decision guides and contentment crushers. The culturally relevant philosophies that I learned were not only critical for my scholars, but they were also the crux of self-awareness that I needed to acknowledge my own personal changes. I developed another layer of identity; one suitable for the growth within.

Being a teacher is a rewarding experience. The depth of service, the connections made with every life touched, and the personal growth experienced is unmatched to any other profession. Yet, receiving these benefits is contingent upon our ability to sustain the journey. That sustenance may come from the camaraderie you've formed with colleagues or the refreshing new beginnings that come with each school year.



However, when the constantly changing conditions are no longer sustained by what has previously motivated you, something has to change. That change can be supplemental, substitutable, or eliminatory. Supplemental changes are tweaks that you make to add to your systems of support. Substitutable changes replace counterintuitive activities or activities that hinder personal goals or growth, while eliminatory changes remove them altogether.

Self-awareness is integral in determining when changes must occur since tolerance varies between individuals. If self-awareness is something you're still working toward, try asking yourself the following questions to help get you started:

- Which of my actions are helping me reach my personal or professional goals?

- Do I speak more from a negative lens or a positive one?
- What changes have I had to face in the last week, month, or year?

Here's the key: Continue asking yourself *why* after each response until your response reveals clarity and transformation.

I wish I would have known then what I know now. Change is a pathway for our journey. Respect it. Embrace it. Yes, there will be grief and mourning of at least an idea that we've nourished, so take the time to celebrate what once was, but don't stay there. Instead, listen to your inner voice, be aware of little things that feel like strands of coincidence, and be amazed when your purpose-driven identity reveals itself.

Table 1. Types of changes

Supplemental Changes	Substitutable Changes	Eliminatory Changes
Exercise	Healthier lifestyle choices	Poor eating habits
Journal	The company you keep	Procrastination
Read devotionals	Find the joy and purpose in your current state instead of focusing on the negative	Negative or fixed mindsets
Use prioritized checklists		Being judgemental
Listen to inspiring podcasts	Transfer to a grade level that aligns with your natural patterns	Workplace gossip
Play encouraging music		Manipulation
Fellowship	Contribute to your field in other roles, but give yourself permission to return to the classroom	Blaming others
Create a social media account that solely uplifts you		Self-loathing
Take advantage of personal and professional learning opportunities	Relocate	Unrealistic expectations
	Collaborate with other trusted individuals, instead of working in isolation	Doing everything on your own
		Self-righteousness



Matherine Dixon has been an educator for thirteen years and currently serves as a Literacy Coach in Columbia, South Carolina. With the ambition to close the academic achievement gap in marginalized communities as her motivation, Matherine is studying to obtain her doctorate in education at the University of South Carolina.



The Power of Stories from the Inside Out

by P. Ann Byrd and Cindy Van Buren

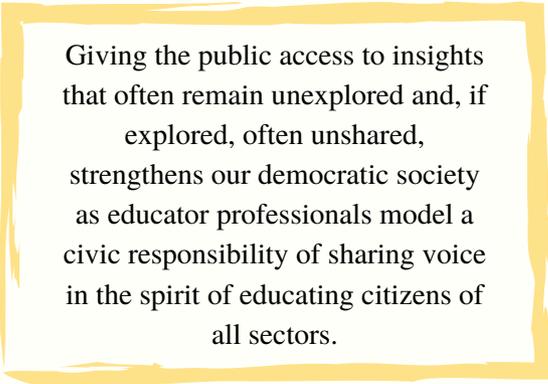
“Silence is the enemy of justice.”
– Aline Ohanesian, *Orhan’s Inheritance*

Far too many educator stories go untold. As the most observed profession of all professions, the stories of teachers and teaching have been published by a variety of stakeholders, often well meaning, yet missing the authentic lens of the practitioners who engage with students daily. The half dozen stories assembled here only begin to scratch the surface of exposing the power of storytelling from educators’ point of view. What fuels their power? Their expertise and a desire to share it. Their isolated practice and a desire to overcome it. Their commitment to service and a desire to deepen it.

These stories break the deafening silence. They offer lessons that we as citizens in a democracy need to be reminded of and re-tell and re-invent as our own experiences are shared. These educator authors remind us through compelling nonfiction narratives to use all tools at our disposal to see and hear others; to lean into our own discomfort in order to model growth and learning; to explore connections between science and social justice; to invite the authenticity of every voice to lead classrooms and schools of celebrated inclusivity and belonging; to use the power of empathy to advocate for change through activism; to share classroom power to build powerful learning; to embrace the change that accompanies meeting each student where they are.

All of these stories are about voices, many voices: parents, children, principals, teachers, educators in a variety of roles, the community that envelopes each and every school. These half dozen stories are compelling and authentic. And for each one of these, there are thousands more that never get told.

Why? Many reasons. We don’t think to ask. We think we “know” the stories since we were all students once and “watched teachers” do their work – an act sociologist Dan Lortie called “apprenticeship of observation” to describe the thousands of hours we spend as students observing and evaluating professionals in action (Schoolteacher, 1975).



Giving the public access to insights that often remain unexplored and, if explored, often unshared, strengthens our democratic society as educator professionals model a civic responsibility of sharing voice in the spirit of educating citizens of all sectors.

Providing opportunities for practitioners to tell their stories helps to bring hazy perceptions into clearer focus. It also creates some rare space and time for educators to deeply reflect, analyze, and share some of their more profound work as learners of their chosen profession that ironically is all about learning. This necessity is too often pushed aside because of competing priorities, creating counterproductive choices as educators lose opportunities to think, refine, and revisit their practice. Giving the public access to insights that often remain unexplored and, if explored, often unshared, strengthens our democratic society as educator professionals model a civic responsibility of sharing voice in the spirit of educating citizens of all sectors. And, crafting these stories not only provides insights for the audience, they clarify learning and strengthen the voice of the storytellers. The more we are able to practice the art of storytelling, the more opportunity we have to connect in meaningful discourse.

Recognizing the opportunity to share powerful experiences of educators in the University of South Carolina (UofSC) network of partners, the Center for Educational Partnerships invested in a storytelling retreat attended by the six authors featured in this journal (plus 18 more storytellers). All stories produced from this writing retreat have been published in some format, completing a necessary and final step of validating the writing process for each author.



Educators report that they have grown from being able to tell their stories, and their sense of professionalism has been enhanced by having their voices published, as evidenced in the quotes below from storytellers:

- “There are so many stories, and mine is more important than I would have thought.”
- “I feel inspired to tell my story, my truth, my experience.”
- “I didn’t give myself credit for understanding that my story may have a positive influence on others.”

As a Research 1 University, certainly the College of Education values the scholarly work of its faculty. And as the flagship University in the state, there is unapologetic value placed on innovations and collaborations that provide other types of South Carolina-centric data such as the lived experiences of educators who are in schools and classrooms every single day. Each of these authors told their own story without concern for if, where, and how they would be published. The surprise of the storytelling was that several groups of writers focused on similar topics that could become a collection like these stories.

When UofSC identified an interest in helping educators find their voice through storytelling, they turned to a highly-respected national non-profit organization, the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ), for facilitator expertise. The first retreat was such a success that the partnership between CTQ and UofSC around storytelling continues to expand. CTQ uses a suite of storytelling tools and protocols specifically designed to assist participants (of wide-ranging experiences as writers) in examining the impact of their work.

The approach to do so involves taking a general anecdote into a deeper analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, and then stepping back to take time to answer “So what?” from as many perspectives as possible. And, once the storyteller lands on the lens of the story that will likely bring about the most powerful response – A CALL TO ACTION – then the story has its shape and purpose. What’s left is to ensure lessons to be shared are as clearly and compellingly communicated as possible.

Perhaps the most powerful part of this storytelling approach is the “peer writing workshop” sessions where participants work in small groups to listen and respond to one another’s stories. The TELLING of the story breaks the isolated, and often suffocating silence of untold stories set in classrooms, hallways, offices, lunchrooms. And the value of honoring the experience and voice of educator storytellers and those they serve is what makes public education a cornerstone of our democracy. One that must be celebrated through stories from the inside out.

As you have engaged with this collection of stories, we hope you have been inspired to further explore how spreading stories in your own practice would add even more value to your work.

What’s your story? We look forward to hearing about it.



P. Ann Byrd serves as President & Partner of *CTQ*, a national nonprofit focused on advancing the collective leadership of teachers and administrators working together to transform their profession. She spent 13 years teaching high schoolers (English Language Arts and Teacher Cadet) before joining *CERRA*’s staff for 10 years at Winthrop University, the last six as Executive Director. She earned National Board Certification in ELA/AYA (2000/2010) and also served six years as a member of the NBPTS Board of Directors. Ann holds a B.A. in English–Secondary Education and an Ed.D. in curriculum and instruction from the University of South Carolina. Her purpose-driven investment in collective leadership creates space for her to work alongside dedicated educators throughout the country to make schools better for all students.



Cindy Van Buren has been an SC educator since 1988. She has previously served as the Deputy Superintendent for the Division of School Effectiveness for the South Carolina Department of Education, the Chair of the Department of Education at Newberry College, the Director of Teacher Education at Winthrop University, and as a high school administrator and teacher at Rock Hill High School. Since joining the staff in the College of Education at UofSC in 2015, she has dedicated her work to building and maintaining partnerships that improve the lives of teachers, students, schools and districts in SC. As assistant dean for Professional Partnerships in the College of Education at UofSC, she serves as the Director of the Center for Educational Partnerships and CarolinaCrED.