

WAR01328 Education for the human journey: Personal narrative in the primary classroom

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Paper Abstract:

This study is part of a Ph.D. qualitative exploration into the use of narrative in Montessori, Steiner, and other primary schools. In-depth interviews of teachers from twelve schools were used to collect stories on how teachers use narrative for curriculum and personal development and how they perceive these uses as relating to their own educational philosophies and to the ethos of their particular schools. Teachers' storied experiences were analysed using NUD*IST software. A wide spectrum of narrative uses related to meaning making was revealed including using narrative as both an oral and written language genre, as a means of curriculum integration, as a means of identifying and understanding personal journeys as well as universal values, and as a tool for establishing connectedness and effecting transformations.

This paper will focus on the interesting and varied approaches revealed for helping students experience the complexity of the human journey including acknowledging narrative thinking as separate from paradigmatic thinking, provision for imagery and allegory, rhythm, ritual and memory. In addition, educational approaches for fostering the construction and exploration of personal narrative will be discussed including creating opportunities for authentic dialogue, the use of sharing, autobiography and biography as well as intergenerational and multicultural storytelling.

Education for the human journey: Personal narrative in the primary classroom

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Introduction

This paper arises from a study of the use of narrative to foster meaning-making in Montessori, Steiner, Government and Catholic Schools. The purpose of the exploration was to investigate the relationship of narrative use to the theoretical base of teaching practice. In-depth interviews of twelve teachers from the four educational settings were used to collect teachers' stories that comprised the data on narrative use. Narrative was thus both the 'method' and the 'phenomenon' researched (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2). Interview questions focused on how teachers use narrative for curriculum and personal development purposes and how they perceived these purposes as relating to their own educational philosophy and the ethos of their schools. The concepts that emerged through analysis of the data using NUD*IST software revealed the complexity of narrative use in primary education by foregrounding its use in curriculum and classroom practice for linguistic and literacy understanding, as an aid to understanding the human journey and personal narrative and for personal transformation in cognitive, emotional and spiritual domains. This paper focuses on the second level of understanding that revealed varied ways teachers adhering to the four methodologies use narrative to enhance students' understanding of the personal journey in the context of community and culture. These means included provision for:

- narrative and paradigmatic thinking
- imagery and allegory
- rhythm, ritual and memory
- authentic dialogue and
- sharing and exploring life stories.

Narrative and Paradigmatic Thinking

A classroom that pays tribute to the power of personal narrative is also one that acknowledges the importance of narrative thinking as separate from paradigmatic thinking. Narrative thinking or – in Bruner's terms "a good story" – convinces us of the likeliness of the events occurring or the characters existing. This is in contrast to the "well-formed argument" of paradigmatic thinking which aims to convince us of truth (Bruner, 1988, p. 99). Using narrative thinking, we find connections in stories or in life events by using our imagination or intuition and without any proof of actual cause and effect although we sense that one action or situation may be the result of another. By not being context-bound, story or narrative thinking is variable according to the circumstances of the teller and listener. "The story incorporates the feelings, goals, needs, and values of the people who create it. Thus, each participant may render the same episode in quite different ways. The story is flexible where the principle is rigid" (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986, p. 115). Narrative thinking thus allows for the co-existence of many accounts without one necessarily being right or wrong. Children exposed to stories begin to understand that every story has a voice; every story is somebody's story. "All ages gain some extension of thought or omnipotence through identifying characters in stories heard, read, dramatised" (Bruner, 1990, p. 54). Story "accommodates ambiguity and dilemma as central figures or themes" (Carter, 1993, p. 173). In contrast, a scientific account aims for a single version and is appropriate for assessing external physical problems, but not for assessing human dilemmas.

Classrooms that herald narrative thinking are much more likely to be process oriented, rather than product oriented. Story does not lead to a single outcome defined by "rules or logical propositions," but rather story "emerges from action" with a myriad of possibilities for

resolution and ending that can be considered by the imaginative realm (Carter, 1993, p. 173). Story is not about reducing variables, but about considering the interplay of all the variables including characters, setting and plot that contribute to a comprehensible whole. Narrative thinking merged with logico-scientific thinking can enhance understanding of a concept. For instance, in the following scenario, the personification of non-human creatures helps to highlight the interdependence of creatures.

Pamela, Sasha and Catherine decided to write a play about the Palozoic period. They personified the creatures of this early evolutionary period, the Cambrian. The trilobites were the heroes for doing the best job of cleaning the calcium from the ocean to prepare it for other creatures. They lived happily amidst the jellyfish, sponges, and bivalves. Then the Sea Lilies (Crinoids) entered the scene and with a most superior attitude took over this job with the result that the trilobites left. As the girls performed their play, I realised that their personification of the situation made their presentation the least factual of the class projects. However, in portraying these human-like relationships they revealed that they had a deep understanding of the interdependence of creatures. (Gay: V: 121)

Young children, who are in a very concrete stage in terms of logico-scientific thinking, are capable of abstract thought in a narrative sense (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986; Bruner, 1988, 1990). Educational approaches such as Steiner and Reggio Emilia celebrate the young child's mythical narrative understanding, rather than viewing it as a time to 'get through' until greater rationality. The young child can understand many complex concepts if they are presented according to his/her understanding which is characterised by elements of the oral tradition including imagery and allegory, rhyme, rhythm and ritual (Egan, 1997).

Imagery and Allegory

Children under the age of 7 ask many 'why' questions. They do not seek abstract logical explanations but stories and images that are abstract in the sense that they are symbolic and representational (Marshak, 1997).

If a teacher tries to explain the subjects during the first school years, the children will react by becoming blunted and dull...On the other hand, everything will go smoothly if, rather than explaining the subject matter, one forms the content into a story, if words are painted with mental images, and if rhythm is brought into one's whole way of teaching. (Steiner, 1923/1996, p. 100)

Young children themselves use imagery including metaphors, similes and personification which further supports the view that humans from preschool age are capable of abstract thought in the narrative sense. In the following journal extract, for example, six-year old Emily uses a simile to describe herself.

I fille lieck a princess today in a butefel dress with perpel and pinck things on it. [sic] (Emily: Age 6)

In her emerging literacy, Emily is clearly exploring the rules of language trying to find consistent patterns but still unsure of which spelling should be selected for each phonogram. She is also mastering the use of adjectives in her descriptive language. More than this, however, she is creating an image by using a simile. Through this image she projects her feelings about herself. This is a narrative understanding as is the following transcript of a conversation on a bird sanctuary project in Shawn's Montessori preschool class.

Nora: We could write it on a sign for the birds to read when they fly over here.

Shawn: So you know what they eat?

Nora: Worms. I saw them in my neighbour's yard. The wife bird was out there looking for worms for their kids to eat while the husband bird took care of their babies in their nest. (Shawn 3: 104-110)

The children use personification in talking about the birds. This narrative thinking reflects an understanding of the caring that birds display for each other and the needs that they must meet in order to survive.

If children can understand through imagery, then they can benefit from allegorical stories as well which serve as metaphorical stories for real human dilemmas. The Steiner schools believing that individual consciousness development parallels historic consciousness use fairy tales and then fables early in primary years. Bettelheim (1977) would concur with the views of Steiner in noting that fairy tales can subconsciously aid young children with dilemmas. A third child, for example, might take heart that the third son or daughter always triumphs in the end in fairy stories.

In contrast, Montessori (1949/1988), stressed that in the early years, imagery should be reality based. She viewed animism as an immature, primitive means of understanding the world and implied that focusing on fantasy with young children might actually be a disservice to them in their development of logical thought processes. For this reason, she encouraged her children's house teachers of 3-6 year old children to emphasise real stories such as those provided by nature as well as focusing on the child's own timeline. Nevertheless, Montessori (1964) understood that one could stimulate the wonder in children by using imagery they understood and her primary curriculum is laden with examples. Several of the Montessori interviewees in the study used the charts designed by Montessori in telling stories about geography and botany. One of the geography charts entitled *The Cosmic Dance*, for example, demonstrates the cooling of the earth by red angels leaving the earth with hot air and blue angels descending with ice.

From my interviews and literature overview, it became apparent that the use of imagery in teaching had been more carefully considered by Steiner and Montessori teachers than by teachers in Government and Catholic schools. However, the teachers in Government and Catholic schools were very aware of the meaning making provided by parables and allegorical stories. Fran (1:51) and Vicky (1:233) both mentioned that a favourite teaching text, *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1964), is a metaphorical story about children's fears. Egan suggests that rather than being frightened by the monsters, children see them through keen perception as allegories of adults. "What he does through the book is help the child domesticate the fears caused by these ugly looming adults. They aren't so bad really; they can be controlled (Egan, 2000a, p. 14). Catholic teachers also used allegorical biblical stories to guide children in discovering life's lessons.

My research indicated that Steiner and Montessori teachers were more likely to use oral storytelling in their classrooms. Montessori herself recognized that orally told stories had a role in the education of children and based her primary curriculum on five great stories (the story of the universe, the story of life, the story of humans, the story of language, the story of mathematics) designed to be told orally to stimulate the imagination. For Steiner teachers, oral story telling was a part of their teacher training and the interviewed teachers were adept at using the rhythm and choral repetition of the traditional story teller in imparting mythologies to their classes.

Rhythm, Ritual and Memory

Egan (1997) notes that oral cultures provide a key to understanding the link between narrative and emotional rhythms by modelling that emotional rhythm "can provide a powerfully engaging access to knowledge of all kinds" (p. 59). Oral cultures have also demonstrated "that ideas or lore put into a rhythmic or rhyming form (are) more easily remembered" (p. 58). Teachers, who have emphasised the importance of noting oral language attributes in teaching, report that the rhythm of life is experienced in the rhythms and rituals of the classroom including lesson explorations in a narrative format, alternating periods of activity and silence, the celebration of the rhythm and ritual of seasons, festivals and life transitions. In addition, children are exposed to rhythmic patterns in movement, music, speech, mathematics and art. Oral language constructions can also be used to connect students to memories, traditions and images.

Montessori teachers interviewed adhere to a narrative lesson plan format designed by Montessori with the three steps of "This is"; "Show Me" and "What is this?". These periods might be likened to an engagement, a development and finally a transformation and reflection aspect of the narrative.

Both Lynne and Alison, in their respective interviews, reflected on the influence of whole language practitioners Green and Reid (1988) in helping them to appreciate the narrative-like movement possible in meaningful lessons. Green and Reid suggested a narrative-like lesson plan, more delineated than Montessori's that included engagement, exploration, transformation, presentation and reflection. Each of these stages would have an internal rhythm of beginning, exploration and ending so there would be constant movement within each stage. It is this rhythm of movement that underscores learning as a process of construction rather than a product in both Montessori and whole language classrooms.

In both Steiner and Montessori classrooms there are long work periods punctuated by a rhythm of activity and silence that Steiner likened to breathing. Steiner interviewee, Sam (43) also commented that as a teacher he keeps in mind that he "must tap the feelings and imagination first" which certainly would constitute the engagement of narrative and whole language terminology. In both Steiner and Montessori classrooms visited, the long morning work periods did allow for full exploration of concepts and one was often left with a feeling of closure at the end of the work time. This was in contrast to other primary classes visited where a subject shift often occurred every 45 minutes. Rhythms in the Government and Catholic classrooms visited were experienced more by altering between individual and group work within the overall narrative of a termly thematic exploration.

One contrast between the Montessori and Steiner schools was an awareness of the individual rhythms in Montessori whereas the Steiner teachers established a whole class rhythm perpetuated with rituals such as candle lighting, choral verse recitation. Also, although attributes of oral narrative including rhythm, rhyme and repetition were apparent in the poetry, music, movement and play explorations in all the "narrative" classrooms visited, the Steiner teachers most integrated movement, poetry and in-class music into their classroom routines and explorations.

We actually walk out rhythms. So it might be a short poem. It might be an anapest – short, short, long and they will actually step that out in short steps and long steps. So they get very sensitised to rhythm, because, again, it's being worked through with their whole body. (Steiner Yr. 4 teacher, Bernadette: 236)

The festivals and traditional celebrations in schools are also a way of defining that narrative rhythm of life's journey within a cultural context. In this regard, too, there was considerable variation according to the ethos of the schools represented by the interviewees. The Steiner school celebrated Christian festivals as well as having the whole school community come together to celebrate the summer and winter solstice through story and puppetry, artwork, movement and choral singing. Montessori schools visited had varied traditions ranging from weekly whole school sharing times to picnics and bush dances to grandparents' day and end of year concerts. The Catholic schools celebrated religious festivals as well as events like book week and sports day in common with the Government schools.

Aside from Anzac Day, I was struck by how many traditional festivals in the government schools incorporated a competitive element and prizes including, in this instance, Sports' Day, Easter Hat day, Book Week. This was in marked contrast to the Steiner and Montessori schools visited where festivals never involved a competitive element. The Catholic schools were on a spectrum between these orientations. They all included competition in the upper primary Sports Day but views on other competitive traditions varied from school to school. I believe this is an area that needs to be addressed carefully. We need to ascertain the purpose of our festivals. Are they to celebrate the life journey of all participants or are they to celebrate excellence by putting forth a few models? Might it be appropriate to have some of both? Do group competitions such as faction and house races on sports day and performing arts festival (in the systemic Catholic system) allow for both a traditional celebration (in the sense that they are community building) as well as providing venues for defining excellence?

Birthday celebrations are traditions celebrating the life journey of individuals and if competition is involved, it seems to be in home party games rather than at school. I visited a few Montessori schools in America including Shawn's school where a lovely ritual was practised that I understand with some variations is quite common in Montessori schools around the world.

We celebrate birthdays simply. On that day a child is celebrated at our regular meeting. She brings a gift book for the classroom. She carries the globe and circles a candle, lit to represent the sun. Her journey around the candle signifies the trip the earth makes around the sun each year, and we all count as she circles it. Then she kneels at the small table that holds the candle. She makes her own wish, then blows out the candle. We sing to her and silently send her many good wishes. Then we read her book to the group. Each time we read her story with the class we read the small dedication that she or her parents have written inside the cover. This typically includes her name, age, and a small message to her class. (Shawn 2: 15)

The two Steiner teachers I visited shared the ritual of birthday poems with me. Each year they would write a special poem for each child in the class. The child would learn the poem and share it as an oral presentation with other class members. The poems are a celebration of the uniqueness of each child, but also a testament to the close relationship between the teacher and child who are on this seven year journey together.

One of the things we do in the school is write a birthday verse for each child. We tell a story and then give each child a verse which they then say once a week each week for a year... What I try to do is think, "What's an image that might capture where this child is? Where are they and where do they need to go?" (Sam: 271-276)

Birthdays were acknowledged in the government and Catholic schools I visited but not with the emphasis on personal journey. In Lynne's school, for example, she noted that:

Children's birthdays are announced with daily messages over the PA and the children are asked to go up to the office where they are given a birthday sticker. Staff birthdays are not really recognised – sometimes a 50th might be celebrated by having a cake. (Lynne 3: 30-31)

Each school marked the life transition of ending primary school in some form. In addition to a ceremony and celebration at the end of the year, the oldest class members were given special jobs and privileges. Ellen, who studied both Montessori and Steiner philosophies felt that the Waldorf educators were particularly aware of the importance of marking this transition as contributing to the meaning of life.

It is not only in the daily rhythm or pattern or even just the seasonal with solstice festivals, but rather the rhythm of life's transitions. (Ellen 2: 3)

Authentic Dialogue

Students are introduced to the complexity of the human life journey through images and the rhythms of their physical and cultural worlds mirrored in the metaphors and rhythms of language. Paradoxically, the more they know about the images and patterns of their world, the more they become aware of the unique combination of images and patterns in their own lives. This self-discovery process can be enhanced by opportunities for authentic dialogue.

Classrooms are socio-constructivist recognising that for individuals to "construct" themselves, they must be in a community experiencing authentic dialogue. There is an argument that the term "socio" is redundant, for can one construct oneself without social interaction? Even if a student were engaged in a solitary constructive cognitive activity, he/she would clearly be influenced by past interactions with family, teachers and peers. Vygotsky describes this as moving from an interpersonal process to an intrapersonal one.

An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one. Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

Relationships are clearly a key influencing factor in the construction of our personal narratives by which we make meaning of our experiences. Student-teacher, student-student and teacher-teacher dialogue can all be contexts for meaning-making.

Student-Teacher Dialogue

Mem Fox emphasises that for efficient learning to occur, children must "feel safe enough to learn without fear; so they won't be afraid to take risks" (Fox, 1997, p. 123). This sense of safety ensues from genuine interpersonal relationships in the classroom.

Relationships are fundamental to learning. Teachers cannot be aloof, detached, or apolitical. We cannot withhold personal information, keep our first name a secret, pretend to have no emotions, or merely feign interest in children's worlds. We must interact honestly with our students. Real life literacy is always a social event, so our classrooms need that scaffold of social cohesion. (Fox, 1997, p. 123)

Parker Palmer (1997) expressed the similar view that good teachers "are able to weave a complex web of connections between themselves, their subjects, and their students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (p.2). Like Fox, Palmer (1997) infers that this connectedness cannot be achieved if teachers keep their personal lives totally separate from their teaching lives. "Good teachers join self, subject, and students in the fabric of life because they teach from an integral and undivided self" (p. 2).

A first step towards achieving authentic dialogue in the classroom is for teachers to reveal themselves as multifaceted human beings by revealing some of their own journey to their students. Adult stories – the stories from their teachers and parents – "help children negotiate meaning from the mixed messages that bombard them daily. Stories help children to feel grounded" (Diz-Imbelli, 1998, p. 32). Montessorian, Nigel, shares aspects of his own life with his 6-9 year old class:

So in terms of my own personal narrative, this class is really lovely. I can catch them and bring them in at any time just telling them something about my own personal life. When we had Father's Day, we had a picture of [Nigel's birthplace on another continent]. And I picked it up and showed them that I was going to be there and see that mountain and that beach...And the kids said, "Are you going to visit your father?" and I said, "Yes" and [one child] said, "Why doesn't he come here and visit you?" I said, "Why don't you write and tell him?" so she sat down and wrote a Father's Day letter to my father...Such a wonderful moment. True, I have a father and he is there. They would love to meet him. He is a great storyteller. He brought us up on stories. (Nigel 1: 47)

Shawn describes how in her Montessori school's autobiography project – discussed further below – teachers made a concerted effort to reveal aspects of their life stories:

The children got over thinking we ate and slept here and raised our children here. They couldn't believe we had a husband and a home. What do you mean you live three blocks away? They thought that was so odd. So now they know I have a home and children and that I take a writing class. They have seen me write in my journal because I bring that in to the classroom. (Shawn 1: 292)

Steiner teacher Bernadette also voiced the opinion that it helped children to view their teacher as fellow learners.

And they go home and say to their mothers, "Now Bernadette must be sitting on her verandah reading Shakespeare with a cup of tea." That's wonderful that they see that I am a striving human being, that I continue to learn and that I have things that I love. (Bernadette: 326)

Teacher-student dialogue can become a catalyst for learning if there is genuine sharing of personal narrative as well as dialogue regarding the joint exploration of interesting topics.

Student-Student Dialogue

Teachers who are oriented toward socio-constructivism view the dialogue that occurs between and among children as an invaluable learning tool and thus the teachers create opportunities for discussion and collaborative learning. The Reggio Emilia approach claims to be influenced by Vygotsky in asserting that "children's participation in communicative

processes is the foundation, on which they build their understanding" (Caldwell, 1997, p. 62). Montessori interviewee, Shawn, began recording children's dialogue in her classes after a visit to Reggio Emilia in Italy. She commented on the problem-solving skills revealed through the interaction of children and their project work. The children themselves provided the guidelines to help define an emerging curriculum.

I was fortunate enough to travel to Reggio Emilia, Italy, last summer with a study tour of the preschools in this small city. I was drawn there by my interest in the hugely expressive individual and group project work they support in their beautiful schools. It has been exciting to witness the process and learn how to support it without dictating its direction. Starting from a place of ...trust in children, I have been led by them into these amazing projects. (Shawn 2: 22)

Following her Reggio experience, Shawn and her students began the Earthbird project. The following is an extract of preprimary children discussing ways to create an ideal bird sanctuary:

N: What about a drum? You could have a strap one and wear it around your neck and play it. Maybe if they were hanging on the trees, up high near the sky, the birds could hear them.

M: If a flute was up high in the trees, where the wind blows, IT could play the flute for the birds to hear.

G: A wind chime would work! We could make some. A bird was out there looking for worms for their kids to eat while the husband bird took care of their babies in their nest. Maybe we could bring instruments and play them so the birds would hear singing and playing!

American kindergarten teacher, Vivian Gussin Paley, has written extensively on how important young children's dialogue is in helping them to construct a view of themselves. She described her students as "actors on a moving stage, carrying on philosophical debates while borrowing fragments of floating dialogue...A relentless connection-making was going on, the children inventing and explaining their rules and traditions every time they talked and played" (Paley, 1988, p. 12).

Different challenges present themselves to the teachers of primary aged children. Rules and roles are still explored in playground games, but it is often in group dialogue around subject explorations, that children gain confidence in expressing and supporting their own opinions. Interviewee, Fran, described her goal of helping older primary aged children to experience having an authentic voice.

I really wanted them to become independent thinkers and to engage with the text from that personal point of view so they would have authentic comments. That was the challenge for me – have Year 3 children confident enough to express their own personal thought which may be different from someone else's about a text. (Fran 1: 75)

At an age when peer acceptance can work against independent thought, she found that working with small groups with meaningful engaging texts helped to support risk taking, critical thinking and dialogue that challenged children to reframe their perspectives. Like

Shawn, she found that trusting the children to the point where one could suspend one's own judgement helped to nurture their authentic voices.

I think, too, you need to suspend your own judgement, your own notion of where you think a child will go with an idea. Because, I know a tremendous example that I tell the [university] students. In this particular class, they were looking at good and evil, good and evil with regard to Jack and the Beanstalk. They have to list the good characters and the evil characters. Most children did what you would expect. One child came up with the mother was good, the cow was good, the hen was good, and Jack was bad. Immediately you think, "Well, I didn't expect that response." And probably, unless you have enough confidence as a teacher, you might really say, "Well, that's not right." But because of this literature class and because of all the work done for children to have all these authentic thoughts, I was delighted because it was different. So I said to him, "Why did you say that?" And he said, "Because he went out of his culture (that was his word – "culture") and started stealing things."...The most important thing is how you interact with the text, and reflect on it and think about it. It's so enriching to have someone with a different thought and to provide another idea. (Fran 1: 135)

Dialogue between children is a key variable in socio-constructivism. From my interviews and observations, I noticed that the potential for children to gain personal and cognitive meaning from the dialogue was enhanced by establishing a secure environment where risk taking could occur through encouraging collaborative groups, small discussion sessions and tribes. Children were more likely to express an authentic voice where individual response and interpretation was valued by the teacher and fellow students and scaffolded through questioning at various levels. At least one interviewee indicated that there should be more questioning that encourages the student to apply narratives studied to their own personal journeys. In the following example, a lesson on fables is revisited with an implied conclusion that with different questioning, children could be helped to make the connection between the story and their own lives.

I almost think I would give them more ideas, more questions

relating to stories from themselves...With fables, we dramatized them and we turned them into news articles. Changing genre was something I did often and I thought that was really a way to get them to think about it. ...But ...I would make it more their personal journey. I would do more with getting them to identify with a character and choose a setting and a conflict that maybe they can identify with metaphorically... This is what I didn't do enough of. That is what I'm starting to do in working with children. There is no reason not to take that bridge. That's how I would change. And I suspect it might help their writing too. (Allison: 156-160)

Teacher-Teacher Dialogue

The interview data suggests that we are far better at nurturing student- student dialogue and teacher-student dialogue than teacher-teacher dialogue. Teachers in many schools meet briefly for "How are you?" conversations in the staff room where they may catch up on major family events, or a moment of sharing on the latest movie. They also meet on designated professional development days in which collaboratively they target and explore issues in education. However, there is rarely a forum for sharing their personal lives and interests or their personal interpretations of classroom experiences.

Lynne attributed her feeling of isolation to a lack of sharing ideas and events related to daily classroom teaching. At the time of the interview she was teaching in a remedial support class and she felt she would have more sharing if she was in the mainstream.

In the State schools, you are in a classroom and I am left to teach without anyone wanting to know what I'm teaching. ...Everyone teaches in a different way...I'm in this room and someone else is in another room and I really wouldn't know how much they use story compared to what I use in here...I suppose if I was teaching in the mainstream area there'd be more opportunity to be more collaborative, to share, more sharing of programme ideas and so on. (Lynne 1:241-271)

In a follow-up interview two years later, Lynne revealed that there was far more sharing now occurring in her school on a professional level which she attributed to regular meetings to explore the implementation of the new West Australian Curriculum Framework.

Feelings of isolation were not limited to Government schools but seemed part of the experience of most interviewed teachers. Like Lynne, there were other teachers fortunate enough to experience more collegiality in the years my study progressed. Steiner teacher, Sam, for instance felt that a chance to share personal biography stories helped to foster dialogue and respect between staff.

We've had some biography work with teachers sharing aspects of their own lives. That has been just tremendous. These are people you work with everyday and even though it's a deep work it can be an isolating work. You can be in your classroom and you know what you're doing, but you don't know what someone else is doing or what they're going through or who they are. And so when we had this biography work...When you see aspects of their lives, you say, Ah, I understand why that person might be like that. (Sam: 37)

Catholic teacher, Vicky, also reflected on her experiences in both isolating and communal teaching situations:

Being a sharing group, being given a chance to focus on us is transformational. We sometimes forget that we are learners too. (Vicky 2: 6)

We are always learning and constructing ourselves. To do so in an integrated way, without fragmenting their personal and professional lives, teachers need to create an environment parallel to the one advocated for students. Staff rooms need to be safe non-judgmental venues where critical moments about teaching and lives can be shared. Because teachers can learn a great deal from each other, PD days or afternoons devoted to sharing ideas about teaching are extremely valuable. Teachers, as well as students, can obtain clues from biographies to guide them in constructing their lives. Thus, granting time for staff to share their stories is well spent.

The rhythm of the teacher's life should include a time for dialogue inside and outside school, and a time for reflection. Reflection may take the form of meditation, journaling, or even metaphor writing or drawing. Reflection fuels dialogue and self- construction.

Sharing and Exploring Life Stories

Autobiography

By sharing events from life journeys, experiences have a context. Stories need to be believable and cohesive for listeners. In creating and presenting them, one makes connections with other life experiences and with the lives of the audience. "Telling the story of one's life is often a way of stepping back and making it an object of reflection, of speculating on one's life. Cognitive psychologists call this 'decentering'; it allows one to step outside the busyness and make of it all some meaning" (Ritchie and Wilson, 2000, p. 23).

In my interviews and classroom observations, I was gratified to note that there has been a move away from "show and tell" as the primary vehicle of classroom sharing or "newstime" to a format that invited children to share personalised, coherent narratives.

Cusworth (1996) indicates that children who bring in an object for news are limiting the possibilities of their oral language to descriptive and ownership terms rather than benefitting cognitively and emotionally from the properties of narrative. She questions whether newstime with its emphasis on oral language skills is viewed as "a forerunner to public speaking rather than as a venue for storytelling" (p. 60).

Showing an object does not help a child make sense of his/her life or help them to recognise the past, present and future of their own life stories. It does not help the child to reflect on his/her inner experiences. There is an argument for objects being brought in for young children but only as a mnemonic for events when relating personal stories. In my school, children shared objects but they had to be hand-made, collected, or researched so that the object had a story.

In Shawn's American Montessori school, the entire school is participating in what they refer to as an Autobiography project. Their 3-6 year old children take turns taking home the "Me" heartshaped box which they brought back with mementos – photos and objects that remind them of events in their lives. The objects are a prop rather than a focus of their sharing. As Shawn explained, "We are trying to make it concrete for the children" (Shawn: 10). The child presents his or her story using the "Me" Box items and then a teacher takes dictation from the child for the "Us" book in the classroom (Dougherty, 1999).

On the day I visited Shawn's school a child had brought back the "Me" box with some assorted items. Her dictation clearly reflected her growing awareness of her own unique combination of interests.

I brang my bathers because I like to swim. I brang my ballet slippers because I love to dance...I brang my hat because when I was born, they put that on my head to keep me warm. Haleigh. (Shawn: 17-21)

Cusworth (1996) asserts that children need an audience for stories such as this. "Children need more than just a venue to share their personal narratives; they need to have them accepted, even honoured, by others" (p. 62). In Shawn's class, children share their stories from the "Me" box. Usually, the teacher gathers the children and invites them to hear the personal narrative. Sometimes the children themselves independently gather a small group who want to hear their story again. The comments and questions from the peer group help to clarify the stories and positively affirm the identity of the teller.

The children just bring and tell each other. And if anyone has questions they can ask them. So if Gina was having her meeting that day and Heidi had a

question she would raise her and Gina would call her name and she could ask her question. She's in charge of it and it really is a celebration. (Shawn 1: 31)

In the 6-9 year old class at Shawn's Montessori school, the format for exploring and sharing their autobiographies moves from "the Me Box" of the 3-6 year old class to illustrated timelines in the 6-9 year old class. Flags representing their countries of ancestry are part of these time lines and children (9-10 year olds) have the opportunity to research these countries. In addition, children create family trees and this provides a platform for exploring their family histories and cultural traditions (Dougherty, 1999, p. 41)

In the 9-12 year old class at Shawn's school, during the first year, children research their autobiographies by interviewing family members. Their final presentation might include essays, poetry, interviews, dioramas and even game boards noting significant life events. The next year they do in-depth research of American culture and the cultures represented in their family trees. It is a year of celebrating diversity as they become aware of customs and social concerns linked to the cultures represented in their community. They arrange visits for story sharing with other cultural groups. The bookshelves in the room have a wide assortment of biographies and stories that children used to explore their roots in Africa, Asia, Europe and America and the teacher in this class is an accomplished storyteller who draws children in through "symbolism and connections...She sees that part of community building as really important. People who know where they come from just have a different level of confidence..." (Shawn 1:137-145)

Biography

Studying the lives of others can help to clarify our own journeys as we find pathways to emulate and pathways to repudiate. The wonder of the personal journey is enhanced by realising that every human being finds some common ground in every other human's story, whether it be revealed in stories of heroes or heroines or in a story shared by a grandparent visiting the classroom. Because life's passages share common attributes in all cultures, we can marvel in noting what is shared. At the same time, we can find fascination in recognising what is different in lives lived in other cultures or times or settings. Both children and adults, as they go through passages in their lives, clarify their identities by being exposed to biographies that provide clues for their personal journeys. American academic, Mary Catherine Bateson, has discovered that her audiences are more moved and more challenged by hearing narratives uncluttered with generalities and jargon.

People learn from stories in a different way from the way they learn from generalities. When I'm writing I often start out with abstractions and academic jargon, and purge it. The red pencil goes through page after page, while I try to make sure that the stories and examples remain to carry the kernel of the ideas, and in the process the ideas become more nuanced, less cut and dried (Bateson, 2000, p.1).

Many of the teachers interviewed have discovered the power of using biography in the classroom. Collectively, they have noted the effectiveness of studying famous lives in engaging students' interests in a variety of subjects including literature, mathematics, social studies and value education. The study of these lives should be detailed enough that students become aware of the real person they are studying from the thinker's "psyche, body, relationships, passions, political and social context. Objectivism tries to protect its fantasy of detached truth by presenting ideas as cut flowers, uprooted from their earthy origins. But good teachers help students see the persons behind the ideas, persons whose

ideas often arose in response to some great suffering or hope that is with us still today" (Palmer, 1999, p. 4).

Catholic school teacher, Fran, selects biographical stories to help children explore journeys and quests and relate them to their own journey. She emphasises that if children only hear an outline of the story and the journey including birthdate, where he went and on which islands he stopped, they have no hooks to relate it to their journey of self.

Captain Cook's journey...What I want them to think about it is What sort of a man was he? And why do you think he did that? And how old was he? It's quite a long journey for an old man. His life is interesting. He got married quite late, and he was a farmer, and he went on these boats and I think that would reflect more truth of the journey. The hardships. (Fran 1: 240-244)

Biographies can become life metaphors for students, models to be remembered in times of crisis, adversity or enormous challenge.

About that time I presented Helen Keller's story to children and ...none of them have forgotten. These children are now of university age and many refer to Helen Keller when I see them...We really looked at the setting too. Prediction, and then the setting, putting ourselves in her shoes. What was it like not to be able to speak or see or hear? We tried to put ourselves in that situation and consider how one could be educated. We brought in Braille books and not until I really felt that they knew what she was facing, did we proceed with her story. It was a really powerful experience for all of us. (Allison: 25)

By exploring biographies, students begin to appreciate the complexities of the human condition and to develop an awareness of the number of roles a single person plays in a lifetime.

You realise the people have other sides. It's important for children to ...realise that...we're not just a mathematician, or we're not just an historian, or a banker, but we have other sides to our lives. I think [biography] helps children realise...there are other sides to people that they might want to know. (Carol: 29)

Communal and Intergenerational Sharing

Bateson: Famous people are interesting, but there's a kind of distancing phenomenon there. I'm interested in the creativity that we all put into our lives. Picasso's life story is not empowering to the creativity of ordinary people. What is empowering is looking at someone that they can identify with. And becoming aware of what they're already doing. (Bateson, 2000, p. 1)

Montessorians Allison and Ellen, Government schoolteacher, Dan, and Steiner teacher, Sam, all brought community members into the classroom to tell their stories.

Sam used these visits to encourage children to reflect on a variety of occupations.

One thing I did when I had Class 3 was to invite the parents in once a week to talk about their lives, because in Class 3 we do building and farming and things of practical living like the farmer's life. (Sam: 532)

Dan invited the grandparents to join his class for a simulated "old-fashioned" school class and The Childhood Museum and then to share their memories.

It was really interesting. The kids were sitting at the desks. And the guy was beating the cane and raising mayhem. And all the grandparents were at the back. Even if they weren't very old, they said they remembered being taught like that. And the kids couldn't believe it. When [comments] were coming from the grandparents, it was so good. Mary used to go to school on horseback... We went and had a picnic after that ...and we had old-fashioned games like skipping. Some of the 'grands' were playing. (Dan: 231)

Allison invited grandparents to tell their stories when her upper primary class were studying Australian history including World War II experiences.

One of the most interesting times I had was when I had grandparents in to talk about war years or early life in Australia. The war came into it. It was suggested that they interview someone who lived through the war. One of my students interviewed her Japanese grandfather who wrote a long sensitive letter about his view of the war for her to share with the class...I also had a grandfather visit the class who talked about what it was like to be one of the "boat" children and how he made his way. [The "boat children" refers to orphaned and otherwise disadvantaged children who were sent out to Australia from the United Kingdom in the 1930's-1950's to be raised and educated in-group homes] The kids were open-mouthed. He also talked about things like the first traffic lights in Perth. (Allison: 224;233)

The opportunity to interview parents and grandparents and other people working in our communities and to hear their personal narratives is an invaluable educational resource. Students are made aware of the sorrows and joys, the challenges and successes of the personal journey – often beginning to understand that heroism and fame are not synonyms. They also have an opportunity to follow the threads of a life from childhood through adolescence and adulthood and to put these stages in a historic setting. Because these examined lives are close to them and they can therefore relate to the journeys, they are particularly poignant guideposts for their own life decision-making. By studying heroic qualities in the stories of people living near them or in similar situations, students can feel empowered to make a difference in their own communities.

Conclusion

Humans are storytelling organisms who individually and collectively lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 2)

Teachers in relating their experiences indicated various ways that narrative is used in

their schools to deepen children's understanding of their personal journey in the context of their community and culture. The use of narrative acknowledges that even though young children are in a very concrete stage in terms of logico-scientific thinking, they are indeed capable of abstract thought in a narrative sense (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986; Bruner, 1988, 1990). They can apply images to their own lives and further their understanding of the world through creating imaginary roles and situations. They use metaphors, similes and personification in their language to express understanding of their world; they use images and rhythm to aid memory. In fact, they demonstrate many of the attributes of rich oral language displayed by traditional preliterate cultures (Piaget, 1929/1973, Cassirer, 1946;

Montessori 1949/1988a; Steiner 1923/1996; Gardner & Winner, 1979; Bruner, 1990; Caldwell, 1997; Egan, 1997).

More than other methodologies, Steiner teachers believe these language characteristics give us insight into children's understandings. They thus view the value of oral narrative as far more than literary scaffolding. They believe that rhythm, rhyme and imagery relate to the mythic understanding of the child and thus these attributes of oracy are a basis of their early childhood curriculum. Steiner classrooms and those influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach tend to celebrate the animism in children's stories that helps them to make sense of their worlds rather than minimising its importance or treating these expressions as naïve or inferior. Each Steiner educator is also an adept oral storyteller. Oral storytelling is valued throughout the educational process for its power to create a meaningful interaction with a specific audience as well as using rhythm and image to enhance memory skills and vividly connect the listener to another time, place or culture (Bettleheim, 1977; Ong, 1982; Mellon, 1992; Edwards et al, 1993; Matthews, 1994, Egan, 1997, 2000a).

Montessori also placed great importance on imagination as a tool to abstraction. However she believed in fostering this imagination through images linked consistently to the real and natural world. Thus, an appropriate story for seven year olds would be *The Story of the Universe* in a Montessori school whereas in the Steiner school, fairy tales are chosen as appropriately corresponding to the challenges of that age group. Government and Catholic teachers are primarily concerned that children have a blend of fiction and non-fiction stories as a basis to their curriculum.

In addition to image creation, rhythm and ritual also help to define the complexity of the human journey for students. The rhythm of life is experienced in the rhythms and rituals of the classroom. Observations in all the schools revealed a rhythm in lesson plans that mirrored a narrative format. Steiner and Montessori classroom teachers are also attuned to the importance of altering periods of activity with periods of silence to aid a child's self-construction. Steiner educators view this rhythm as connected to human breathing. In contrast to the other methodologies, they have found using rhythmic patterns to be an effective tool of classroom management. In the Steiner school, rhythm is a pulse in the class as a whole. Thus, collectively the children might engage in a choral verse preceding a time of quiet concentration. Steiner teachers also stress the importance of linking patterned movements to sound in order to nurture holistic development.

In Montessori, allowance is made for individual rhythms as children make guided selections of the day's activities. For Government and Catholic teachers, there is a rhythm to the scheduling of the day and the terms and rhythmic and rhyming texts are used frequently to aid language acquisition. However, the Steiner approach is unique in using music, movement and oral poetry recitation on a regular daily basis to consciously aid the student in gaining insight into the rhythm of his/her own being and journey.

All of the schools visited have some nominated festivals and times for community gatherings that supported our journey in the community context. The Steiner and Montessori teachers also practise rituals connected with birthdays. Steiner teachers write birthday verses for their students. Montessori children reenact their yearly movement around the sun recalling significant moments on their journey. All the schools also have special celebrations for the graduating class, marking an end and a beginning in the human journey.

These communal experiences highlighting the patterns of life prepare the student to incorporate experiences that help him/her find an authentic voice and recognise the elements of their unique journey (Vygotsky, 1978; Fox, 1997; Diz-Imbelli, 1998; LaRouchelle & Bednarz, 1998). In a respectful environment, they hear stories of their peers, teachers,

and members of the community (Paley, 1988; Edwards et al, 1993; Sturm, 1997). Engaging in authentic dialogue with fellow students and teachers can support risk taking, critical thinking and self-reflection.

Studying the lives of others through autobiography and biography can also aid students in making sense of their life experiences thus far and in making choices aided by projecting into the future (Egan, 1986; Cusworth, 1996; Dougherty, 1999; Bateson, 2000). This process helps them appreciate the perspectives from different times, cultures and genders as they develop an understanding of their own unique combination of interests and attributes derived from these collective experiences. Steiner teachers, believing that children's understandings parallel the development of historical consciousness, focus on the lives of fantasy figures in fairy tales and fables in the first few years. Subsequently, they study mythological figures with each selected myth responding to the challenges and needs of children of a designated age. In contrast, Montessori, Government and Catholic teachers use a spectrum of biographical tools but with an emphasis on exposing children to real people in history and in the community. Catholic teacher Fran and Montessorian Carol both emphasise the importance of students experiencing the complex lives and interests of people who contribute to our society. Biographies and autobiographies become life metaphors for students as they acquire models for problem solving and dealing with life crises. Opportunities for students to hear the life stories of people in their communities from other cultures and other generations can provide rich cultural learning experiences. (Paley, 1997; Holmes, 1997; Fatowna, 2001) Constructing their own autobiographies is also an effective means of helping children to make connections between multiple life experiences as was demonstrated in Shawn's Montessori school's autobiography project (Dougherty, 1999).

In Shawn's school teachers were also encouraged to share their autobiographies with the class. However, as in the other Montessori schools, Government and Catholic schools, there was little opportunity to share personal narrative with other staff members aside from pre-staff meeting pleasantries. The Steiner teachers also identified this as an untapped support area for furthering the sense of community. However, both the Steiner teachers had recently had the opportunity to share their autobiographies with other members of staff in a weeklong workshop and they indicated that this had lessened the personal isolation that is prevalent in most teaching communities. There is thus indication that the positive effect of sharing personal narrative is undervalued in most school settings.

Storied data collected from in-depth interviews with Montessori, Steiner, Catholic and Government primary school teachers reveals varied approaches for using narrative to help children connect to their personal journey and thus to create meaning. Many of these approaches are derived from characteristics of oral tradition including rhyme, rhythm, choral repetition, and story sharing and celebrations in communal settings. There is also evidence that teachers perceive the classroom experience to be more relevant to the human journey if there is opportunity to engage in authentic dialogue including a sharing of personal narrative and an exploration of biographies.

Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resource. Mythology, in its original sense, is at the heart of things. (Alasdair MacIntyre, 1984, 216)

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