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Ilene L. Ingram

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Creative Maladjustment: Engaging Personal Narrative to Teach Diversity and Social Justice

Ilene L. Ingram

We all have stories—beautiful and ugly stories—neat ending and never ending stories. When personal narratives, the stories that come closest to the human experience, are used as pedagogy, they can be windows offering views of different worlds and people. In this way, personal narratives become lanterns that illuminate the real and imagined fences that divide us as human beings. The intention of this article is to give an account of both how and why I use personal narrative as a pedagogical method to teach diversity and social justice.

Outwitted

He drew a circle that shut me out—Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout;
But Love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle that took him in.

—Markham, 1936

Since the time cave dwellers told about their existence by etching pictures in stone and tribal elders explained the mysteries of the world from mouth to ear, we have been engrossed with storytelling. The stories we tell, read, or listen to shape our ways of knowing, and what might count as reality (Novinger & Compton-Lilly, 2005). Stories serve as a reminder that reality is not preset, nor is it a given (Richardson, 1990), and an “insistence that there is one kind of reputable human reality can be fatal to many people” (Greene, 1995, p. 118). Rather, stories enable us to give credence to reality. Personal narratives, the stories that come closest to the human experience, expose archetypal models, activate schemata or construct new ones to comprise new imprints (Walters, 2006). Personal narratives can serve as windows offering views of worlds and people that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange and when lighting conditions are just right, a window can also be a mirror (Sims-Bishop, 1990). The intention of this article is to give an account of both how and why I use personal narratives to teach diversity and social justice.

Prologue

The idea for personal narrative pedagogy presented in this paper developed from struggles I have faced at both the micro (classroom and school) and

About the Author

Ilene L. Ingram is an Associate Professor at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. Her research focus is social justice praxis, critical reflection, and personal narrative. Email: *ingram@oakland.edu*.

macro (district-wide and community) levels as an educator. This struggle has been to promote diversity and social justice, with the conviction that all children are able to achieve at high levels, without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. As my pedagogy advocates for diversity and social justice, I have become, as Kohl (1994) describes, *creatively maladjusted*:

Creative maladjustment consists of breaking social patterns that are morally reprehensible, taking conscious control of one's place in the environment, and readjusting the world one lives in based on personal integrity and honesty- that is, it consists of learning to survive with minimal moral and personal compromise in a thoroughly compromised world and of not being afraid of planned and willed conflict, if necessary. (p. 130)

To that aim, I feel responsibility to prepare my aspiring and practicing educational administration students accordingly. Beginning with these critical premises, my own personal narrative is both the medium and the message in the article.

Contextualizing

My career in education spans 30 + years as an elementary and middle school teacher and middle and high school administrator. After these many years of professional experience and tacit understanding, I have come to know that schools can be unhappy institutions lacking in tolerance, love, and human kindness, especially for students situated at the margins. I am mindful that in schools at every level, the growing numbers of students who are nonwhite and poor coalesce with the majority workforce of White teachers and administrators who have different socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural histories, and limited face-to-face experience with people who are different from themselves.

Importantly, while school populations have become more racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse, educational systems and schools remain deeply rooted in a White European social construct that devalues, minimizes, denies or ignores the history, culture, and lived experiences of Black students, Hispanic students and other students of color (Banks, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Gerwitz, 1998; Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 2004). A sad reality is "Our educational system has a checkered past in providing equality

and equity for all students” (Grant, 2004, p. 4). Social positionality, social dominance theory, and systems of White power and privilege perpetuate the marginalizing of diverse student groups (Howard, 1999).

Taken together, these factors contribute to the achievement gap between students of color and their white student counterparts (Cochron-Smith, 1999; Banks, 2001, Nieto, 2004). Ringo (2006) touches on this when she posits that the race achievement gap is viewed and addressed from deficit models that do not promote the academic achievement of students “whose target identities subject them to discrimination, prejudice, socioeconomic marginalization, and life-threatening circumstances in and out of the classroom” (p. 26).

Ingram and Morehead (2007) write that, “Broadly speaking, the achievement gap between white and non-white students is highly situated in the moral purpose of education and the socio-cultural context of schools themselves” (p. 384). The race achievement gap and the restoration of apartheid schooling in America (Kozol, 2005) vividly captures the moral and ethical obligation of educational leadership programs to advance diversity education and social justice praxis that disrupts and subverts long-established arrangements in educational systems and schools that sustain inequity, marginalization and exclusionary processes (Freire, 1973; Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Gewirtz, 1998).

Ethical Leadership and the Social Justice Agenda

Institutions of higher education in general, and educational leadership programs specifically, have come under attack for abrogating their civic and moral missions (Beck & Murphy, 1994; Beckner, 2004; Ciulla, 1998; Fullan, 2003; Starratt, 2004). At a time when the public schools are often blamed and held accountable for society’s civic and moral decline and social fragmentation (Boyer, 1996), leadership programs only touch the surface of cultural diversity, equity, and democracy (Marshall, 2004, p. 5). Levine (2005) explicated that, “. . . demographics are reshaping both the student body and the corps of administrators” (p. 11). He continued, “Schools have the job of educating a student population that is experiencing dramatic demographic changes, growing increasingly diverse, and becoming more and more segregated by income and race (pp. 11–12). In today’s environment, the moral and ethical dimensions of school leadership and the link to student outcomes become more acute. According to Stein (2006), “If schools of education are to remain relevant in this era of accountability, they must approach the preparation of school leaders as part of an urgent social justice agenda” (p. 522).

Despite the many fundamental disagreements and criticism about educational leadership programs, they are an entity positioned for *critical* teaching and emancipatory pedagogies that are on the same traditions of Dewey (1916, 1933) and Freire (1970, 1973). Rusch (2004) noted, “What academics do in classrooms transfers to words and action in schools” (p.

21). As such, faculty in educational leadership programs must initiate and sustain transformative pedagogy that let all of us move beyond the restricted confines of a familiar social order (hooks, 2003). *Critical* teaching and emancipatory pedagogies, therefore, rightly prepare educational leaders with ethical agency to initiate and sustain democratic school processes and social justice work.

In *The Road Less Traveled*, Ingram and Morehead (2007) suggested that the road not taken, or certainly less traveled in our educational leadership programs can lead toward cultural competence and a broader view of diversity. They say, “There is a much greater need to travel this road to identify which strategies, which interventions, and which programs lead to high achievement for all students” (p. 382). Unarguably, adequately preparing the esprit *dé corps* of educational administrators who are committed to valuing diversity and social justice are acute priorities and may be among the most important keys to the survival of our democratic way of life (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Riehal, 2000). What schools of education need most, are sound pedagogical models that precludes making polite conversations or issuing polemic dictums about student achievement disparities, racial and cultural diversity, and social justice (Frederick, 1995; Singleton & Linton, 2006). They need pedagogical methods to expose the elephant and get it out of the parlor.

Teaching in Higher Education

I currently teach at a large university in the Midwest. With very few exceptions, my graduate level students who are White middle class have no experience, or a very limited experience, with persons who are not like them in terms of race, culture, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic status. In fact, it was common for students to report that I was the *first* minority teacher (African American) in their *entire* educational experience. Further, my students reported that in their role as classroom teachers and administrators they are unsure about how to “treat” their minority students, who are few in number in their schools, for fear of being labeled as racists. They conveyed this in a manner that implied they wanted more diversity education in their educational leadership preparation program.

It is safe to say my students who are predominantly White, middle class are living the benefits of White privilege. They have the propensity to view schools as meritocracies that provide full access and equal opportunities for all students and are not cognizant of how their position in mainstream society fosters social cultural identity that perpetuates White dominance and supremacy. Given my observations, I recognized the acute need to help students conceptualize that the building blocks of sociocultural identity are race and social experience. I understood the need to challenge them to view schools as part of our “real” American society and the “real” world experiences of poor, non-white students that traditionally experience marginalization, discrimination, and rejection by educational systems and schools.

Rather than merely teach about educational administration theory and techniques of leadership, the learning experiences had to engage every student in *critical* reflection about their own values and beliefs and call what is going on internally out of obscurity. Further, it was imperative that students think *critically* about the meanings ascribed to whiteness within educational systems and schools. My hope was that students would become cognizant of their sociocultural identities and recognize how they are revealed through values, beliefs, dispositions, worldviews, and practice. Their task, I told them, was to think more *critically*, honestly, and deeply about who they are and the ways one's leadership is enabled and constrained by sociocultural context (DePree, 1998; King, 1991).

As an African American Assistant Professor, several years away from tenure eligibility, I did have uncertainties about engaging White, middle class students in dialogues about diversity and social justice and what might I expect as the result of such engagement? This same concern is true of other African American teachers in the predominantly White administration, faculty, and student body institutions in which they work. In fact, Ladson-Billings (2005) prefaces her highly regarded work in multicultural education and teacher education by pointing out "teaching in the academy is deemed a prize job and the selection of African American (and other scholars of color) teacher educators tend to require a higher level of scrutiny than that applied to their White colleagues" (p. 8). The openness of my students who said, "I did not experience attending school with members of diverse racial and cultural groups in my small rural community where everyone was White" and "I grew up in a household where there was very little tolerance for racial and ethnic groups," encouraged me to put aside all reservations and gave me a chance to develop diversity and social justice pedagogy.

The educational leadership knowledge base and traditional textbooks in my department's programs were sorely inadequate as a conceptual foundation for teaching about diversity and advancing social justice. As Shakeshaft (1995) describes,

The knowledge base in educational administration has been critiqued on many fronts, some of them addressed in plans to restructure the field of educational administration. The plans, no matter how well conceived, all seem to come from a similar perspective; they propose to regroup rather than rethink the knowledge base. Few, if any, of these proposals question the adequacy of these theories and practices. Most theory and practice in organizational and administrative thought is based upon studies and behaviors of white males and that it is adequate for understanding human behavior only to the extent that women and people of color interpret the world and respond like white males. (p. 139)

There is a growing body of literature that I was able to draw upon where scholars show steadfast commitment to diversity and social justice. Chavez and O'Donnell (1998) commented that, "These authors are often able to il-

illustrate by story, by example, and by sound scholarship the intensity within the teacher education enterprise and the political risks involved in yearning to engage learners in what must be” (p. 5). Initially, I considered that personal narratives as a theoretical framework would be problematic given the truncated and exclusive focus of the curriculum for each course that I taught. I reconsidered personal narrative as pedagogy after contemplating works of literature that link teaching and learning to diversity and social justice. Kozol’s (2005) uncompromising and honest book, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, made me more mindful of the legacy of racial isolation and the concentrated poverty of African American children in the United States. Ladson-Billings’ (2005) book *Beyond the Big House: African American Educators on Teacher Education* told the stories of seven African American teacher educators. These powerful personal narratives were important venues that informed and educated me about African American teachers whose efforts to address issues of difference, equity, and social justice made life better for us all. Greene’s (1995) classic *Releasing the Imagination*, espoused that teachers who want students to break through the limits of the conventional and the taken for granted must do so themselves. Frost’s (1913) poem, *Mending Walls* conveyed in a literal and metaphorical sense that walls divide us in our personal lives and across the contours of educational institutions, many conceptual and political walls are erected. hooks’s (2003) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, was the inspiration I needed “to pick up my bed and walk.” She wrote,

When college professors who are democratic educators share knowledge outside the classroom, the work we do dispels the notion that academic workers are out of touch with a world outside the hallowed halls of academe. We do the work of opening up the space of learning so that it can be more inclusive, and challenge ourselves constantly to strengthen our teaching skills. These progressive practices are vital to maintaining democratic education, both in the classroom and out.” (p. 43)

The Medium, The Message, And The Messenger

I grew up listening to the stories told by members of my immediate and extended African American family. For me, storytelling was a way to learn about *who* I am. We all have stories—beautiful and ugly stories—nurturing and heart breaking stories—neat ending and never ending stories—and real and imagined stories that makes empathy possible. I posit that because of their traditionally marginalized position in society, women, especially, have a right and a reason to tell their stories. Walters (2006) and Conner (2006) consider that when individuals who have group identity membership provide authentic words, accounts, and interpretations to life experiences, their personal narratives can serve as context that is worthy of careful study and deliberation. Delgado (1989) argued that members of the

majority race should listen to counter stories of minority group members that bring new knowledge and enrich their own reality. Moreover, personal narratives as a teaching resource can be engaging and enjoyable, and address controversial issues in a meaningful, less-threatening manner. Our personal narratives have the power to illuminate the real and imagined fences that divide us as human beings.

The Way of the Storyteller

Dislocation can be the ideal context that moves us beyond our familiar social order (hooks, 2003). I tell the following personal narrative to my students, which is a story about my own dislocation and the outward happenstance and inward journey that began my cross-cultural emersion and understanding of other worlds and people. This is my story.

The summer that I turned seven years old my family moved away from the projects where I had grown up to a White, Polish, Catholic neighborhood. This same scenario was unfolding in other White, singularly ethnic communities. It was common for African American families to encounter violent opposition to neighborhood integration. Cross burnings on lawns, racial epitaphs painted on property, vandalized automobiles, and a daily barrage of verbal racial slurs were some of the hate crimes they experienced. While my own family did not encounter these things, we did not feel “welcomed” to our new community.

For me, the move away from the projects was bittersweet. It meant leaving the large circle of adults and friends who constituted the extended family that I had known my entire life. On the other hand, the benefits of moving were a four-bedroom home with a spacious kitchen, formal dining room, basement recreation room, a large fenced backyard with a brick barbecue, and my own “Hollywood” style twin bed with a tufted white vinyl headboard.

The first summer in my new home was an especially lonely time for me. The White children on my street refused to play with me and I struggled with feelings of rejection and loneliness. This was very different from my life in the projects where my African American friends and neighbors embraced and nurtured me.

My new neighbor who lived next door was Mrs. Milenski (a pseudonym), and the occasion when we first met was a happenstance. The low fence that separated our yards afforded a good view of my neighbor’s flower gardens and the apple, peach, pear, and plum trees that flourished with fruit. On an afternoon when I thought she was not at home, I climbed over the fence. I was helping myself to some apples when Mrs. Milenski appeared from the garage that she used as a gardening shed. We were both surprised by our unexpected appearances. Transfixed, we stared at each other with our mouths open. Dressed in a long, black dress and big floppy hat my neighbor looked like the proverbial evil witch. Terrified of her, I threw the apples on the ground and ran home.

I encountered Mrs. Milenski a second time several days later. I was playing in my own yard when she called out to me from over the fence that separated our

property. She spoke to me, and sensing that I was about to run away, again, from over the fence that divided our yards she offered me a bag of apples and bouquet of flowers that she had grown in her garden. Unlike our first ill-fated meeting, the transaction of offering and accepting fruit and flowers across the fence that divided us would open new worlds of understanding for me, and for Mrs. Milenski. Even though age divided us by six decades, our friendship grew and blossomed.

I learned a lot about a culture that was unfamiliar to me because Mrs. Milenski was a storyteller. She told me stories about growing up in Poland, a place she called "the old country." She grew up on a farm with six brothers, two were older, and four were younger. They were a poor peasant family and work on the farm was hard and never ending. As the only girl, she cooked and cleaned, washed and sewed, and cared for her four younger brothers. With so much responsibility, there was never the time, nor the expectation that she would attend school.

I was a story teller, too. I told Mrs. Milenski stories about my family members and my African American culture that had been told to me by my father, aunts, and uncles. Like Mrs. Milenski, neither of my grandmothers was afforded the opportunity to attend school for long periods of time. Both grandmothers were born and raised up in the south where the schools for Negro children, when they did exist, were segregated and substandard compared to the public schools for White students.

Two months shy of her fifteenth birthday, Mrs. Milenski immigrated to America. The possessions she carried from Poland to America were the few items of clothing she owned, the prized family Bible, and a sealed letter written by the Catholic priest in her village that she had been instructed to deliver to the authorities when she arrived in her new homeland. Both of my grandmothers moved away from home and family at an early age. The stories handed down about both women included tales of them arriving at new destinations with little more than a few items of clothing and a well-loved, worn family Bible.

When Mrs. Milenski arrived in America, she lived in a small apartment over crowded with aunts, uncles, and cousins in the borough of Manhattan in the city of New York. Expected to "earn her keep," her uncle found her a job in a bakery where she prepared dough, and baked loaves of bread and Polish pastries. She turned over all of the money she earned to her uncle. When Mrs. Milenski was 16 years old, her uncle arranged for her marriage to a man who was 15 years her senior. She was happy in her marriage and wanted to have a large family.

The great depression changed her life. Without jobs and no money, the day-to-day existence was an ongoing struggle for her and her husband, and during the years of the great depression, her two children died during childbirth. Mrs. Milenski's dream of having a large family would never materialize. Both of my Grandmothers were also married in their teenage years. My maternal grandmother gave birth to three girls. My mother was the middle daughter. My paternal grandmother had five children. Her third child was my father.

The Milenski's moved away from New York City, and in time, they bought the house next door. Her husband's health had grown increasingly poor and he died

from a massive heart attack just six years after realizing the American dream of owning a home. Widowed in midlife, with only distant relatives and very few friends, Mrs. Milenski lived a lonely life. By her own account, “life took on new meaning when a little African American girl became her new neighbor.”

Mrs. Milenski was a wonderful cook and we spent many hours together in her kitchen where she taught me to cook traditional Polish foods. I taught Mrs. Milenski how to cook the traditional foods prepared by African Americans with southern roots. Cooking lessons included language lessons when I would help Mrs. Milenski practice speaking “good” English and she taught me how to speak a “passing” version of Polish. I no longer called her Mrs. Milenski, rather she became Pani (Mrs.), and I was happy to have her refer to me in Polish as Babka (a wonderful girl). We spoke both English and Polish while we cooked.

Pani taught me how to bake placek z jablkami (apple cake), chrut faworki (biscuits), placik (raisin bread), and naleśniki (crepes). We made chruschiki (dough) for pierogi and kluski (dumplings filled with potatoes or sauerkraut), and haluski (noodles). The vegetables grown in her garden were used to prepare barszcz (red beet soup), and golabki (stuffed cabbage). I “knew my way around the kitchen” and taught Pani to prepare “soul food,” which has its roots in slavery when slaves scavenged the cast off food from the plantation master’s table and the poorest cuts of meat when animals were butchered on the plantation. I taught Pani to cook black-eyed peas, collard greens, red beans and rice, southern fried chicken, cat fish stew, grits and pan gravy, hoppin’ John, and hot water corn bread.

Pani was Catholic and I attended the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Early in our friendship, we discovered that while we shared the same Christian faith, within our distinct Polish and African America cultural groups holidays are celebrated differently. At Easter time, we painstakingly decorated pysankis (a Polish version of an Easter egg without the inner egg white and yolk). Pani’s pysankis were genuine works of art and mine were “beyond description.”

My own version of the Easter egg was a hard-boiled egg that was decorated by dipping it in water that had food coloring added to it. My version of the Easter egg was far less painstaking to decorate, and edible. We also made traditional Polish Easter baskets, which we filled with Pani’s baked goods and canned fruits and vegetables. We always put two white candles in Pani’s Polish Easter basket. My own version of the traditional Easter basket contained jellybeans, marshmallow eggs, and chocolate bunny rabbits. I liked my own version much better.

Every Thanksgiving we had pie baking contests and my sweet potato pie, a traditional dessert served at Thanksgiving in my African American culture, usually won out over the pumpkin pie that Pani made. We also prepared budyn (a traditional Polish pudding) and raisin bread pudding (a traditional African American dessert garnished with a rum flavored hard sauce). Pani made a white bread “stuffing” and I prepared corn bread “dressing” to go with the Thanksgiving turkey.

We cooked the traditional foods that are eaten on the first day of the New Year in our cultural groups. Pani prepared biogos (a spicy Polish sausage and pork

stew), and I cooked chitterlings (boiled hog intestines that had an unpleasant smell but tasted delicious with a generous dousing of hot sauce). Pani did not like the chitterlings and I did not like the bigos.

Pani also taught me how to knit and crochet. While we worked on our various projects, she would drink hot tea with a slice of lemon in a cup from her collection of bone china cups and saucers, and I drank cold sweet tea traditional to my southern roots served in a glass (a mason jar was always preferable). Pani knew that I wanted to be a teacher and she became my student. She was eager to learn and enjoyed being the student, and I loved being the teacher. I taught reading and spelling lessons and gave tests to determine how well Pani mastered the lessons. After every school lesson Pani would tell me, “maty dziewczynka, ty jesteś dobry nauczycielka” (little girl, you are a fine teacher).

Not all of the times we spent together over the years were carefree. We grew increasingly distant from each other when our views about world events clashed. The Civil Rights Movement and related violence targeted towards Blacks by Whites was a watermark in our relationship and “tested” our friendship in ways we had not expected. We both found it difficult to see beyond our own points of view and had heated discussions about White privilege, racism, and prejudice deeply woven in the fabric of American society. Pani was apolitical and I was a political activist. Subsequently, we also had opposing points of view about America’s involvement in South East Asia and the war in Vietnam, which many of my high school classmates were called upon to fight. Pani viewed world events through the lenses of whiteness and those who had positions of privilege and power as the only reality for understanding the world. I, on the other hand, did not.

These world events, in particular, did strain our relationship, but through a sincere desire to seek to understand the other person they also brought us to a far greater understanding of what it means to combat the opaqueness of a worldview centered in self. It’s hard to be an enemy of someone whose story you know.

I was a junior in college studying to be a “real” teacher when Pani was hospitalized with pneumonia. When I visited her in the hospital, it was the first time that I had seen her without a babushka (scarf) covering her head. She was 86 years old, and very frail. My teacher, mentor, and beloved friend never returned to the house next door. As I share this story, what comes to mind most is that Pani would often tell me, “maty dziewczynka, ty jesteś dobry nauczycielka” (little girl, you are a fine teacher). This is one of my most treasured memories of the journey embarked upon between two people who would not let real and imagined fences divide them.

Epilogue

There is always a reflection period after I share a personal narrative with students. The purpose is to give students the opportunity to engage in a shared dialogue about what they understood and learned from the story. To this end, I can discuss several things. I begin by sharing some of the qualita-

tive comments students made during the dialogue period. All student names are pseudonyms.

Ken is in his fourth year teaching high school physical science. He aspires to be a high school principal and was the first person to comment about the story.

I think telling the story in a classroom with adult students leads to discussions we all need to have about diversity. I don't believe telling stories, no matter how well told they are, is the way to help teachers to improve their teaching so that all children learn.

Beth is a literacy coach in her district. She is unsure about wanting to be a school principal. She talked about the importance of the relationship between the two people in the story and the relationships between teachers and students.

I work with teachers in two different schools. The story made me mindful of the importance of relationships and the ways that we can learn from each other. Too many of the teachers that I work with are so engulfed in addressing the literacy needs of their students that they are often inconsiderate of the backgrounds of their students. What I witness daily in classrooms is the lack of time given to building teacher/student relationships. The story really made me consider how valuable caring relationships are for students who struggle with learning in the classroom.

Fiona is a first-year elementary school principal. She spoke about the way the story caused her to consider the challenges she faced to advocate for diversity and at the same time value the need for her district's schools to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) mandates determined by No Child Left Behind.

My school district became a school of choice school district four years ago, and a growing number of out of district students who are African Americans attend schools at all levels in the district. In our district principals' meetings, the topic of discussion is always on the need to improve the academic performance of the out of district minority students because principals are concerned about meeting AYP mandates. What is not discussed is the greater need to acclimate minority students to an all White student body and teacher school district and that principals and teachers value the diversity the students bring to the district and their individual schools.

When I brought this issue to the attention of my colleagues, the vast majority were incensed. I was surprised and hurt by their reactions. In my district, it appears that valuing diversity takes a back seat to making AYP.

Frank, a second year middle school principal, shared his own personal narrative that was "triggered" by the story.

I was nine years old when my great grandfather came to live at our house. At first, I was ashamed of Grandpa Sal because he mixed up English and Italian in the same sentence and listened to opera music. My friends would make fun of him and I usually joined in, too. I was mortified when he made a garden in our back yard. The other back yards in the neighborhood were grass lawns. Our back yard looked like a farm. At my mother's urging, I would spend time with Grandpa Sal working in the garden.

I actually learned to like gardening and I grew close to my great grandfather based on our time growing and cultivating the garden. Saturday mornings were our special time together when he taught me how to keep bugs from eating the plants (sprinkle firewood ashes around the roots of plants) and how to tell a bad weed from a good plant because I was prone to mistaking a healthy plant for a weed and would rip it out of the soil.

Under my Grandpa Sal's tutelage, I learned to be more patient. He also taught me about the need to have a good character and to always be honest, especially with myself. Grandpa Sal even taught me to speak Italian. He did not tolerate prejudice and bigotry. He told me the story that my great grandmother's parents did not want her to marry him because he was a poor lad and they did not believe he would amount to very much. This was a lesson that he taught me about looking beyond the surface and not judging people on outward appearances.

In our schools, too often minority children are treated like the weeds that we don't want growing in our gardens. We do not take the time to nurture their development and understand their unique learning needs. The story had meaning for me as a husband, father of two sons, and as the principal of a middle school. In all of these roles, I believe that I have a responsibility to value the unique attributes of all people and to work toward creating a world where we can live together, learn together, and take pride in who we are without diminishing who others are.

I am mindful when I engage personal narratives to teach about diversity and social justice that the ultimate aim is to promote the inner dialogues of the students. As it often happens with storytelling, the events and themes of the story evoke "stories within the story" for the listeners. It is actually possible and desirable to use the students' reflections about the story as part of the curriculum. In this way, the students become the curriculum of study.

I can conclude from the class discussion following this story that some students merely found the act of storytelling to be entertaining and believed the story had very little relevance to them in either a personal or professional sense. Some students did reflect on the many parallels and the external forces that influenced the lives of the women in the story.

The majority of students "wrestled" with the story. They reflected *critically* about their own values and beliefs systems and what Joyce King (1994) describes as dysconscious racism. According to King (1994) dysconscious racism is rooted in uncritical habits of mind and the every day acts that reinforce racist behaviors and White dominance. She writes, ". . .

uncritical habits of mind must be identified, understood, and brought to awareness” (p. 132). Further, I can conclude that the majority of students were *critically* reflective about their own social justice praxis as teachers and school principals.

Most gratifying to me are the qualitative comments students have expressed about personal narrative pedagogy to teach diversity and social justice, for example:

“Unlike any of the textbooks in my educational leadership courses [your] personal narratives helped me to gain insights about my own sociocultural upbringing. Such introspective thinking was intimidating at first, but challenged me week after week to think deeply about myself as an educational leader in our diverse society.”

Another student expressed:

“The best way I can describe [your] personal narratives is to say that they were thought provoking and galvanized the start of my efforts to act on how my high school can address the needs of our English language learners and African American students who experience difficulty upon their initial enrollment in an all White high school that is foreign and fear-inducing. Sharing with others my diversity awareness and understanding from the course constitutes my own personal narrative to teach about diversity.”

In sum, engaging personal narrative as pedagogy is attractive for me, in part, because I am able to add my voice to an educational administration knowledge base that traditionally denies the voices of minorities and females. In addition, personal narrative provides a context for students to view me as a world citizen, teacher, and scholar deeply committed to improving the educational experiences of all children. At the most moral and ethical levels, I believe I must teach the skills and dispositions that are necessary to restructure schools on the foundations of democracy and justice that Dewey (1933) explicated over a century ago.

If I fail as a teacher to explicate diversity and social justice, it enables students to hold onto the common belief in our society that schools are meritocracies and all students stand an equal chance in the education experience. In the broadest sense, I believe personal narratives can move both the teacher and students beyond the confines of what is known in order to consider what might be possible.

Will my educational administration students’ personal lives and professional practice reflect a genuine appreciation of diversity and social justice? Will their own praxis, which involves *critical* reflection and acting on the world to transform it (Freire, 1998) change the morally reprehensible traditions of educational institutions and schools to deny access, equity, and equality to all students? As is the way of the storyteller, I choose to end this paper in the form of a cliffhanger. We will just have to wait and see.

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