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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on classroom-based narratives that reflect how a convenience sample of 25 graduate students, who were also practicing teachers, wrote about and utilized the real-life events and experiences of their students to help them become instructional explorers and effective problem solvers. The narratives had to be a depiction of actual events that occurred in instructional practice and had to reflect the reality of classroom practices. They also had to provide for multiple perspectives and levels of self-analysis. In the narratives, the teachers functioned as freelance writers, attempting to better understand and cope with the challenges of teaching in a large, urban school district. The study showed that three kinds of influences defined the environment in which classroom-based narratives dominated the scenario (extrinsic, intrinsic, and individual values and beliefs). The case studies and self-reflections helped the teachers analyze their beliefs and demonstrated how thinking about and reflecting on instructional approaches could result in changed paradigms and improved teaching. (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

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Classroom-Based Narratives: Teachers Reflecting on Their Own Teaching Stories

*A New Page in the Story of Success...
A New Chapter in the Life of Hope*

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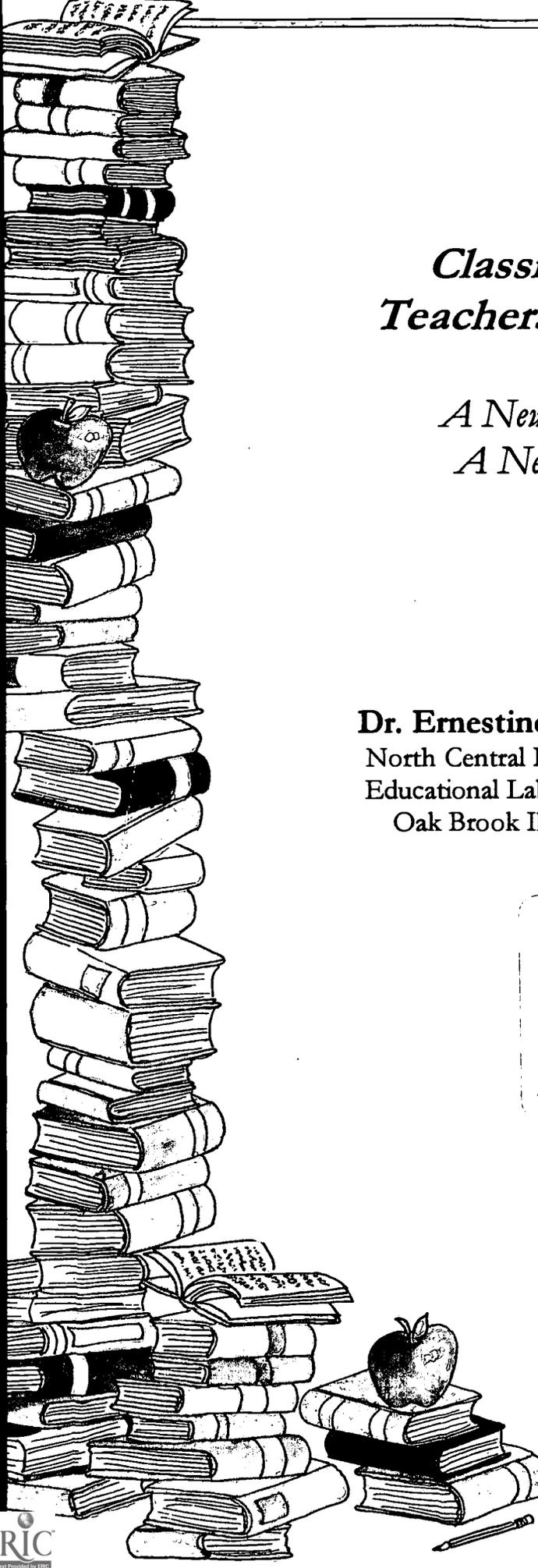
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Classroom-Based Narratives: Teachers Reflecting on Their Own Teaching Stories

A New Page in The Story of Success...A New Chapter in the Life of Hope

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on classroom-based narratives that reflect how a convenience sample of twenty-five graduate students, who were also practicing teachers, utilized the real life events and experiences of their students to help them become instructional explorers and effective problem solvers. In the narratives, the teachers functioned as freelance writers, who attempted to better understand and cope with the challenges of teaching in a large urban school district. The case studies and self reflections helped them to analyze their beliefs and demonstrate how thinking about and reflecting on instructional approaches can result in changed paradigms and improved teaching.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most compelling responsibilities we can have on the human landscape of life is to live, learn, and write our own stories of this evolving landscape. Stories about whom we are, what we do, our dreams and aspirations, our successes and our failures, our expectations of ourselves and others, our triumphs and disappointments, in other words, a kaleidoscopic view of where we are on the journey.

What are the stories of our lives, work, family, and love? We have all experienced different encounters, met different people, and traveled in different directions. Therefore, each of us is responsible for writing our own dialogues. We write our stories by living them. The dialogue between where we are, and where we want to go, is the voice that builds our direction and hope for the future. Yesterday's decisions become today's determinant for tomorrow's destiny. The future carries no guarantees, only possibilities. As individuals, we have to determine what we will do with the possibilities in order to have some control of the destiny that awaits each of us. We have to ask ourselves what we will do with the hopes and possibilities that

could change the flow of tomorrow's happenings? Hope gives us undaunted strength in a world of promise and possibilities. Hope is the human spirit's way of responding to the future of a dream or the faith in a new beginning. Nothing can be achieved without hope. No builder ever laid a brick without hope. No poet ever put a pen to paper without hope. No painter ever put a brush to canvas without hope. No teacher ever transformed a child's life without hope.

If there were special gifts that could be bestowed upon our world, they should include: hope, self reflection, perseverance, empathy, patience, and the will to face the future as a role model of excellence for young people. Our students look to us for wisdom and guidance, as they begin the dialogue that will orchestrate the choreography of their dance with life. What will we, as educators, contribute to the musical score of their lives? How can we ensure that the rhythm puts them in concert with the "beat" or requirements and demands of the society in which they will be expected to function as contributing participants? What type of lyrics can we provide for them that will encourage, empower, inspire, and challenge them to strive for the highest peak of their mountain of dreams?

As educators, in the rush of "doing education," we often fail to just stop and "listen to the music." We overlook the instruments (children), and miss the beautiful melodies they are so capable of creating and performing. However, when we take time, step back, reflect on and record the words and deeds of both the instruments and the conductor (teacher), it is then that the discords can be examined, replayed, and corrected, which will help to create a harmonious teaching and learning environment where the collective voices of students and teachers share in a vision.

How strong the heart of the human condition becomes, depends upon our ability and willingness to reflect on the daily events in classrooms and schools, and to record these as case studies or classroom narratives; then use these as guides in helping us to rethink, revise, and restructure how we go about doing the business of schooling. As we articulate our stories, hopefully, we will become more proficient at teaching our students how to sing songs of hope, love, life, knowledge, and self worth.

Rationale

Effective teacher education programs in colleges and universities, have as essential components of their courses of study, action research, case studies, and teacher reflections. These three elements are a catalyst for providing preservice and practicing teachers with the tools to personally gather information and evidence that will aid them in making decisions about best practices, effective instructional strategies, and appropriate instructional materials. They also will help teachers construct a bridge between theory and practice, and will aid them in the process of learning how to solve and resolve issues that are directly and indirectly related to successful classroom instruction. In addition, these methods will illustrate how “thinking about and reflecting on” instructional approaches and practices can result in changed paradigms and improved teaching.

This paper will address two of these, namely, case studies or case writing, and teacher reflections. Case writing and teacher reflections are excellent ways for teachers to become aware of and recognize the complex problems associated with teaching and learning. These methods help teachers peel back the layers of confusion regarding “what works best, and what does not work.” They give the teachers a reflective, but “nonthreatening” mirror that can be used for self examination, self analyzation, self evaluation, and self improvement. Case writing and teacher reflections provide teachers with such insights as who they are, what they value and why, their expectations of themselves and their students, and their visions and goals.

Education, and teachers in particular, have received a great deal of attention and criticism in the public domain for a number of years. This attention has created the misconception of many of our teachers as tedious, indolent individuals, who stick to the outdated, uninteresting, and mundane ways of doing things. Typically, teachers have been portrayed as individuals who are reluctant to accept changes and opposed to innovations. However, these accusations have not been confirmed [Richardson and Anders, 1995]. What seems to be validated is the fact that teachers may exhibit more resistance to external changes or that which is externally mandated. Research has indicated that if teachers are included in making decisions about the teaching and learning process, and if they can claim some control over the learning environment, they are more willing to accept and adopt innovations and changes. On the other hand, any imposition

from external sources will most likely provoke resistance and detrimental attitudes toward change adoptions.

Clearly the role of the teacher is important in modifying the learning environment. In fact, there is continuous evidence that teachers are constantly changing. Some examples are the adoptions and adaptation of new methodologies, instructional strategies, instructional materials, and the incorporation of new knowledge from staff development research and programs into their own curriculum. In essence, teachers do not fear experimentation in their classrooms. They are not intimidated by new ideas, nor are they afraid to explore new educational territories. They are willing and anxious to volunteer themselves as instructional guides who will investigate, probe, direct, challenge, and encourage. They are courageous enough to, if necessary, convert their habitual teaching modes into practical realities, if it means the outcome will be the improvement of student learning and academic success. The development of case studies and self-reflections is one vehicle by which teachers can become that “explorer” and “problem solver.”

Defining Case Studies

A case study is the general description of a situation. Ashbough & Kasten [1995], Kowalski [1991], and Merseeth [1997] agree with referring to a case study as the narrative description of an incident, not its intended purpose. In this paper, the terms “case study” and “narratives” are used interchangeably. The nature of the knowledge base in any professional field relates directly to the purpose of the case study. Thus, depending upon the field and the context, the case study focuses on associating academic content and realities. The case study entails using realistic incidents in which teachers acquire analytical skills, learn how to synthesize information, know about concept development, apply theoretical concepts, and other abstractions against concrete situations [Ashbaugh & Kasten, 1995].

Sampling Features

A convenience sample of twenty five-graduate students represented the subjects in this study. All participants were enrolled in an **Research in Reading** course in a Midwestern university. The subjects, holding teaching positions in one of the largest public school system in the USA, were pursuing their master degrees in Reading Literacy. In general, the subjects' ages were between late twenties and early fifties; they possessed a various range of teaching experience from three to thirty-five years or more. The course focused on recent research in reading instruction. The description read:

In this course, participants will survey the recent research in the field of reading theory and reading instruction, as well as research related to the reader, children's literature, and effective reading programs. The emphasis will be placed on reading and discussing current research, which has made a major impact on both theory and practice. Each participant will identify a research question and develop an action research plan.

Procedure

This paper focuses on a group of teachers who were dedicated, caring, and adventurous enough to take a risk and step into the unknown and unfamiliar territory of writing narrative cases, based on their everyday experiences as facilitators of learning.

As with most schools, and especially urban schools of large cities, the challenges are tremendous. However, it is extremely gratifying and humbling to see the efforts of teachers, students, parents, and administrators, as they continuously struggle to find solutions to the problems that society has created and transplanted into our schools. These teachers, in a first attempt at narrative cases, jumped "head first," without a safety net, into trying to put into words, the daily classroom situations, emotions, failures, and small glimmers of breakthroughs.

The writing of the cases evolved "accidentally," as the teachers started discussing the assigned journal readings and other materials on reading research. Their major complaint was that much of what they were reading and learning did not address the atypical problems they faced on a daily basis. Therefore, they felt the external problems of their students prevented them from effectively applying the research. They were asked to discuss and further explore the

problems they encountered and perceived as a hindrance to teaching and learning. It was suggested they “write” about these various incidents and bring them to class to share and discuss. This extrinsic force stimulated the identification, revision, and analysis of a particular instructional or non-instructional dilemma emerging during the learning process.

The classroom-based narratives vary markedly in length because situations differ from each other. In the narratives, teachers are free-lance writers who use their talent, soul, and heart to characterize situational teaching. The narratives in this study are purposefully not taken to their conclusions because they may not have been finalized, yet, neither is there a set of prescribed data standards. In fact, one situation may have originated another one, chaining a series of related events. Very often these later events are excluded from the narratives.

As stated, teachers were asked to write about their own experiences. They were coached to activate their prior knowledge, to retrieve from their long-term memory any situation that may have impacted their ways of doing things. When writing their narratives, no restrictions about grammatical and/or use of standard English rules were considered. However, directions were given about authenticity, sequence, and relativity, even though the process of analysis was not. The importance of allowing the teachers to “free write” was to help them focus on their thinking and structure their ideas to ensure that by telling or recreating the story, insight and/or self-reflection would arise and provoke their own questioning that could change the flow of their teaching practices. Proponents of classroom-based narratives often stress that the analysis of the situations does not necessarily yield a single point of view. There are no “right answers” in self-reflections. There are no “wrong views” in classroom-based narratives.

Selection Criteria of Narratives

A number of criteria guided the selection of classroom-based narratives. First, all the narratives in this collection had to depict actual events that occurred in instructional practices. They are real, not fictional. The cases satisfy the criterion that they “bring a chunk of reality” into the professional classroom [Lawrence, 1960].

A second criterion for selection was that the narratives reflect the reality of classroom practices. None of the narratives invoke “right action.” Instead, they illustrate the intricate and

awkward situations that typify classroom practices and seek to convert theory into practice. Thirdly, the complexity of the narratives had to provide for multiple perspectives and levels of self-analysis. What can the teacher expect when reflecting on the complex process of teaching through the self-analysis of narratives? Classroom-based narratives help avoid over-generalizing from either principles or prior situations learned.

Classroom Narratives

Narrative Number One: Teacher: Mr. J.

In an at-risk community such as the one I work in, it seems common to have an entire class performing below grade level. I have even had classes where there may have been two or three students at grade level. In the four years of working in this community, never have I had a student performing above grade level, not until this year. Being a professional means not having biases and treating all of your clients the same. After all, we work for the students and their parents don't we?

Looking over my cumulative records this summer I spotted something astonishing, a student that scored 2 years above grade level on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). I was excited and ashamed at the same time. On one hand, this was a refreshing change. I began planning, in my head, all the enrichment activities that I wanted to do with her, as compared to the mundane ones for the other students in the class. How ashamed I felt after thinking about it, that my expectations of my students had sunk to an all time low. It is my duty to try and teach all of my students as though they are all above grade level, despite the fact that they are coming to me performing years below their assigned grade.

C. was just as I had imagined her. Extremely bright, pleasant and always smiling. It was like she enjoyed every moment of school. She breezed through the diagnostic assignments that I normally give my class on the first few days of the new school year. This was to give me a gauge for providing the types of lessons and pace to administer to my class. I was more impressed with the fact that she would take out library or trade books to read after each assignment was completed. For the first few weeks the entire grade level cycle teachers considered her a golden girl. She was a breath of fresh air in a school that seemed to be suffocating.

After further review of her records, I noticed that the previous year was her first in this school system. She had come from a northwestern suburb. I found this odd, a student moving from a middle class community to a community with a 99% poverty rate, but, I left that alone. It was not my business. For some reason, I wanted to meet this girl's parents. I could not wait for the meet and greet night at our school.

That night finally arrived and I became anxious. I wondered how I would spot them. I didn't bother to find out if C. was living with both parents or one. I assumed that she lived with both, coming from her previous background. I wondered if either of her parents or even both were light skinned. C. was extremely light with long dark straight hair. She could have been a product of an interracial couple I thought, but I couldn't imagine a white person living in the community where our school is located. The night was about over, and only a few parents came in. I didn't remember seeing any couples, interracial or otherwise. I didn't discuss grades until I was sure of whose parents I was speaking to, unless they identified themselves as such. Sometimes the child and parent would have different surnames, so I really wouldn't know.

Just when time was about up, a parent that I knew for her volunteer work in the school came in. I thought it was strange that Mrs. J. would come to see me. I would always see her with a smaller child. But because we have a large population of extended families in our community, I figured she was there for a niece or nephew. I remembered that she was an aunt to a former student of mine who just so happened to have a younger sister in one of my science classes. I asked Mrs. J. to make sure her child studied at home for at least 30 minutes each evening. She had the strangest look on her face. I can remember it as if it was yesterday. She said, "I will tell her mom, but I'm here for C." Now Ms. Jones is extremely polite and cooperative. She is helpful and excellent with the kids I've seen her involved with, but I would have never guessed that she was C's mother. That night she apologized for her husband not being there, and stated that he was anxious to meet me. She said C. always talked about this really cool, young, black male teacher.

I learned two things in my young assuming career as a teacher. (1) Never judge a book by its cover. Just because families are living in an impoverished community doesn't mean that they are not good, decent people, who care about how well their children do in school. And (2),

every child that I encounter, whether rich or poor, black or white, good or bad, single parent or otherwise, deserves to be treated and educated as if his or her ITBS scores were 10.0. I would like to apologize to everyone that I made feel less than that.

Narrative Number Two: Teacher: Ms. B.

It's my first day with a new class in a new school. Lots of first! A little apprehension had set in. I've heard rumor that this is the class from the hot spot and you know where that is! I was in my room preparing for my students when I was visited by my new colleagues. They greeted me warmly and then offered me their sincere condolences, adding that if there was anything they could do, please don't hesitate to ask. They entered one by one, each with the same words of wisdom and sympathy. As I sat between visitors, I really began to wonder just what type of class was on the way. As I sat, lost in my thoughts, a male teacher entered my room, introduced himself, and welcomed me to the school. He began telling me all about the students in my class individually. I wondered to myself how he knew so much about my class, but decided not to ask, but just listen to what he had to say. His final words to me were to be very careful of M. who had a reputation that preceded him. He ended our conversation by sharing with me that this had been his class and when he discovered there was a new teacher coming, he asked for a different class - one with fewer problems because after all, he needed to make his life as easy as possible. I thought, man, what a guy! Talk about looking out for your fellow colleague!

Well the great moment of anticipation had finally arrived. The bell rang and the students entered the building. I stood on my post outside my door and greeted the students as they arrived. I didn't get much of a response, but continued my greetings anyway. The tardy bell rang and the time had come for me to be alone with my little darlings. I entered the room and all the students were huddled in a corner engrossed in deep conversation, which I later learned was a meeting to discuss how they were going to get rid of me. I told them to take their seats and I began to take attendance. Much to my surprise, everyone was absent, but yet, there were twenty-nine students in front of me. Well, this meant that I would have to go into my survival bag and solve this mess. I rang the office and asked if someone could cover my class so that I could go to the phone and call twenty-nine parents because their children had not reported to school. The

principal came and asked what was going on. I told him the story, he looked at me as if I had lost my mind, but decided to go along with my plan. Just as I gathered my attendance book, purse, and note pad, my students decided I was not joking. They began to fess up and put all the blame on M., it had been his idea and he had threatened anyone who would not go along with the plan. The principal removed M. to speak with him about his behavior. I took attendance again, and needless to say everyone was in attendance except M. because he was still with the principal. The rest of the day went along without incident, even though the atmosphere was a little strained because the students didn't know just how far they could go with me and their illustrious leader had been temporarily silenced. They did their assignments reluctantly and without substance. We made it through the first day without any further disturbances.

We began the second day of class on a different note. M. wasn't there and the students did not know what to do, other than what I asked them to do. Well that moment of bliss lasted about an hour until you know who arrived. I asked him if he had a note for being late and of course his response was no. I continued my inquiry about why he was late. He finally told me that his mother had sent him to the store and that she didn't know how to write, therefore, he didn't have a note. I didn't want to seem uncompassionate, but had the gut feeling that he hadn't told me the truth. Of course while M. was telling me this story, his partners in crime were laughing uncontrollably, which was a very accurate clue that he was lying. I decided to follow my hunch and call M.'s mother on my prep period. Fortunately, I was able to reach her and tell her what had transpired. She was shocked and wanted to assist me anyway she could. We decided on an action plan that wouldn't involve her just yet.

M. also had a reputation for having sticky fingers. I decided that it was time to take care of this situation once and for all. I allowed M. to continue his charade a couple of more days to make sure he was the only leader of the pack. When I decided that it had gone far enough, I put my plan in motion. I had been taking my purse with me at all times because I had no locking cabinets. I overheard the girls talking about a plan the boys were making for my purse, so I decided to make a plan of my own for my belongings, namely, my purse. I began breaking M.'s strong hold apart by emphasizing how each student was an individual and had to be responsible for his/her own actions. We began talking about what each student needed for success in today's

world and what role they anticipated playing in the big picture. M. had very little to add, but made mental as well as verbal notes about how his classmates were becoming wimps. My plan was beginning to work, but the main player had not claimed his part. I knew that it would be necessary to do something that involved him without the help of his crew, an involvement that would make him accountable to me.

One day, I was called to the office. I found this to be the perfect opportunity to work my plan. I told the class that I needed to go to the office and wanted everyone to continue their work. I then added that I was putting M. in charge of my purse. I pulled him aside and informed him that if anything was missing from my purse, I was holding him personally responsible. He was reluctant in the beginning, but when he discovered I was serious, his attitude changed. I left the room, but stood outside of the door momentarily. I heard M. say that nobody was going to bother my purse. A few of the boys told him that they were on their way over to my purse and that he couldn't stop all of them. He retorted very heroically that he sure couldn't stop them all, but that he intended to do whatever it took to do the job I had given him. I gave them a few more minutes to debate their dilemma and work out their differences. Finally everyone took their seats and continued their assignments quietly. When I entered the room, everything was quiet, but more important, everyone wanted to work. From that moment on, the class from hell had settled and were a total surprise to everyone, even me.

About three years ago, M. came to see me and gave me an update on his life. He now lives in Michigan, works for a radio station and has returned to school, pursuing a career in communications. He had one child and a live in girlfriend that he intended to marry when his career got off the ground. I haven't spoken to him since, but can only hope that his success continues. My worst terror became my best student as well as someone that looked out for me at all times.

In reflecting on how I felt about my fellow colleagues regarding the help and support I did NOT get; how I handled M., and how I was able to succeed to the point that I did because of support from the parents of those students, I can pinpoint how these events helped to shape me as a teacher. I never allow a new teacher to come into our school without offering any kind of support, materials, and supplies I can provide. I have a deep appreciation for parents, although

others complain about the lack of parental involvement; and most important, my students have taught me that I should not give up on anyone; they are savable if we just take the time to let them know we care and expect better things from them, many times, more than they expect from themselves.

Narrative Number Three: Teacher: Ms. F.

With the pressures of probation and restructuring in our system, the Board has been pushing teaching strategies for standardized testing. We have been using Scoring High and IGAP Coaching. Teachers are stressed and students burned out. There was a focus on inferences and summarizing. Data interpretation was forced and then reinforced. Analyzing and evaluating were emphasized and reemphasized. Everyone was ready. We were anxious and excited waiting for the big day. The day came and went and a sense of calm and relief came over the city.

When the scores came back, there was not the significant change I expected. There was an average gain of one year in both math and reading. I had my students take a criterion-reference test as part of the probationary immediate action plan. The students' scores had increased 2-3 percentage points from those at the beginning of the year. How truly discouraged I was. To think, after all of this work, and no real gain! I decided to scrap the basal reader, the testing manuals, and anything else mandated by the probation managers.

By accident (or fate), I stumbled upon Walter Dean Myers' Somewhere in the Darkness. How refreshing it was to read fiction with events closely related to my own life and culture. Knowing that most of my students have similar backgrounds, I had a brilliant idea. I would introduce Jimmy (the main character) as a real person, experiencing real problems as an adolescent. He would come from a single family household, with a father in prison. He would live in the ghetto and dislike school. My students were so intrigued that they begin asking higher order thinking questions. I then gave them an excerpt with a cliff hanger as an ending. I would ask them suppose "ifs", how "woulds" and "what abouts". They ate it for lunch! Each day craving for another episode of "our friend Jimmy."

The low achieving students never participated so much. The higher achieving students would read volumes a day. Instead of dreading instructional reading, they anticipated the next day's lesson. How silly could "we" have been to teach reading strategies out of context! In this divine way, it was revealed to me that personal experience coupled with interest and reading strategies is the best way to increase maximum achievement in reading. Not drill and practice.

Conclusion

In this study three kinds of influences defined the environment in which classroom-based narratives dominated the scenario. The first of those influences were extrinsic to the teaching moment in which the classroom situation occurred. The teachers in this study were required to keep daily journals of events in their classrooms. This extrinsic force stimulated the identification, revision, and analysis of a distinctive instructional or non-instructional dilemma emerging during the learning process.

Intrinsic or internal factors made up the second set of influences and included features and characteristics inherent to the situation. For example, if an incident occurred, what should be the teacher's action or reaction, and what could or would be the most appropriate strategy to handle it? In general, the emerging affair may be solved depending on the sophistication and experience of the practitioner. The intrinsic influences may or may not be acknowledged and addressed unless the teacher is determined to find "soup for his or her soul." The intrinsic role of a teacher calls for reflections, deliberations, and judgements about his or her own teaching delivery model. Since there is no single approach to teaching and learning [Merseeth, 1997], classroom-base narratives can stimulate individual study and reflection as well as offer a springboard for problem solving. In essence, classroom-based narratives may produce thoughtful strategies and effective teaching action plans.

Teachers also responded to a third influence which was compiled by their own set of core beliefs, values, personal philosophies, cultural assumptions, creeds, and doctrines about education. Whether an individual values lectures as a method of instruction over cooperative learning strategies, or monolingual education over bilingual education, these factors will significantly influence deliberation, analysis, self-reflection, and resulting actions.

The classroom-based narratives allowed the teachers to take both a subjective and objective look at themselves and their instructional practices. Through these narratives, they were able to question, examine, and challenge themselves regarding the best recurring practices that combined a recognition and analysis of the extrinsic and intrinsic factors that influenced the learning environment of their classrooms. The self reflections and writing of classroom-based narratives helped these teachers to realize the act of teaching involves much more than the mind; it involves the very essence of what it means to care, love, and nurture the children who come to school each day, with the hope that today will be better than the day before.

As Argyris stated, the advantages of the case study method is that they are an enjoyable way to motivate teachers to learn about teaching and learning[Argyris, 1986]; this method results in active rather than passive learning and requires student participation [Argyris, 1980]; it improves communication skills; and it develops group thinking skills and encourages consensus [Argyris, 1980].

The teachers in this study exhibited all of the tenets stated by Argyris, in addition, they discovered that when they thought and taught with their minds and hearts, the benefits and new learnings for the students and themselves were immeasurable.

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