

Faith narrative and ethical practice in the literacy field

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Abstract

What is the intersection between being a person of faith and a literacy teacher? How do educators experience literacy instruction when trying to connect their faith and practice? Using the lens of researchers Clandinin and Connelly (2000) these questions were explored from the perspective and experience of one of the co-authors. Three themes of Christian pedagogy emerged from the results of this narrative inquiry: the power of words, the power of forgiveness, and the power of voice.

Introduction and Background

Imagine the experience of a teacher who is in charge of ensuring all students in a classroom read well, a goal that includes the avid readers in the group, as well as the struggling and reluctant readers who share this space. Now, imagine this work on top of the identity formation that takes place when trying to lead a life of Christian character. The work is complex and layered but is also a labour of love.

This project seeks to consider the experience of reading teachers who engage in this multifaceted work, balancing the demands of literacy instruction with their personal faith. The major question that guides this work is, “How do educators experience literacy instruction when trying to connect their faith and practice?”

To answer this question, we draw on Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) exploration of narrative inquiry.

Our stories as educators, who happen to also be people of faith, serves as grounding for the work we do – and we are equally encouraged by one another’s faith narrative. This approach is uniquely suited to our thinking, as one of the authors served as a research participant as we worked on this project.

It is our hope that some of the themes we share will resonate with a wider set of themes in the broader community of Christian educators. In our journey through this process, shared considerations centre around the research question: What is the intersection between being a person of faith and a literacy teacher?

Christ and the Academy

As Hove and Holleman (2017) pointed out, being a follower of Christ in academic communities is considerate work. The balance between inculcation and invitation is a real one, and the ways faith is incorporated in our daily lives is one of thoughtful self-reflection. We are told in scripture that we will be known as followers of Christ by the love we show to one another – yet it seems easier to simply decorate our office in crucifixes, inspirational mugs, and Jesus action figures.

Gathering the narrative

To serve as a starting point for dialogue about faith and practice, two of the authors engaged in a semi-structured interview process. One acted as a researcher, while the other reflected on their teaching experience, positioning themselves as an educator and interviewee. In this section, the broad strokes of that experience are shared, locating faith and practice

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in the narratives recounted to one another. In order to value the words of the speaker, the following section is organized by codes that were drawn directly from the interview (Saldaña, 2015), referenced to the line numbers of the interview transcript.

As a final introductory note, this line of research also connected to a specific problem also explored in this interview—working with readers who struggle.

A Portrait in Practice

This portrait of the educator's practice has been shaped by words that resonated from the interview experience. In order to construct this portrait, we arranged codes in a set of categories that reflected the educator/interviewee's experiences.

Prior.

"Prior" codes were marked and grouped by the participant's experiences as a teacher in the public school system prior to teaching at the college level. This was the word the participant chose, so we applied the *in vivo* term "Prior." This first prior experience was at a school that closed down (line 70). The participant seemed to indicate that experience in the public education classroom, totaling seventeen years, had been one of the factors that led to this participant's later research in the area of literacy.

Having moved from place to place for a variety of reasons, this interviewee described experiences in the classroom with a variety of locations (line 69), and this background propelled our conversation about challenges and strategies in the field of literacy. Interestingly, this participant's teaching of younger children seemed to inform observations made later about members of a family who both excelled and struggled in reading from elementary through secondary education. Strategic information was also shared in this section of the interview, including the participant's advice to "listen to [students] read individually" (line 193), among other ideas for literacy improvement.

All approach teacher education based on our experiences in the classroom, and the ways Christ was experienced in the work that we have done, continues to ground the work we now do.

Grandsons.

The educator also mentioned "Grandsons," which emerged as a second *in vivo* code. Not only did this participant have a number of experiences in the public education sphere that contributed to an interest in later research, but also a very strong connection to grandchildren that emerged. The work we do, it seems, is not always so far removed from home. One grandson was an avid reader (line 80), while the other was a reluctant reader (line 88). This section, while

brief, was a moment of self-disclosure for this person, and the other participant initiated revisiting the topic in a later portion of the interview, which was not part of this initial transcription.

It became clear that the dichotomy of these two grandsons formed a bond of interest for this person, particularly in the statement, "I watched him develop" (line 81), in which she applies her diagnostic knowledge, often practiced in the academy, to a very personal and familial setting. This was not a clinical observation from a pedagogue in a laboratory-style classroom of sterilized testing environment; rather, this was a grandparent watching a grandson and reflecting on behaviours at a much more personal level.

As has been suggested by one of our colleagues, "we are where we are from."

Research.

"Research" emerged as a third *in vivo* code when this educator discussed the question of instructional differences in educational equity (line 90), a line of inquiry that led to the co-author/educator creating and distributing a survey instrument to three schools of diverse ethnic demographics. In terms of the research work, this educator identified herself as a gatherer of information (line 140), and at the time of our interview had already begun to share about these findings in the academic community.

Asking students to 'select their own reading material for personal interest' was a theme that emerged as part of this investigated topic (lines 177-178), as well as asking students to 'conduct independent reading' (line 182) of this material. Additional strategies or sub-themes emerged as 'listening to students read on their own' (line 193), 'discussions of reading' (line 194), 'completing interest inventories' (line 200), and 'modeling reading' (line 205).

As teacher educators, part of our work is research, or the art and science of looking again. As Christians, but also in the general world of scholarship, we know the power of taking a second look to gather more information and truly see people, and working to resolve these imbalances in equity is central to our teaching. Truly seeing others as created beings with purpose, is endemic to our educational work.

Parents are the first teachers.

Additional challenges were discussed when detailing the differences between the educator/co-author's experience in urban versus rural teaching environments. The line that stood out first was "parents are the first teachers," and the educator went on to discuss the lack of success parents seemed to have in an urban environment.

The educator/co-author described disconnect in

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communicating the kinds of reading materials that were desired for independent reading (lines 221-224). In one example, a parent asked the educator what material should be read at home and offered a science book as an option, but the educator felt that other enjoyment-based reading materials might have been more appropriate. Programs that provide books for the home were mentioned as part of this community-based solution. Information coded in this section provided brief information beyond the context of the classroom, expanding the teacher's role in literacy instruction into the frame of the community.

Struggle.

Along with the "Prior" codes in the initial stages of the interview came discussions of challenges this educator faced as a classroom teacher. Reading below grade level was a problem that permeated this teacher's classroom work (line 150). This experience was described as a "balancing act of trying to...work with individual students" (line 157), "frustrating" (line 160), "a real struggle" (line 171), and "stressful" (line 173). A principal's decision to combine third and fourth graders resulted in a classroom of fourth graders who actually functioned at a lower level than some third graders (line 168) in the same class, and the participant noted that male readers made up a group of struggling readers, in particular (line 169).

There were times during the interview that this person voiced her personal emotions, and persisting concerns, for students. This seemed to me to be both the confession and profession of a concerned teacher, a voice arriving through decades, after having explored multiple professional avenues. From these specific "words" this discussion moves to consider three larger themes of Christ-centered literacy pedagogy.

Three Themes in Christian Pedagogy

Moving from the story of a few to more generalizable themes, this discussion offers three "power" ideas that capture part of the narrative of what being a Christian educator in a university setting means, especially when teaching future teachers. The power of words, of voice, and forgiveness.

The Power of Words

Emergent from this interview as particularly significant was the way in which this educator described teaching experience. There were clear challenges, and they were described comprehensively. My reflections on my experiences as a third and fourth grader when this participant was discussing the split class challenges early in teaching affirmed authenticity. The conversation relayed with the parent, including a focus on selecting reading materials, played out for

the interview process, even with dialogue included. A need for community, as well as familial discourse, underscored this section of the interview.

When discussing grandchildren, a personal connection to the topic of this interview was established and later portions of the interview included discussions of reading activities this educator engaged in with family. The early teaching experiences, coupled with family life, led this person into a field of research in which fifth-grade students are surveyed for their reading interests. The narrative suggested that as educators, the books and stories we share in the classroom often mirror the practices we value at home, with our families.

As people of faith, the words we share are gifts. Johnston (2004) rightly points to the ways teachers use words, and the capacity we have for helping students see themselves as readers or non-readers, as valued and undervalued, based on what we say and how we say it.

Faith is a powerful word for children to understand. Faith is a strong tool for moving them toward confidence that they can find solutions to problems and purpose in their lives. A teacher who demonstrates faith in their students' abilities provides them with impetus to take risks in their learning.

Children's literature in which the authors focus on the importance of believing something deep in the heart, point children toward the importance of faith as a vital part of their lives. It stimulates them to consider their own personal narrative and the themes threading through that story.

Another powerful word for children to learn is character. Good character evokes more powerful words: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Live Wire Media, n.d.). Martin Luther King, Jr. (cited in MLK Jr Day 2020, n. d.) said, "Intelligence and character—that is the goal of true education." Effective teachers model and teach the importance of good character.

Parents and teachers have not only heard children say mean and hurtful words to other, but also may have been guilty of this. The childhood response, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me," does not ring true. Effective teachers stress the power of words to harm or to encourage; and then set out to teach and model positive words.

After a 1995 study that revealed a 30 million word gap between high and low-income children, new findings by Romeo et al., (2018) suggest that it is not the quantity of words children hear, but rather the quality of words that matter. Their research discovered that the brains of children from lower-income families are just as positively affected by quality words as those of children from higher income levels. Romeo's

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research extends the importance of words spoken in the home environment to children's literacy ability.

Children deal with a variety of emotions as they grow and develop. Teachers use stories to help children understand their feelings as well as the feelings of others. Bibliotherapy is a way to use books as a therapeutic means for helping children understand their emotions in a variety of situations. Being able to identify with a character in a story who is struggling with a problem helps them better understand and handle their own thoughts and feelings. Maria Nikolajeva (2013) noted that fiction literature provides children an excellent understanding of the power of empathy. Neuroscience supports this with the idea that fictional stories stimulate our brains to see ourselves as part of the story, provoking empathy toward the characters. This sensitivity is then transferred to real life and real people. Readers, if they are engrossed in the story, live the characters' lives at a neurological level (Bern et al., 2013).

The Power of Forgiveness

Forgiveness is central to the Christian faith. Recognizing we have been forgiven much, our classrooms are spaces where second chances should occur. Not only that, but we value the sense of redemption that comes through in many stories, both within and outside of the faith tradition. The story of the Prodigal Son is one of the parables of Jesus in the Bible and appears in Luke 15:11-32. Children can identify with this young man who did something wrong to his dad. Even after he returned home to tell his dad how sorry he was, he still expected harsh punishment. Instead, his dad provided love, mercy, and forgiveness. Vaillant (2008) describes forgiveness as a key positive emotion that connects people to each other.

This sense of connection speaks not only to a positive classroom environment, but also to fostering connections with those that students meet as representations of their own experiences in fiction – as well as characters and storylines that introduce students to new ways of thinking. The notion of redemptive narrative is certainly true of many of the stories that we encounter as readers and lead students through. This is also a powerful theme we find expressed in scripture, as well as in the Christian worldview.

We are all, teachers and students alike, in a process of becoming better in our character and of shaping the world around us for the better.

The Power of Voice

In the first theme, the power of the words found in other places was explored, including those happened upon in the texts used in class instruction and in the

scriptures shared. Beyond this use of words, it is suggested that being a Christian means embracing an all-encompassing sense of love.

This love for others leads us to value the voices of the students who spend time with us in classrooms – it is a hopeful and shaping kind of love that attempts to offer guidance as school students, but also preservice and in-service teachers, navigate the complexities of their lives. It is the kind of love that often finds its expression in listening and seeking to understanding rather than first rushing to judgment.

Giving children voice builds their confidence that they will be heard. It assures them that they are in a safe classroom environment. Helping children find their unique voice enhances self-concept and teaches them that they are valued. A child's sense of confidence, safety, and value plays an important role in how he or she learns to read and learns in general. In higher education this gift of "voice" continues to be important, supporting these same assurances.

Conclusion: Trust the Mystery

As Buechner (1993) points out, and Paul (1 Cor. 15) also asserts, part of the work of being a person of faith is simply trusting the mystery. For educators working at the university level, as well as others challenged by the doubts and traumas of daily life, it seems that this conclusion should be more complex. Our work often positions us in a place of expertise, and we work to find moments to express the humanity of continued, lifelong learning. One of the ways we are always growing is through the storytelling we encounter and encourage in our classrooms. Indeed, our brains are seemingly hard-wired for stories. Cutting (2016) tells us, "It is generally accepted that narrative text is easier to comprehend than expository text, which is consistent with research that proves this viewpoint" (para. 3).

We work together as a community – yet, we are told in scripture to work out our own salvation (Phil 2:12, KJV), and this work is both real and at times involves a trembling sense of humility. In a tentative answer to our overarching research question, a glimpse is offered at the ways we take up our own narratives. Storytelling is endemic to literacy instruction, and this is no less true in a community of faith. Jesus himself used stories and parables to illustrate his points, and we further this ethical practice by passing the parables down in our classroom expectations and in our daily interactions.

Stories connect to the human psyche. As might be guessed, this interview provided a support for more questions and study. The conversation that began in this initial interview process has provided a base to build from for further work as we continue to practice our faith on the public stage of higher education. **TEACH**

“One of the ways we are always growing is through the storytelling we encounter and encourage in our classrooms”

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