



The Power of Stories from the Inside Out

by P. Ann Byrd and Cindy Van Buren

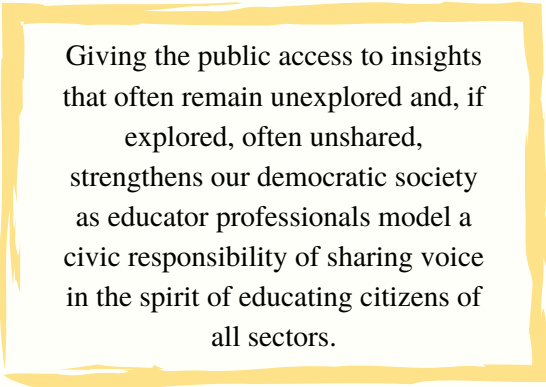
“Silence is the enemy of justice.”
– Aline Ohanesian, *Orhan’s Inheritance*

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

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

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


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



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

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

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



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

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

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


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

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


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

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

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



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



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