

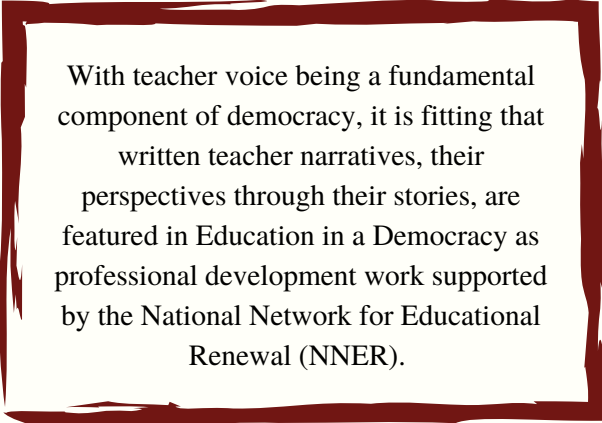


Honoring Teacher Voice as Professional Development: A Democratic Imperative

by Rhonda Jeffries, Terrance McAdoo & Michele Myers

Educators who are learning at every degree level, including pre- and in-service teachers, are often required to explore their professional voice through a plethora of methods courses stemming from various curriculum paradigms. One of the most powerful concepts covered in many of these courses comes from the qualitative research tradition of narrative inquiry that asks practitioners to first examine their personal perceptions as a means of understanding classrooms as educational spaces designed to promote and instill democracy. It is certainly in these learning environments that novice education students who are growing into teachers and experienced teachers who are growing into leaders grasp the power of narrative, their verbal and written perspectives, to profoundly drive educational outcomes. The teacher voice is consistently cited as one of the most meaningful contributors to impactful professional development that effectively addresses the contemporary goals of educational institutions (Hammersley-Fletcher, Clarke & McManus, 2018; Haug & Mork, 2021; Liefshitz, 2020). With teacher voice being a fundamental component of democracy, it is fitting that written teacher narratives, their perspectives through their stories, are featured in *Education in a Democracy* as professional development work supported by the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER). The teacher narratives included in this special issue support the four pillars intended to advance democracy in education and embody the mission of NNER to:


- Provide access to knowledge for all children (“equity and excellence”);
- Educate the young for thoughtful participation in a social and political democracy (“enculturation”);
- Base teaching on knowledge of the subjects taught, established principles of learning, and sensitivity to the unique potential of learners (“nurturing pedagogy”); and
- Take responsibility for improving the conditions for learning in P-12 schools, institutions of higher education and communities. (“stewardship”) (Goodlad, 1994).



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Furthermore, NNER’s recent partnership with the National Center for Clinical Practice in Educator Preparation (NCCPEP) helps to affirm a common purpose centered on highlighting the pedagogical expertise of educators via their “voices as the best advocates for our nation’s children . . . unapologetically and boldly” (NCCPEP, n.p., 2021). These timely teacher narratives highlight six teacher voices as they critically examine their professional practices and their greater purpose as educators.

This collection of teacher narratives articulates the clarity that comes from an exploration of one’s experience and the acceptance of multiple perspectives as an essential aspect of professional development in teacher education. These manifestations of teacher voice describe a process that drives teachers to achieve equity and excellence in the classroom; to pursue learning opportunities that challenge their various positionalities; to design curricula that are culturally relevant and nurture all students to understand systemic oppression; and to adopt a stance of responsibility to challenge those identified policies and procedures that replicate oppression and deny democracy in education.



Teachers Expressing Equity and Excellence

Many practicing educators reluctantly acknowledge that they are unprepared to effectively teach for equity and excellence and even more hesitantly admit that they are not aware of the manifold ways that systemic oppression is present in policies and practices that govern their teaching. Teacher narrative offered our featured educators a space to work through these realizations and confidently explore their limitations and more importantly, their growth as educators working for democracy. Recognizing limitations in teacher practice is the first step to addressing strategies for growth. When Jessie Guest, Program Manager of the Carolina Transition to Teaching Residency Program, noticed “a teacher that wasn’t listening with her eyes and missed Jacob’s desire to learn, a teacher who is doing the best she can but lacking tools of awareness and an understanding of how to see this particular child” she recognized the inherent lack of equity in the teacher’s response to this student and the inability of the student to achieve excellence under the given classroom circumstances. In response to instances like this, she and her colleagues created a dual-purpose social-emotional learning professional development series aimed at self-reflection. This self-introspection was designed to clearly have teachers examine their practices and to “[learn] to see the impact of getting to know their students — to see their students with more than their eyes.”

Touching on the first pillar of advancing democracy by providing access to all children, Assistant Principal Roy Blakeney painstakingly deconstructed the discomfort he experienced by uncovering his eyes to institutional racism in his narrative when he stated, “I was unable to comprehend that I could be part of something so insidious.” Finding his father’s voice as the seed that planted his discomfort, Roy accepted the opportunities to “make a few folks uncomfortable with the hope that we can . . . cause them to seek to understand how they can take action to diminish the effects of racism in our schools.” These teachers overtly adopted a stance of responsibility to effectively address embedded inequities that crush the culture of democracy upon which every act of education should be built.

Statements of Social Enculturation for Democracy

Realizing that she was functioning with blinders on after almost two decades in the profession, secondary science teacher, Stephanie Bailey, “started seeing the underlying presence of race in almost every aspect of American life” which made her further “confused as to why, after 18 years in the classroom, I had never heard anything about culturally relevant pedagogy.” Her life-altering professional development experience removed the veil and enabled her to see the ways in which many educational practices and policies are antithetical to the intended goals of education for democracy. She also began to shift the culture of her class to support democracy by “approach[ing] my classes from a place of learning as well as teaching. I ask my students who they are and learn about their experiences. I ask their parents who their children are to get to know them better. I tailor my lessons around the people who are in my room. By tapping into the experiences and expertise of my students,” Bailey was able to decenter the white, Eurocentric curriculum that drives most classrooms in the United States and begin to highlight the diverse cultural voices represented in a democracy.

Bethany Reilly, early childhood and elementary special education teacher, used her voice and shifted the cultural landscape to expand her classroom beyond the neurotypical student experience. Creating a culture of inclusivity, she actively engaged her efforts in Project Au-Some where she realized that by “providing exposure we can do great things, but it doesn’t end there. Exposure isn’t enough. We leverage this amazing opportunity to actually teach students about disabilities and diversity within those experiences.” The critical aspect of cultural shifts is acknowledging the time needed to earnestly affect ingrained behaviors and alter long held and unexamined beliefs. Project Au-Some addresses this barrier to creating a culture for democracy in that it spans multiple grade levels and instructs students “that they have the power to change lives and understand that their words and actions have lasting meaning.” Her statement holds true for students and teachers alike and addresses the second pillar of advancing democracy.



Practices of Nurturing Pedagogy

Teaching content knowledge couched in compassion for students' cultural diversity comprises the basis of the third pillar of advancing democracy, and Brandy Meyers, fourth/fifth grade teacher, tackled this task with her TED Talks assignment. These powerful and highly personal student creations enabled Brandy to address mandated state standards and more importantly to increase student engagement since they "had the opportunity to authentically learn from one another. I watched the students in my classroom shift from shock to understanding and empathy." This narrative provides further evidence (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Celik, 2019; Jennings, 2018) that grounding curriculum in principles of equity and justice do not detract from the delivery of content knowledge but rather increase effectiveness through student commitment to the work in and out of class.

Stephanie Bailey's voice also spoke to the third pillar when her narrative questioned: "What could I do as a science teacher?" Her answer to, "teach science framed around social justice," definitively sought to make field specific, standards-based knowledge culturally relevant. Her curriculum decision to use student-centered inquiry as the starting point for units resulted in molecule lessons on food deserts, coastal environment lessons on Gullah peoples, and DNA modeling lessons on academic property theft and the Innocence Project. And again, classroom engagement was positively impacted with students experiencing the power of being involved in the democratic process.

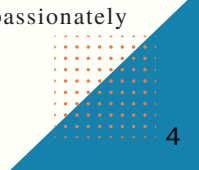
Showcasing Stewardship

As educators, we are all entrusted to the careful and responsible guidance of the students with whom we work and this stewardship, the basis of pillar four for advancing democracy, is evident in Bethany Reilly's Project Au-some. The magnitude of this work not only reminded teachers to promote opportunities for learning but also had profound consequence on elementary and emerging middle level students: "While I worked hard to ensure students had opportunities to build and grow themselves, I also realized through listening that this could become much more than we ever imagined. We discovered by teaching about behaviors and reflecting on their experiences, it has empowered the fifth graders to

lead." The project instilled a sense of citizenship and responsibility for others and fully developed the students' sense of responsibility to sustain a state of democracy.

In the role of steward, Matherine Dixon spent her career guiding and supporting the improvement of learning conditions for students in her position as teacher and currently as literacy coach. Her narrative expressed this agenda as she stated, "I taught my students to be lifelong learners and conditioned myself to do the same. Each time change reintroduced itself, I embraced it. After all, it was an opportunity to learn something new." Certainly, in her quest to meet the needs of all students using equity pedagogies for democracy, she continued to recognize the changing landscape to which teachers must be accountable. Experiencing racial equity battle fatigue, she later realized the importance of self-care for educators on this demanding journey (Acuff, 2018; Winters, 2020). She stated, "Change is a pathway for our journey. Respect it. Embrace it. Yes, there will be grief and mourning of at least an idea that we've nourished, so take the time to celebrate what once was, but don't stay there." As teachers change throughout their professional practices, a priority of being good stewards of the profession fundamentally means taking care of oneself first in order to effectively take care of others. Matherine's call for personal change is echoed across the teacher narratives in this special issue as each of our contributors are shining examples of stewards of education for democracy.

In its quest to sustain a culture of democracy, The National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) supports the professional development of educators through the sharing of best practices intended to overcome limitations and barriers that prohibit the maintenance and evolution of justice in schools and communities. Furthermore, NNER acknowledges the role of teacher voice in school improvement and supports evidence that suggests teachers who voice their experiences and expertise are more invested in their careers, more likely to set and reach goals that positively impact education outcomes, and more likely to become leaders and create student leaders who influence the preservation of democracy (Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Quaglia & Lande, 2016). We hope these teachers' voices inspire you to tap into your own voice as a source of professional development as you continue to teach for equity and excellence, create a culture in schools that supports democracy, and compassionately lead toward a just society.





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