



Living the stories we tell: The sociopolitical context of enacting teaching stories



Andrea Bien ^{a,*}, Makenzie Selland ^b

^a Boston University, School of Education, 2 Silber Way, Boston, MA 02215, United States

^b Utah Valley University, School of Education, 800 West University Parkway, Orem, UT 84058, United States

HIGHLIGHTS

- Narrative theories and discourse analysis methods used to unpack teachers' narratives.
- Contradictions between the stories teachers told about teaching and the stories they enacted.
- Contradictions were examined within sociopolitical/historical contexts of practice.
- Few opportunities for teachers to construct sophisticated narratives about teaching.
- Guiding principles for supporting teachers' growth through construction of complex narratives.

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ABSTRACT

This article draws from two separate classroom-based studies of early career teachers that yielded overlapping findings about the diminished opportunities teachers and teacher educators have to construct sophisticated stories about the complexities of classroom life and the ongoing process of learning to teach. The teachers' stories represent the intersection of research, policy, and practice, illuminating contradictions between teachers' beliefs about teaching and what they were able to enact in their classrooms. These findings may be leveraged to support teacher educators to support teachers to create coherent narrative identities that help them creatively respond to problems of practice and contextual constraints.

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Stories unfold. They are woven over time and across spaces as meaning is given to and drawn from experiences through stories told and re-told (Bruner, 1986; Greene, 1995; Nussbaum, 1995). Some stories are told so frequently and publicly that they develop into singular narratives commonly understood as conventional wisdom. However, one-dimensional storylines can be problematic for teachers and students often cast as central, but simplified, characters in widely-circulated narratives about schooling in the current climate of reform (Brubaker, 2015; Cuban, 2009; Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; Madeloni & Gorlewski, 2013; Sloan, 2006; Zeichner, 2010). Consequently, there are diminished opportunities for teachers, students, and teacher educators to construct sophisticated stories about the complexities of classroom life and the process of learning to teach. While this dilemma is not new, it is one that persists.

In this article we share vignettes from two research studies to illustrate examples of narratives early career teachers construct about their practice. Analysis of these vignettes highlight: 1) How *narratives about* teaching practice were in tension, or even contradiction, with *enactment of* teaching practice; 2) How these tensions were better understood when traced to sociopolitical and sociohistorical contexts of practice; and 3) How we, as researchers and teacher educators, were, and continue to be, mediators of teachers' storytelling. We share what we now see as missed opportunities to explore sites of tension with one pre-service teacher and one early-career teacher and to co-author complex narratives that encouraged further growth. Our goal is to highlight those missed opportunities and offer ideas for how we might have supported the young teachers featured in our vignettes, as well as other pre-service teachers, early-career teachers, and teacher educators. We hope that by acknowledging our missed opportunities and offering a set of principles that, upon reflection, could have

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: abien@bu.edu (A. Bien), mselland@uvu.edu (M. Selland).

made space for more complex storytelling in the field, that we provide insights to contribute to addressing the persistent dilemma of singular storylines that can constrain teachers.

We present inverse examples featuring Kathleen, a pre-service teacher excelling in her secondary student teaching, and Norah, an elementary teacher striving to exercise agency in a context limited by standardized test performance pressures. Analysis of Kathleen's story highlights ways she and her cooperating teacher created spaces where more complex stories of teaching and students became available, *but also* ways larger grand narratives of teacher authority (Kalantzis & Cope, 2009) sometimes contradicted the teaching practice Kathleen was striving to enact. Analysis of Norah's stories reveal the tensions between the story she told about herself as a teacher and the realities of her teaching enactments in a highly regulated school context, *but also* the sociopolitical context that contributed to this misalignment. Although the research focus of each study was very different, we found clear points of connection in our findings across the two contexts.

Our goal, as scholars who are simultaneously researchers and teacher educators, is to support teachers in developing and sharing stories about teaching that enable sense-making of their complex roles. These stories help us consider: *What design principles support teachers to write, re-write, and re-organize stories that capture the complexity and sophistication of quality teaching within inherited contexts?*

1. Current climate of teacher storytelling

This exploration comes at a time when the stories teachers are encouraged to tell about themselves as professionals continues to narrow toward the singular pursuit of rigid, academic goals (Dutro & Selland, 2012; Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010; Milner, 2014). As this happens, other stories about what it means to be a teacher become increasingly marginalized.

We see a recent intensification of public and political interests in teachers' roles; however, societally- and politically-prescribed pressures on teachers are not a new phenomenon. Teachers have long been both vilified as resisting innovation and lauded as the hope behind future generations' successes in a competitive, global marketplace. Few professions inspire such a dichotomy of responses from the general public because few are known so familiarly by such a broad group of individuals.

It is within the framework of these overlapping, yet often simplified narratives of teachers' work that new teachers begin telling their own stories of who they want to be in classrooms. As teacher educators, we argue that part of the support we offer novice teachers *must* include acknowledging these ubiquitous backdrops in ways that allow grand narratives, or cultural myths of teaching (Britzman, 1991), to be critically examined.

2. Theoretical framework

Theorists from many fields (McAdams, 1993, 1996, 2008; Bruner, 1986, 2002, 2004; Greene, 1995; Nussbaum, 1995; Ochs & Capps, 1997, 2001; Wortham, 2001) describe narrative as a necessary practice where humans work to gain meaning from life experiences. Our narrative compositions are influenced by cultural expectations; personal environments and positions; and historic and current contexts. The stories we tell help us situate, justify, and assess our everyday experiences within the wide range of human history and communal ideas; and as we tell stories conversationally, we make choices about how to deal with the tension of desiring "both coherence and authenticity of experience" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 156) when making sense of life events. Though these narrative compositions are constantly constructed and

reconstructed, their emergence and coherence helps us decide how to engage in the complexity of daily life (Bruner, 2002), deal with unanticipated and troubling experiences (Razfar, 2012), and take ethical stances. Thus, the common methods and lenses we use to memorialize events in daily storytelling moments can have a profound impact on how we live our lives and, importantly, perceive what happens to us (Razfar, 2012; Wortham, 2001).

Narrative constructions are at the heart of teacher knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, 1998; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000), and comprised of the complex interplay between teachers' experiences in both "out-of-classroom" spaces filled with "knowledge funneled into the school system" and "in-classroom" places, where "teachers are free to live stories of practice" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 151). These "sacred" and "secret" stories are often in tension on the "professional knowledge landscape" where teachers compose stories within the heavily storied contexts in which they live and work. Building on Crites (1971), the authors describe how these tensions can manifest in the creation of "cover" stories. As Clandinin and Connelly (1998) describe,

When teachers move out of their classrooms into the out-of-classroom place on the landscape, they often live and tell cover stories, stories in which they portray themselves as expert, certain characters whose teacher stories fit within the acceptable range of the story of school being lived in the school. (p. 151)

Olson and Craig (2005) describe the force of these sacred, "officially authorized versions of professional knowledge and practice" and how they can subsume teachers' "secret" or "real" stories to the "point where individuals lose awareness of their personal agency in authoring these stories to live by" (p. 169). In other words, through the creation of cover stories meant to appease the presence of out-of-classroom narratives, teachers' personal stories to live by are often changed irreparably, sometimes thwarting their original intentions. With few spaces to "challenge and scrutinize" sacred stories, the ability to author narratives of change is largely absent. In the cases of Kathleen and Norah, we see these forces at work on their developing narratives of who they were and could be as teachers. We lament the lack of official space we provided as mentors to negotiate the sacred stories, familiar archetypes, and comforting grand narratives that are so readily available as teachers navigate the complex situations that arise in the course of a teaching life (Olson & Craig, 2005; Sykes, Bird, & Kennedy, 2010).

Teachers compose teaching narratives within increasingly pressurized environments that influence the stories they tell (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009). The progression toward standardization in curriculum and assessment can cause tension for teachers who consider the success of their teaching through gauges beyond high-stakes accountability measures. For instance, in one narrative study of Canadian teachers', students' and parents' experiences of standardized educational experiences, Clandinin et al. (2010) noted the frequency of teachers' stories' bumping up "against the dominant stories of accountability through standardized assessment" (p. 83). The authors found that teachers experienced tension as they tried to live out "narratively coherent stories of who they are as good teachers" while also striving to live within the "plotlines of the story of school" (p. 87).

Although the current climate can be particularly stifling, teachers have always navigated the process of learning to teach within environments that seek to minimize change and "maintain the existing system" (Britzman, 1991; Kaufman & McDonald, 1992). "Heritage" notions of school are deeply engrained in our shared social memory (Kalantzis & Cope, 2009; Sykes et al., 2010);

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