

## The Role of Storytelling in Post-Pandemic Education

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### ABSTRACT

Our brains are designed to process information as narrative, and storytelling in classrooms addresses the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, particularly relevant to the challenges facing education today as educators struggle to find interventions to remediate learning loss resulting from the pandemic. Storytelling addresses different learning styles, facilitates the development of focused attention span, improves audio processing and increases long-term memory. Storytelling builds reciprocal relationships and fosters the development of empathy. Storytelling gives teachers and students a way of being seen and recognized.

### INTRODUCTION

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States government issued a nationwide mandate that shut down school buildings in 16,000 school districts for at least eight weeks. Fifty-five million children in the public school system were affected by these closures. Like everyone else, schools faced a situation for which there was neither precedent nor existing protocol; nonetheless, local and state boards moved rapidly to craft learning strategies that would provide some measure of continuity of instruction, such as distance learning, hybrid learning, socially distanced in-class learning, and shorter days with smaller classes, as part of that effort. Despite these measures, students incurred academic loss.

The nature of storytelling aligns both with educational practice and what we know about how the human brain functions. It plays a significant role in the development of cognitive skills and affective skills that children need to succeed in school. The academic losses incurred during the pandemic have been studied and measured. However, I believe it is the affective benefits of storytelling that have greater importance in the current educational challenges of the post-pandemic era. This paper will focus on storytelling as a powerful tool to address the learning losses and the concomitant emotional issues that are the results of the pandemic years.

### THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling is an art. “It is the most basic and accessible of all our art forms. It is an act of pure creation. It is experience and imagination made manifest in language.” (Niemi & Ellis, 2001, p. 50)

Storytelling is a two-way interaction between the storyteller and the listeners, an interactive and intimate conversation that develops a relationship between the

teller and the listeners. The listeners are always active participants in the story, and their responses influence the telling of the story.

Storytelling is an ancient, oral, sophisticated practice, and one with a ritualized and patterned form. It is immediate, existing in the present moment, and is changed and interpreted by each audience.

Storytelling is an oral art form whose practice provides a means of preserving and transmitting images, ideas, motivations, and emotions that are universal across human communities. (Livo and Rietz, 1987, p. 7) Storytelling is a personal art that makes public what is private and makes private what is public. By choosing this or that story to tell, I reveal much about myself. (Yolen, 1986, p. 13). Storytelling has been called a universal mirror that shows us the “truth” about ourselves, who and why we are. (Livo and Reitz, 1987, p. 4)

In *Teaching as Storytelling*, Egan (1986) presents the concept of story as a fundamental component of our human nature. “The story form is a cultural universal: everyone everywhere enjoys stories. The story, then, is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experiences.” (p. 2)

Storytelling is a way of healing. The National Center for Biotechnology, a division of the National Institutes of Health, studied how effective storytelling might be in the treatment of illness of hospitalized children. In its study, *Storytelling Increases Oxytocin and Positive Emotions and Decreases Cortisol and Pain in Hospitalized Children* (2021), researchers describe how human connections and meaning-making induced by storytellers can lead to changes in biomarkers and pain scores associated with time spent in the hospital. After only one storytelling session, children experienced a reduction in pain, and researchers measured an increase in oxytocin and a reduction in cortisol. The authors coined the term “Narrative Transportation” to describe a “dynamic and complex interaction between language, texts and imagination that deeply engages listeners in the world of creation.”

We understand our experiences and our lives through our stories, and they provide the structure and framework that enable us to make sense of our world with its inherent uncertainties and inconsistencies. It is the way we make our meanings and memories. Bruner writes, “[w]e seem, then, to have some predisposition, some core knowledge about narrative from the start.” (2002, p. 33) Narrative, it turns out, is what makes us human.

### **STORYTELLING AND THE CREATION OF SELF**

Stories are capable of “capturing complexity, specificity, and the interconnectedness of the phenomenon with which we deal.” (Carter, 1992, p. 6)

Every aspect of our lives is intertwined in stories. Stories and storytelling offer the means to organize a sense of self in ways that are acceptable to our understanding of who we are. “Stories are the fabric of our private lives, our relational networks, our social traditions, and our cultural lives.” (Botella, Herrero, Pacheco and Corbella, 2004, p. 19) The stories we hear play an integral part in the basic formulations of our personalities, so the study of narrative is also the concern of psychologists and psychotherapists. Boothe and Von Wyl (2004), Bettelheim (1977), and Bruner (2002) view narrative as a key component in the socialization of children. They ascribe a primary role for storytelling in the development of a child’s self-concept and in the formation of secure attachments. In *Making Stories*, Bruner writes that our sense of self is continuously being constructed and modified to meet the needs of the situations we encounter and that the making of a self, the forging of an identity, is in itself an act of narrative. “It is through narrative that we create and re-create selfhood, that self is a product of our telling.” (2002, pp. 85-86)

Parental storytelling contributes to a child’s sense of individuality; the stories parents tell their children form a basic component in a child’s level of confidence as the child matures and moves into a wider world.

Stories that we tell ourselves help shape our identity. We use the stories we tell ourselves, along with the ones we hear from our families, to develop a coherent self, and we are constantly telling stories to create and recreate ourselves. We use our personal stories to develop autonomy and to distinguish ourselves from the other people in our lives and the stories they tell about themselves.

### **PLACE**

It is necessary to consider the power of place in our lives, *the where we are*, in order to understand some of the difficulties students faced as they transitioned from being in the physical place of school, leaving the security of school culture and then returning to it. In Edward S. Casey’s book, *Getting Back into Place*, he describes place as being “prior to all things.” (1993, p. 13) “The power a place such as a mere room possesses determines not only where I am in the limited sense of cartographic location but how I am together with others.” (p. 23) Where you are determines how you will be with others in that place. This sense of place, this sense of being where you belong, was taken away from school children during the pandemic. “For the most part we get into places together. We partake of places in common—and reshape them in common. The culture that characterizes and shapes a given place is a shared culture.” (p. 31) The losses children are experiencing go beyond reading and math.

Each classroom develops its own culture where students know what is expected and how to behave: something that the pandemic radically changed. One day, children are placed in a classroom with its culture and familiar norms, and the next day, the physical place of school and the role they may play in that culture and ways of being in that place is gone. For some, the loss of communal culture results in anxiety and loss of focus. This loss

of communal culture may also be a factor in the unacceptable behavior that teachers have seen in schools post-pandemic. School is where children learn a large part of their social skills, learn to navigate in groups, and find a way to operate with others.

Children, like many other groups who suddenly were working from home, were caught between two places, each with different norms for appropriate behavior. It is no surprise that children who had been isolated from school had difficulties managing.

Every society, every culture, and every classroom has rules in place to govern the behavior of its citizens and ensure smooth operations as it pursues its goals. In *Acts of Meaning* (1990), Bruner states that in order for a culture to be viable, it must have a mechanism to resolve conflicts, provide for differences in conduct, and have the ability to restore its members to normalcy from the effects of the aberrations and deviations that occur from that code. Stories serve the function of reconciling the cultural codes of conduct imposed upon us, and the inevitable departure from those codes of acceptable behavior.

Storytelling has the power to create a new place of safety, trust, and community where children can resolve conflict, make moral choices, face ethical dilemmas, try out different options and roles, or provide alternate stories. Storytelling helps students make sense of disorder, engages the listeners in a unique way, and fosters the development of empathy and inclusivity—characteristics that teachers say are missing from the classrooms.

### **STORYTELLING IN THE CLASSROOM**

For centuries, people who had no written language used storytelling to transmit the culture of their civilizations, to pass on the values, norms, laws, the will of the gods, and the beliefs from one generation to the next; in short, to educate. Plato mentions that old women told their children symbolic stories: mythoi. Fairy tales were used in France to instruct aristocratic children in the proper ways to behave as members of the nobility.

The most compelling reason to use storytelling in the classroom is that our brains are designed to process information and make meaning through stories. In *The Neurology of Narrative*, Young and Saver write, “what predominates or fundamentally constitutes our consciousness is the understanding of self and world in story.” (2001, p. 73). According to Jerome Bruner (1986), we have a predisposition, an innate inclination to organize facts into narratives, and he writes that humans have two ways of thinking and constructing reality: the paradigmatic and the narrative.

The cognitive mode of thinking is formal, procedural, and logical and is associated with concepts such as logical reasoning, attention and focus, critical thinking, problem solving, memory, and planning. The narrative mode, the affective mode, deals with human actions and consequences and is associated with attention, acceptance, self-actualization, trust, friendship, memory, empathy, complexity, and inclusivity. It is the narrative mode of thinking that creates stories, makes possible our ability to deal with the ambiguities of life and provides children with a means to make sense out of disorder. Storytelling provides a richness and nuance to education that cannot be captured by any other means. Story has

the capacity to handle complexity, accommodate ambiguity, and paint a richer, more fully nuanced picture than many methods currently employed.

One of the most important elements of storytelling is the effect it has on the ability to focus and increase the levels of attention. If students' attention is not focused, concentrated and sustained, the other cognitive functions, such as problem solving, memory, and reasoning will not be as readily available to students. Storytelling is a way to guide and focus attention and to create engagement.

To control attention means to control experience, and therefore the quality of life. Information reaches consciousness only when we attend to it. Attention acts as a filter between outside events and our experience of them. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 128)

Storytelling creates more engagement in both the cognitive and affective domains, and when we listen to storytelling, it encourages cooperative activity, encompasses a holistic perspective, and makes sense of experiences. It captures the complexities of a given situation, stimulates critical activities to problem solve, and provides for greater and more detailed memory skills to be developed, including basic skills such as understanding sequence, writing structure, and vocabulary.

Collins and Cooper (1997) write that the fundamental benefit of story is that it makes meaning; it pervades all learning. Storytelling enhances imagination and visualization, develops appreciation of the beauty and rhythm of language, increases vocabulary, refines speaking skills, improves listening skills, and allows students to interact with adults on a personal level. It enhances writing skills, develops reading skills, and sparks an interest in reading. It also enhances critical and creative thinking skills, nourishes students' intuitive side, helps students see literature as a mirror of human experience, and helps students understand their own and others' cultural heritage.

Groce's study of the experiences of teachers who used storytelling found it to be effective in all areas of curriculum. "As a result of increased storytelling implementation, the teachers found that storytelling helped not only to enhance their language arts program, but also helped improve reading skill and practices in science, social studies, and bilingual education." (2007, p. 127)

Barbara Read (1987), the Director of the Connecticut Storytelling Center, conducted a study to find out the effectiveness of storytelling, which involved telling stories to six classes of elementary school over a course of twelve weeks. The teachers involved responded with a resounding affirmation of the storytelling's cognitive and affective importance for the curriculum and the students. One teacher commented, "[t]he chief value of the project lay in the way it allowed certain children to bloom, fostered group conversation, and gave the children an opportunity to be generous." (p. 37) To have storytelling provide nourishment, the soil to feed young minds, to "allow certain children to bloom" and "to be generous" is

a testament to the enormous power and potential storytelling has in education.

In *Understanding Reading*, Smith writes “the human brain runs on stories. Our theory of the world is largely in the form of stories. Stories are far more easily remembered and recalled than a sequence of unrelated facts.” (1994, p. 181) Storytelling provides a means to integrate prior and current knowledge and takes advantage of effective learning strategies such as scaffolding and integrating prior knowledge in ways that promote critical thinking and a mind more receptive to making connections.

Stories are universal, and a core component of storytelling is its inclusivity. People and their cultures reside in the stories they tell.

Schools must be seen as institutions marked by the same complex of contradictory cultures that characterize the dominant society. Schools are social sites constituted by a complex of dominant *and* subordinate cultures .... Teachers and others interested in education must come to understand how the dominant culture functions at all levels of schooling to disconfirm the cultural experience of the “excluded minorities.” (Giroux, 1988, p. 7)

Teachers have at their disposal a rich source of readily available tales from other lands and other cultures, the inclusion of which gives recognition to students of differing ethnicities and cultures. If this effort is based on the ongoing telling of stories rather than primarily on textbooks, it can provide listeners with opportunities to grasp nuances and shades of meaning unavailable from passages in books. Telling the stories of different cultures, many of which are represented in our classrooms, allows aspects of diverse cultures to be seen, heard, and given a place of honor in the curriculum. A teacher who brings storytellers from different or divergent cultures into a class gives students an embodied example of the importance of the culture and the understanding that those cultures are valued, undermining the “special communities” thinking that “threatens to simply reinforce an unquestioned sense of normalcy.” (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2003, p. 37) It becomes harder to demonize and distance someone when you have heard their stories. There are other types of diversity in classrooms.

So often in schools, the troublesome child is understood only pathologically. They are rarely taken to be a commentary on *us* and what we and our curriculum guides and our institutions have presumed. (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2003, p. 38)

The “other” is not only cultural but exists outside of what we consider to be “normal” behavior. Every teacher has had students they find worrisome, “troubling children who haunt the margins of educational practice” (Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2003, p. 37), and their concern for these students is evident in all they do.

## THE STORYTELLING TEACHER

To educate is to take seriously both the quest for life's meaning and the meaning of individual lives. (Witherell and Noddings, 1991, p. 3)

Storytelling has the potential to make classroom life more cooperative, more inclusive, and more conducive to learning. If teachers are to embrace storytelling in their classrooms, they need to know how it will advance their pedagogical practice, bring them a measure of satisfaction, and acknowledge their professional expertise and competence. In my own research, I worked with and chronicled the experiences of teachers who told stories in their classrooms. It is not within the scope of this paper to address all of the nuance and results of my research. Instead, I have chosen to highlight several important topics and the ways in which storytelling influenced teachers' attitudes toward themselves and their students. I believe the stories from these teacher storytellers offer a new way of being in the classroom and present alternatives to the standard practice.

Storytelling gave the teachers an opening to use their creative energy, renewed their sense of agency, and gave them the satisfaction that comes from being self-directed. Participating in this study gave these teachers an opportunity to exercise a measure of autonomy, get back in touch with their years of knowledge, skill, experiences, instinct and pride in their professional competence; and gave them renewed understanding of how proficient they truly were, a realization that is not always in the forefront of their experience.

### *Attention and engagement*

When storytelling, my participants found they did not have to ask for the students' attention: they already had it, and they experienced themselves as the complete focus of students' attention. For Bekki, it "was very rewarding because you could see them really just hanging on every word, wanting to know what happens next."

As a matter of fact, not only are they listening, but their attention is exactly where you want it. They are learning, they are participating. Karen

"They are not moving, they are trying to figure it out," said Tracy. Julia shared, "They were definitely, definitely focused, so that was great. I felt very, very much like I had captured their attention."

The students were so engaged that participants were asked to tell more stories. "Three times in the last three days in succession. Are you going to tell us another story? Please tell another story today. Are we going to hear a story today?" shared Bekki. The teachers knew they were being heard. Bekki tells about her experience of being listened to. "I made up a little melody and of course the kids would immediately begin to sing that every time it came into the story, they would sing this little refrain."

For my participants, being heard manifested in several ways. Karen's insights into the normal exchange between her and her students point to the difference in being heard that occurs during storytelling and the communication teachers have with their students in the normal course of events.

Oh, I have seen when both myself and the teacher have given them a direction and it's [as if] I really did have a conversation with the wall because absolutely nobody heard me. You know that feeling. Never heard that, right? Well, you couldn't hear that telling the story. They weren't just there physically, they were there emotionally, they were there intellectually.

Bekki explains it this way:

It's like what they call flow, where you've lost all sense of time and it just moves; it just goes along by itself. You're so in the moment and they're so in the moment that it's not school anymore and it's not just you anymore, it's just sort of transcendent. It doesn't happen that often.

### ***A New Role***

For these teachers, storytelling provided an outlet for both their creativity and the exercise of their professionalism. The persona of the storyteller was one the teachers described as more colorful and fun. They felt as though they had discovered a new talent and a new way to express it. They were able to immerse themselves in the story and wanted their students to be immersed along with them. They felt closer to their students and were pleased that they could demonstrate that they had other aspects of their personality, and their students got to see that they were not one-dimensional. They wanted the students to see more of them as persons.

Storytelling allowed the teachers to leave their regular role, creating an opportunity for them to step away from the conventional ways of being a teacher. During one conversation, Julia told me how she made the sounds of an animal character to illustrate a point during her storytelling. "I asked them what they wanted to hear and they all wanted the *Turkey Sultan* and they all made the chicken sound, 'Baaaack!' They were really happy about that."

Aoki writes, "The teacher in becoming involved with his [or her] students, enters into their world as he [or she] allows them to enter his and engages himself with students mutually in action-reflection activities." (2005c, p. 131) Tracy embraced the change in status from teacher to storyteller:

When it's time for storytelling everything about me changes, it's kind of like a new person coming out. I change totally, the persona of who I am. My voice



changes, everything changes about me. And then, that's my kids' cue to know to jump into my world. And they say, "We're getting ready to get into her world!" And that's the announcement that is made, "We're getting ready to get into her world." When I put on my hat ... they know that's time.

Bekki was surprised at how different she felt telling stories:

This is so outside the realm of the way I usually teach a music lesson that it means I step away almost completely from the role of teacher and it's—you're more of an actor. It's a completely different role for me than it is when I'm teaching a regular lesson.

One of Renna's most vivid impressions after telling stories is that of having the children's eyes focused on her becoming acutely aware that her students were looking at her, and having the experience of seeing herself reflected in their eyes.

The biggest difference between reading the book where your face is down and you look up every now and then to make sure your kids aren't poking at each other and to put it down and to look at them and have them look back at you.

Bekki spoke about having all eyes on her:

You are looking right at them. You're not looking at a book, you're not watching them do something, you're actually speaking directly to them, that was one thing about storytelling, it's a very direct connection. It's different than teaching. It's different than telling somebody something. There is a real connection. They do look at you and they watch very carefully to see what you say and how you say it and how you look when you say it.

### ***Conversation, Collaboration and Relationship***

During storytelling, the classroom rules that my participants normally applied were relaxed, standards of behavior were softened, and interactions between teachers and students that were usually tightly scripted and controlled, such as raising your hand and being recognized by the teacher before speaking, give way to a freer, more relaxed conversation. The teachers discovered that their expectations for their students stood apart from their usual classroom model during the storytelling sessions. Renna describes one aspect of this phenomenon:

When I am reading a story or am teaching a lesson, they need to raise their hand to respond. They need to sit a certain way and be focused a certain way so I know they are getting it. I do not feel that way with this. But when I storytell

[sic], I wanted them to feel like a Billy Goat. I wanted them to want to be up on their knees, I wanted them to participate, I wanted them to yell out. I wanted that to happen, to be a part of the experience of the storytelling.

Storytelling provided a space for teachers to leave their regular role, from their everyday teaching self, to take a chance on a new persona, creating an opportunity for teachers to step away from the conventional ways of being a teacher. That new persona as storyteller was one the teachers described as more colorful and fun. They felt as though they had discovered a new talent and a new way to express it. They were able to immerse themselves in the story and wanted their students to be immersed along with them. They felt closer to their students and were pleased that they could demonstrate that they had other aspects of their personality, and their students got to see that they were not one-dimensional. They wanted the students to see more of them as persons. Bekki described the pleasure she takes in surprising her students:

I always have fun with them, but it was because it was fun for me to do something different. I think the fact that they were surprised, that I was telling a story, because it's not the usual thing that we do, and I like that feeling of, "I can still keep them guessing." They don't always know what we are going to do. So, that was fun. And it surprised me.

A way in which my participants described being present with their students was to speak of "being right there." Renna told me, "Oh, it's incredible, it's incredible and they hook in and they are there."

Giving instruction and correcting work or behavior make up a large portion of the teacher talk, but storytelling is a conversation. We have conversations with those we respect or deem worthy of engagement and whose opinions and thinking we find of interest or of value. Each slight alteration in conversation causes change in relationships, and the reciprocal is true. The transformation in their conversations and relationships occur concurrently. What seems to be underneath these remarks is a longing for another type of interaction, another way to be, with students into conversation. Bekki said, "[y]ou are actually to go and look at children's faces, look at what they are doing, look at the response you are getting." The conversations in which we engage, and the language that we use, are transformative, and the participants in a successful conversation create a common, shared language. Storytelling makes that common, shared language possible. "They [stories] have such power: they do not require that we do, be, act anything we need only listen." (Ester, p. 15) During storytelling, participants felt they were giving a gift to their students, and they discovered that their students were giving one back to them.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Schoolchildren at the feet of a storyteller sat mesmerized and remembered the stories til (sic) the storyteller came again. (National Council of Teachers of English, 1992)

Storytelling gave teachers new respect for students' ability to focus on and remember stories and gave them a way of engaging their students that they had not experienced previously. During storytelling, they could see their students hanging on every word, wanting to know what happens next. They had the students' complete focus. They were surprised and gratified to find that focus began to cross over into other areas of instruction. Renna commented,

I think it made me a better teacher because I'm stopping to notice them more. The students were being right there. Oh, it's incredible and they were right there. It was rewarding. It was very rewarding because you could really see them hanging on every word. They were captured the whole time.

One other facet of storytelling is to create groups and provide mechanisms to rectify conflict:

In human beings, with their astonishing narrative gift, one of the principal forms for peacekeeping is the human gift for presenting, dramatizing, and explicating the mitigating circumstances surrounding conflict-threatening breaches in the ordinariness of life. (Bruner, 1990, p. 95)

This peacekeeping aspect of storytelling offers all teachers a different way of dealing with the inevitable conflicts in the classroom and creates pathways for teachers to construct a different response to unacceptable behavior. This represents a shift in the normal cycle that consists of escalating misconduct and repeated reprimands, followed by a trip to the principal's office.

Renna and the other participants wanted their students to participate fully in the story. Gone were the strictures to raise your hand and be recognized before you speak. Gone was the need to get attention because the attention was already there. There is always some tension and some trepidation, however, about changing the rules of the road. Renna expressed the competing needs presented by her regular practice and her desire to honor what she knows to be valuable for her students:

See, that's what I mean about the difference of being the teacher in the room or being the storyteller. Because it takes something to not have them sit correctly

on the rug during a tale. I have to let that go so they can have the experience, I'm letting that go.

My participants described a transformation in experiences during storytelling, which led to a difference in how they perceived their students and how they generally expected their students to behave in class.

Bekki shared a similar attitude:

You try to do things that are fun; you don't want them to get so carried away, so that they aren't learning. So this is, I guess this is a change for me to let them sort of get carried away, and really laugh, and see me laugh, without losing control of the group, or without feeling like, they didn't learn something that I wanted them to learn.

When Julia told stories, she didn't want to concentrate on behavior: she was looking forward to the relief she felt storytelling provides from her struggle to maintain order. She changed her focus in order to create a different climate in her classroom.

When I tell stories I want them to have fun. I think, like I said the other day, when I did the interview, I need to bring more fun into the classroom and I want that to be an opportunity for that. So I don't want to have to lay down the law in terms of behavior, which is a lot of, I have to do a lot of the day. And I don't tend to have to when I'm doing storytelling.

Renna summed up her feelings by saying, “[i]t makes it possible to teach better than you've ever taught because your whole focus isn't behavior.” Karen stated that behavior issues were not in the forefront of her mind “because they were so right with me. And there wasn't a kid who didn't go with me, down the road.”

My participants did get a chance to experience what their classrooms might be like when the focus was not on behavior, and the possibilities storytelling might create when they chose to connect with their students in a way that fostered a more cooperative atmosphere. Teachers were able to easily handle what would seem to be divergent classroom standards. As a result of storytelling, these teachers began to be with their students in a more collaborative and cooperative fashion, and this change began to manifest itself in changes in practice.

Renna was keenly aware of her responsibilities to provide a safe environment and gave a caveat to the loss of her expectations:

Right, I'm letting that go. To a point. There's things you cannot let happen, there wasn't, if I [had no limits and] was to take the Biggest Billy Goat Gruff

into being a more violent ending with the troll, I could not have had people collide.

My participants were able to imagine themselves as different from their usual teaching selves. As storytellers, they were able to enter into the process of storytelling joyfully, exploring new ways of being and choosing what roles they wished to assume. If teachers can do that for themselves as storytellers, what might they imagine for their students, and how would that be made apparent in their teaching? Through storytelling, teachers are able to transform the ways in which they perceive themselves and forge new teaching identities.

Renna said: “I can hear them, they are storytelling. They’re re-enacting the story. They are telling it the way I told it with their twist.” She understands that this experience of listening to her students means “it went in.” Her students heard her so profoundly that they were able to tell the story on their own. For Renna, the best indicator of being heard is this:

But I think that the true measure of the success was after Goldilocks and the Three Bears, to have them incorporate in their play. There’s nothing better than that because nobody’s saying “You gotta do this or draw me a picture about that.” Nobody’s directing their play. And I think that is the highest, well, the highest would be if they went home and told the story to their parents.

Karen tells of having her students listen closely to her story.

They told it to each other. I told it on a Friday, they told it on a Monday. So, they had to wait two whole days to tell it to each other, and they had pretty much no problem remembering it. Straight up, no problem. And you know what else? I found it fascinating. Not only did they remember it, they even got all the inflections right, it was such, you can see the language, it was almost visual.

As a result of storytelling, these teachers began to relate to their students in an unfamiliar way, and this change was manifested in their teaching practice.

### **GOING FORWARD**

The full impact of COVID-19 is still very much being processed by the educational community. Froust, (2/01/21)

Schools now face complex problems on an unprecedented scale. Current thinking on how to reduce the impact of learning losses caused by the pandemic relies on traditional methods such as intensive tutoring, extending the school day, revamping schools, summer

school, grade retention, extending the school year, and reevaluating curricula. These solutions are predicated on several faulty assumptions. The prevailing thinking seems to be that relying on the conventional pre-pandemic methods, if used more intensively, will continue to meet the needs of the post-pandemic population, ignoring the reality that “school” has changed and gives short shrift to re-engaging children in the life of the school.

Reliance on standard approaches is also based on the assumption that schools will have the teaching staff required to implement them; however, this assumption is not supported by statistical data. A survey conducted by the National Education Association (02/01/2022) cites the Bureau of Labor Statistics showing that between the years of 2020 and 2022, the number of teachers declined from 10.6 million to 10.0 million. There are 567,000 fewer teachers today than there were in 2020. Schools are facing “unprecedented staffing shortages,” with 0.57 hires for every open position. The survey also showed that over 50% of teachers are leaving or thinking of leaving the profession, a statistic that does not bode well for implementing traditional methods. (*Challenges of Improving Academic COVID Recovery Interventions: Evidence from the Road to Recovery*, December 2022) The Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data Education Research (Calder) paints a bleak outlook for these traditional methods and estimates the need for a staggering number of tutoring hours “of approximately 40 to over 100 hours of high-quality, high-dosage tutoring for the average student.” Calder’s report outlines additional challenges standing in the way of successful implementation of these methods, such as issues with staffing, scheduling, adapting and accommodating other policies, and identifying and reaching targeted students.

The emphasis on scores and measured improvement lacks any mention of how the pandemic might have affected children’s ability to absorb knowledge. The proposed solutions do not take into account the trauma/chronic stress suffered by students and teachers alike. Until these issues are addressed, many students will simply be emotionally unavailable. It is doubtful that children who are coping with prolonged stress will be able to focus on “high dosage tutoring.”

Traditional methods won’t solve the issues due to the sheer number of staff that will be needed, the complexity and scope of the problem, and the ever-present issue of funding. The challenges of this task range from inequity in services, disruptions to class time, isolation from peers, new testing to determine individual learning needs, development of special curriculum and finding locations in the school building where these students will receive their tutoring. The logistics alone present a substantial roadblock to success. The onus of developing these programs may very well fall to a teaching staff that is already exhausted, and there are simply not enough teachers to make traditional methods of remediation possible.

The US school systems operate on a macro level, and it may be the time to rethink that paradigm and give local schools more of a voice in matters of interventions that would fit their populations. There is no one overarching strategy that will fix all the problems that have resulted from the pandemic; it will take a multi-pronged approach.

Storytelling is engrained in our DNA and is the way we make meaning of our world. Storytelling would serve as a model for a fuller, more nuanced educational experience, relying on its considerable power to integrate the affective domain associated with empathy and acceptance and the cognitive domain associated with problem-solving and critical thinking. It is a way forward to more effective and inclusive schools that support both teachers and students.

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