LEARNING THROUGH STORY TYPES ABOUT RACE AND RACISM
Preparing Teachers for Social Justice

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This chapter presents a theoretical and conceptual framework for teaching about racism through the arts using the metaphor of story and story types. Developed by the Storytelling Project at Barnard College in 2005–2007 (Bell, 2009; Bell & Roberts, forthcoming) and supported by funding from the Third Millennium Foundation, a creative team of artists, academics, public school teachers, and undergraduate students crafted the model we call the Storytelling Project model. In the second year of the project we field-tested the model in two high school classrooms and in teacher professional development in New York City. Since then, we have refined and presented the model at national conferences in higher education, where we have found that it can be flexibly adapted for use by college faculty in various disciplines and by staff in student affairs, community and adult education, and upper elementary/secondary classrooms.

Here I demonstrate the Storytelling Project Model, showing how it organized a seminar for students preparing for teacher certification while completing their liberal arts majors. First, I briefly talk about the context for using the model in teacher education. Then I present the model and the four story types: stock stories, concealed stories, resistance stories, and emerging/transforming stories (see Figure 2.1). Each story type is defined and discussed,
The almost apartheid-like status (Kailin, 1999) of an overwhelmingly White teaching profession constitutes a serious crisis for education in our increasingly diverse nation. Although increasing the numbers of teachers of color is critical, preparing the White/Anglo majority of prospective teachers to become culturally responsive and knowledgeable about educational inequality is equally pressing. Strategies are needed to prepare all teachers to understand, analyze, and challenge racism and ethnocentrism in the larger society, because these affect school practices and procedures that differentially impact poor children, children of color, and children from diverse linguistic and cultural communities.

Although teachers from all racial and ethnic groups need education about racism and strategies to address it in their schools and classrooms, they often bring differing awareness and needs to this process. Even though teachers of color are less likely than White peers to deny the existence of racism or cling to naïve color blindness, they too can benefit from an opportunity to discuss and analyze their own experiences with racism in the broader society (Bell, 2003). White teachers, on the other hand, need to identify and examine their own socialization, the unearned advantages of White racial dominance, and conscious and tacit assumptions about race/racism. Teachers from all groups need skills for detecting bias in the classroom and curriculum, analyzing and confronting racism in school practices and helping students become future citizens prepared for fairness and justice in a multiracial democracy (Gordon, Della Piana, & Kelchner, 1998).

The Storytelling Project focuses on race to explore both the overt and implicit knowledge that prospective teachers hold about race and racism, and to provide engaging strategies to teach knowledgeably, conscientiously, and ethically in communities they are likely to enter as privileged outsiders. Using the Storytelling Project Model in their seminar asks aspiring teachers to question the overt belief that they occupy racially neutral social positions and to expose how racism operates in this society and in the schools they will enter as teachers. It also asks them to think about the kind of society they wish for the future and to consider how they might teach toward this vision.

The Storytelling Project Model

Working within a social justice education paradigm that looks at diversity through the structural dynamics of power and privilege, the Storytelling
Project and the seminar discussed in this essay explore the potential of using story types and the arts as methods to enable teachers who are often positioned differently (and socioeconomically) than their students to constructively contend with racism in curriculum and school interactions. Through the model we at the Storytelling Project examine the role that storytelling plays in either reproducing or challenging the racial status quo through exploring both the power in stories and the power dynamics around stories as these shape learning and practice about race and racism. The model highlights how social location (i.e., positionality) affects the stories we construct and considers how in analyzing racial issues we might generate new ways to understand stories about race that account for power, privilege, and position. In particular, we explore the power of storytelling to expose and confront color-blind racism and to offer alternative tools to tackle racial issues consciously and proactively.

We focus on both diversity—how race is constructed as a form of difference—and social justice—the unequal ways in which social hierarchies sort difference to the benefit of some groups over others (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Bell, 2007). Further, we offer creative strategies to teach about race and racism in ways that connect individual and psychological (i.e., micro-sociological) features with systemic/social features of racism (see, for example, Bell, Love, & Roberts, 2007).

We were drawn to story in developing the model because stories operate on both individual and collective levels and can thus build a bridge between the sociological/abstract and the psychological/personal contours of daily experience. As hooks notes, stories “can provide meaningful examples and ways to identify and connect” (hooks, 1989, p. 13). Thus, we see that story can be a potent vehicle for connecting individual experiences with systemic analysis, allowing us to unpack, in ways that are perhaps more accessible than abstract analysis alone, racism’s hold on us even as we move through the institutions and cultural practices that sustain it.

Four key interacting concepts underpin our understanding of race and racism: race as a social construction; racism as an institutionalized system of hierarchy that operates on multiple levels; White supremacy/White privilege as key, though often neglected, aspects of systemic racism; and color blindness as a problematic notion that serves as both an ideal and barrier to racial progress. We also draw on scholarship in critical race theory (CRT). Like CRT scholars we see race and racism as central to our analysis of inequality.

Like them, we use the idea of counter-storytelling to denote stories that counteract or challenge the dominant story. However, we differentiate such stories into three types: concealed stories, resistance stories, and emerging/transfoming stories. Concealed stories include narratives from minoritized groups that counteract the grand narratives (or stock stories) of the dominant group to reveal the strengths and capacities in marginalized communities that are so often ignored or devalued by mainstream society. Concealed and resistance stories expose and challenge normative White privilege and are usually related by members of marginalized groups, who usually see more clearly what those in the center take for granted, but can also be told by members of the dominant White group, who are in a position to expose the workings of privilege as insiders committed to working against racism. Emerging/transfoming stories are new counter-stories people create, drawing from concealed and resistance stories, to challenge stock stories in the present.

At the center of the model is the creation of a counter-storytelling community, one in which we can build multiple connections among members to enable honest conversation about race and racism. We acknowledge the difficulty in telling stories that challenge dominance, especially in racially mixed groups, and want to be conscious about distributing risk fairly so as to constructively explore frequently painful questions about racism and how we are implicated in the systems that sustain it. We also want to foster hope and belief in our capacity to imagine and act to realize more just alternatives.

In order for storytelling in diverse groups to be meaningful and honest, we need to articulate the “terms of engagement” (hooks, 1989). In the Storytelling Project (STP) model, we ask the group to generate intentional guidelines that can support the counter-storytelling community and enable constructive dialogue about race and racism, emphasizing the need to acknowledge inequality embedded in the different social positions occupied by members of the group. How can we enable race and racism to be openly discussed, ensure that each person’s voice and story will be respectfully heard, hold up and scrutinize all stories in terms of their relationship to systems of power and privilege, and interrupt practices of power that differentially privilege or mute particular stories (thus reproducing the system we hope to dismantle)? We set forth these intentions with the group and engage them in naming and practicing guidelines that support these intentions so that when conflicts or disagreements arise they can be used to facilitate thoughtful face-to-face exploration and resolution. We know that specific
guidelines will likely differ from group to group. What matters is that guidelines be embraced by the group and conscientiously used to facilitate dialogue. Establishing such a community is an essential first step and foundation for effectively exploring the story types.

Illustrating the Story Types in a Seminar for Student Teachers

For the past three semesters I have used the STP curriculum and story types to frame a seminar for undergraduate student teachers. I structure the syllabus, readings and course sessions using the four story types, beginning with an exploration of what it means to build a counter-storytelling community where race and racism can be productively explored by people who are positioned differently by race. Seminar students use the story types in two ways: (1) as a set of lenses to examine and problematize their own socialization and assumptions about student and community assets in urban communities of color, the sources of problems facing urban schooling, the teacher’s role, and the effects of racism on the institution of school, and (2) to think about and plan social-justice-oriented curriculum appropriate to their grade level/subject, either implicitly, by using the story types to organize and plan curriculum, or explicitly, by teaching the story types directly to their students.

We begin by reading authors who problematize storytelling for both listener and teller. For example, we read an article that contrasts storytelling in three different groups (Sarris, 1990). In the first example, the author relates a Pomona Indian tale to a classroom of predominantly White, non-Indian students and notices how, semester after semester, what they remember and leave out of the story is shaped by the cultural lenses and experiences they bring to the telling. For the group in the second scenario, a classroom of Native students from the same community, the issue is not about understanding the stories they all know and share but about believing their stories matter in an often alien and alienating school context and coming to believe that they can speak back to the dominant story told by the mainstream curriculum. In a third class of minoritized students from different racialized groups, there is no shared cultural story; however, through juxtaposing stories they see the potential to develop a shared understanding of and shape a collective response to a system that denigrates them all. Similarly, a close reading of Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech (Morrison, 1993), which tells and retells a story from multiple perspectives, opens up our classroom to awareness of our positionality and power in stories we tell and destabilizes notions of a single “true” or “correct” story.

In our seminar we also look critically at empathy and question the capacity of those who are outside of an experience, particularly within hierarchical relations, to step into the shoes of the “other.” We read excerpts from Feeling Power (Bolet, 1999) in which the author defines the problem of passive empathy, challenging standard notions about this term. “These ‘others’ whose lives we imagine don’t want empathy, they want justice. . . . What is at stake is not only the ability to empathize with the very distant other, but to recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles that other must confront” (p. 166).

These readings provide a frame for thinking about racial positionality and our responsibility (i.e., response-ability) to systems of oppression and lead to an examination of color blindness. We read an essay from Seeing a Color-Blind Future (Williams, 1998) in which the author explores the notion of color blindness through and story about her Black child’s experience with his “color-blind” White teachers. This is invariably revealing for students because it so clearly illustrates the problems with color blindness. One White student teacher responds:

I realized I had fallen into the stock story that I was not racist, that this was not my problem. I saw racism as something that I could help other people solve so they would not be discriminated against. I also hadn’t understood until then how race (specifically) and privilege (generally) affected my relationships with people on individual levels, and the kind of difficult community building that is needed to lay these issues out on the table instead of only pretending they operated on some macro level, floating above our daily interactions.

Collectively, these readings open up the possibility for talking about race and racism with the recognition that White people are also racially positioned and inescapably implicated in the systems they wish to interrogate. The authors lay the groundwork for discussing ways to create community among a diverse group of people in which we are attentive to racial and other positionalities and strive to stay conscious of the hegemonic assumptions that often shape discourse. We develop guidelines both to construct our own learning community and to help students think about creating in their own
classrooms the type of community where stretching beyond one’s “comfort zone” (Griffin, 2007) is possible.

My learning edge is pushing myself to be comfortable with all these discussions that make me uncomfortable, so that I can continually reevaluate my own racialized position with respect to that of my students . . . if I’m comfortable, change can’t happen.

This discussion takes place just as student teachers are themselves entering a new elementary or high school placement, so creating a community and a classroom learning environment are very present in their minds. They become sensitized to noticing and looking at their own racial location, socialization, and experiences in relation to that of their students and begin to note ways that normative classroom discourse privileges and supports some students but silences or overlooks others. This connection is made by a Korean American student teacher who unearths and then compares her own early schooling experiences with that of a young student in her classroom as a way to try to understand and connect with her:

I . . . remember that as a child I would yearn to see an Asian in my texts . . . . a feeling of a longing to belong. In the classroom where I am student teaching, the majority of the texts have protagonists who are white . . . . On one of my first days [student teaching in 2nd grade], several girls asked if I was a sister to one of the Asian students in the class because, they said, “Your eyes look the same.” The girl herself then proceeded to ask me if I was the same ethnicity as she and when I told her no [she was Chinese and I am Korean], she seemed disheartened. I felt as if she was looking to find something in me that is missing in the school . . . . This made me think about how important it is even for younger students to be validated in the curriculum.

**Stock Stories**

Having established norms in the seminar for recognizing racial positionality and talking openly about race, we move to a discussion of stock and concealed stories about race and racism, teaching and learning in urban schools. Stock stories are those told by the dominant group to rationalize the status quo by which they benefit. Such stories are passed on through historical and literary documents and celebrated through public rituals, law, the arts, education, and media representations. Because stock stories tell a great deal about what a society considers important and meaningful, they provide a useful starting point for analyzing how racism operates.

Throughout the seminar, student teachers use the story types to examine their own racialized narratives and locations, and to listen and learn from the stories of their students, families, and communities in order to critique stock stories about color-blind meritocracy. Through reading, observations in schools, analysis of popular culture, and autobiographical reflection, we look at stock stories about urban schools and communities and about youth of color—mainstream assumptions about what they need and deserve as evidenced in the material and human resources dedicated to their education. One student teacher, for example, reflects on the power dynamics obscured by stock stories about immigrant youth.

Students who enter school speaking primarily Spanish, enter because succeeding in the United States demands some sort of working knowledge of English (and often fluency). Attendance is all but obligatory. The students who enter the school speaking English as their first language do so because they have made a decision to learn a second language. They have a choice. From the get go, the students speaking Spanish have no control over where they go, whereas the English-dominant students have agency and power in their world . . . . Working in a dual-language classroom in a country in which English is strongly reinforced as the “official” language, this message will always exist externally. All the more reason for what goes on in the classroom to be actively anti-racist, anti-oppression, and pro-social justice.

**Concealed Stories**

Concealed stories are the hidden (from the mainstream) stories told from the perspective of racially dominated groups, stories that can be uncovered by a critical analysis of statistics and social science data about the differing ways race shapes experience in our society. Concealed stories coexist alongside stock stories but most often remain in the shadows, hidden from mainstream view, and they provide a perspective that is often very different from that of the mainstream. Through concealed stories people who are marginalized, and often stigmatized, by the dominant society recount their experiences and critique or “talk back” to the mainstream narratives, portraying the strengths and capacities of their marginalized community, what Yosso calls “community cultural wealth” (Yosso, 2006) that are so often ignored or devalued by
mainstream society. Levins Morales (1998) insists, “We must struggle to recreate the shattered knowledge of our humanity. It is in retelling stories of victimization, recasting our roles from subhuman scapegoats to beings full of dignity and courage, that this becomes possible” (p. 13).

As students read articles and books that portray the history and struggles of communities of color to achieve a decent education for their children (e.g., Michie, 1999; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999), they write about their own experiences of schooling and examine these alongside what they are reading and what they observe in their student teaching placements. This positioning of stories alongside other stories that challenge and talk back to them means that the “normative” story is up for question and analysis. White and middle-class students begin to see their own story not as right or normal but as one among many.

The truth is that there is no such thing as an un-racialized situation. . . . The concealed story is that the colorblind mentality is detrimental to the goal of tolerance and equity. . . . to teach a child through your actions and words that their race doesn’t matter is to belittle that child’s very being, and the identity they have created for themselves up to this point. In addition, ignoring any influence of race prevents you as a teacher from identifying and challenging institutionalized racism.

The juxtaposition of stock and concealed stories also creates a more welcoming space for students of color in the seminar to explore their own racialized experiences and those of the students in their classrooms, relieving them of the pressure to engage in normative color-blind discourse.

I have experienced being educated in a wealthy school and being educated in a not so wealthy school. For a few years I was in a predominantly white elementary school and I remember being in a classroom with about 20 other students. All the teachers were white and the school had state of the art facilities but what I remember most was how I was isolated (along with the rest of the minorities).

I remember knowing that I wasn’t like the rest of the kids. During recess, most of the minorities would play together. Although I was getting a great education, I was not socially accepted.

Together, students look at how stories about urban schooling are constructed to benefit some groups and disadvantage others and examine how such stories shape school policies, curriculum choices, grouping practices, relations with parents, and other issues. They analyze normative practices through questions such as, In whose interest does this particular story operate? What concealed stories challenge or talk back to it?

Once I had begun to think about how power and privilege operate on personal, individual levels and as part of larger systemic machinations, it became a constant lens for me to use in analyzing my classroom and myself. I worried about the ways that I might be setting expectations at different levels, how my teaching might be missing or connecting with certain students, what it meant for me to be a white teacher in a classroom of students of color teaching and learning about racism, how the curriculum was or was not built off of their experiences, cultures, and interests, and a host of other concerns. These thoughts and conversations helped me to develop an entire way of thinking and looking at the world beyond the classroom and pushed my commitment to social justice in all areas of my life.

Resistance Stories

Resistance stories are the third story type of story in this model. These are stories, both historical and contemporary, that relate how people resist racism, challenge the stock stories that support it, and fight for more equal and inclusive social arrangements. Resistance stories include the reserve of stories built up through the ages about people and groups who have challenged an unjust racial status quo. They comprise stories of “sheroes” and “heroes” who have been excluded from history books (though sometimes included but vilified) but who have nevertheless struggled against racism. Too often, iconic stories of heroic individuals simplify resistance, sanitizing the collective struggles that drive social change, and thus fail to pass on necessary lessons about how social change actually comes about. Resistance stories teach about anti-racist perspectives and practices that have existed throughout history and thus expand our vision of what is possible in our own antiracism work today. What stories (historical or contemporary) exist that serve as examples of resistance? What role does resistance play in challenging the stock stories about racism? What can we learn about anti-racist action from these stories?

As an educator, it is important to show students this system so that they are aware of what they’re up against but also so that they know they are
not inherently at fault and can resist. Often what is left out is just as important as what is said. For example . . . much of what is left out from the Rosa Parks account speaks to the many levels in which [African American] culture is denigrated and history sugarcoated. The account leaves out details that could better encourage resistance to racism and also help to develop an empowering image of African Americans as resisters and activists within their community.¹

As their critique develops, students begin looking for alternative stories and examples to inspire and guide them in their struggle to teach in a way that works for the interests of their students and against an unjust status quo. They use the story types to design lessons and discuss the importance of teaching resistance stories to youth to help them become critical thinkers who can analyze, and act as agents within, their own situations.

Emerging/Transforming Stories

Emerging/transforming stories are new stories deliberately constructed to challenge the stock stories, build on and amplify concealed and resistance stories, and offer ways to interrupt the status quo to work for change. Such stories enact continuing critique and resistance to the stock stories, subvert taken-for-granted racial patterns, and enable the imagination of new possibilities for an inclusive human community. Building on resistance stories, students begin to generate new stories in which they imagine alternative scenarios of racial equality and develop strategies to work toward the changes they envision. Guiding questions include, What would it look like if we transformed the stock stories? What can we draw from resistance stories to create new stories about what ought to be? What kinds of communities based on justice can we imagine and then work to enact? What kinds of stories can support our ability to speak out and act where instances of racism occur?

I believe that “truth” stories [those that counter stock stories], whether they hear/see one from someone such as a teacher or peer or whether they experience them for themselves, give students a chance to see and share the change and justice we want for the world, as well as to practice being agents themselves. “Acting in solidarity with others is a learned habit,” and being able to participate in monologues or role-playing gives students their own voices and empowers them to see and share alternatives to the oppression they and others experience.

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These four story types are intricately connected. Stock stories and concealed stories are in effect two sides of the same coin, reflecting on the same “realities” of social life, but from different perspectives. Resistance stories and emerging/transforming stories are also linked through their capacity to imagine and enact challenges to the stock stories. Resistance stories become the base on which emerging/transforming stories can be imagined and serve to energize their creation. Emerging/transforming stories then build anew as each generation engages with the struggles before them and learns from and builds on the resistance stories that preceded them. Story is the connective tissue of the model, and various art-based storytelling activities ground curriculum lesson plans.

Students write a concluding story paper in which they review the four story types to discuss what they have learned during the semester and what remains to be explored as they continue their growth as anti-racist educators. Using the story types as a framework and/or as content, they also design curriculum units in their respective subjects that support critical education. For example, some student teachers designed history units in which they introduce story types as analytic frames to examine classroom texts: They have their own students identify stock and concealed stories in history and search for historical examples of resistance to racism, then use this information as a basis for considering conditions today and their own responsibilities and opportunities for action. A student preparing to teach high school sciences designed a chemistry unit that looked at DNA to debunk the notion of racial categories and to help her students understand the social construction of race. Another student designed a middle school literature unit around concealed and resistance stories about racism in novels and poetry, drawing on contemporary youth hip-hop and spoken word.

Conclusions

Through the Storytelling Model we place diverse stories side by side as worthy of critical inspection and see that the mainstream story is not normative but one among many, and thus contestable. We learn to attend to stories from the margins as sources of crucial information our society needs if we are to realize our democratic ideals. The model offers a critical lens that can be applied to many areas of analysis and thus engages students in critical learning for social justice.
Although the Storytelling Project Model is effective at moving students to consider the problems of color blindness in teaching and to see the importance of understanding culture, institutional racism, and critical pedagogy to inform the creation of truly just classrooms, problems and contradictions remain. How far students get in the development of their analysis is very much shaped by where they begin. Many students simply do not yet have enough knowledge or models to apply a consistent critique. Without further support and learning, expanding their knowledge and awareness of racism and its historical and contemporary operations, it is not clear whether they will continue to develop a critical stance.

I don’t think that this will just happen one day, but rather will be a lifelong process as a teacher. To be honest, it is very overwhelming to think of how much I don’t know and how much I have to learn. However, reading about teachers such as Ms. Logan (Orenstein, 1994) and Mr. Michie (Michie, 1999) who were able to effect change in their classrooms, I am inspired and motivated to do the same because I see that it is possible.

Although students are inspired in the context of our course, how is it possible in one semester to build the awareness and knowledge to resist the constant recruitment back into the status quo that they will encounter in their lives and schools after graduation? Furthermore, even students who are the most knowledgeable, active, and committed and who have sustaining systems of support often encounter a school culture that makes it exceedingly difficult to enact anti-racist curriculum and teaching practices.

Yet, without teachers who have a vision of what socially just teaching can be, there is little hope that we can create the kinds of classrooms and schools where all children see themselves as central to the curriculum and agents of their own lives. The Storytelling Project Model offers a framework that new teachers and others who work against racism in universities and communities can use to actively critique the stock stories about urban youth and schooling, to seek out concealed and resistance stories about their communities’ history, struggles, strengths, and aspirations, and to develop emerging transforming stories to enact and sustain more inclusive and just educational practices.

References


Note

1. Refers to an essay by Herb Kohl (2004) in which the author challenges the typical representation of Rosa Parks’ action, that she refused to vacate a White seat on the bus because she was tired that day, by contextualizing her activism within a community of planning and support that was collective.


