

A Narrative in Three Voices

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“A Narrative in Three Voices” was written halfway through a year in which I was exploring with my first-grade students how we construct our understanding of academic literacy in our classroom. Frustrated with my inability to articulate what I was seeing going on in our daily reading-group conversations, I experimented with representing both the data and the varied interpretations of them in a form that reflected the nature of classroom experiences more broadly, which entail relationship, a nonlinearity, context, and conflict.

The classroom itself was situated in a large elementary school in an urban district in Northern California. The children who participated with me in the study were 5- and 6-year-old African American students and English-language learners. I am a White woman who had at this point taught at this school for 6 years. Although the narrative itself was a complete piece of writing, it was not meant to stand alone. It was rather an attempt to help make some sense of our inquiry that year. The narrative was also not meant to be read independently, but to be performed in a group and then engaged through conversation.

The intent in using multiple voices is to attempt to represent the fact that in teaching, data are often conflicting and that multiple interpretations can be made of the same event. The boundaries between these voices are murky, seeming at times to overlap. Part of what is being represented here is the complex and often contradictory nature of teaching. Holding conflicting emotions, interpretations, data, understandings, and perceptions is part of the nature of teaching.

Were I forced to explain the differences in specific voices represented, I might call upon categories such as “observational,” “reflective,” and “exasperated.” Yet while the purpose here is to illuminate the complexity of teaching, the idea that we might strive to either reconcile these perspectives or make neat and definitive boundaries between these voices is not the purpose. Rather, this illustration of conflicting perceptions is intended to illuminate the difficulty of a teacher’s coming to know and understand her students. The intention is not for the audience to name the different voices, but rather to experience some of the complexity and dissonance teachers feel as a normal part of their practice.

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Voice 1: The heat is oppressive, literally pouring dollars out wide open windows which are poised directly above the blasting vents. These openings to the outside let in the smell of exhaust and the sound of traffic, but not fresh air, which loses the atmospheric fight with the heat. I remember back to November, days without end of wearing long underwear, kids bundled in layers of clothing. Lethargic and shivering, trying to stay warm; lethargic and headachy, conserving movement to stay cool. All of this an annoying but barely perceptible backdrop to the more pressing reality of our purposes there. It’s as if this climate situation is a metaphor for

our many internal struggles. The embodiment of metaphors of contradiction engulf me this year, so blatantly manifested in the physical that I close off part of my mind to ignore them, to the extent that ignoring them is possible: the heat and cold, the physical violence among the six year olds of our classroom community, the psychological and emotional needs of my individual children expressed within the confines of standardized education, the feminine intertwined with the masculine, even research data conflicting with themselves---the appearance of one thing amid the official reality of another. Struggling within the chaos, immediacy, and isolation of it all, unable to stop and think, I see only irreconcilable dichotomies.

Voice 2: I was able to identify most of my students as I picked them up out in the yard on the first day of school. Many I had a vague connection to from their kindergarten year. Others I was able to place by the language designation and gender listed on my enrollment forms. One child, African-American, standing stock still in line, clutching herself, eluded me. Long braids falling over her face, she did the best she could to hide and I responded by not immediately approaching her, unable anyway to figure out which of the names on my list might be hers. When I finally asked her name, she drew even further inside herself, whispering something I couldn't make out. I asked again, but not knowing what I was listening for I still couldn't understand. Nothing corresponding seemed to be on my list. Out of a group of mothers standing on the periphery, one spoke up, offering that his name was Nadji. His eyes met mine, momentarily locking, as I fought with my perceptions. Scared and nervous there alone by himself, my confusion must have spoken volumes to him.

Voice 1: Gathered at the carpet eagerly awaiting our daily presentation of small group projects, the class sits oddly attentive. On my lap is an eclectic pile of work, some teacher directed and similar in form, other pieces developed in various student-selected formats. Although unknown to me until I come upon it in sharing, in the mix is a hand-made book authored by this child, who by that September day of his first grade year had demonstrated that he could barely hold a pencil. So shy, he rarely uttered a word other than to echo someone else's idea or opinion. In a class where boys outnumber girls two to one, and aggressiveness from both genders is a dominant feature needing constant intervention, Nadji rarely attracted my much sought-after attention---nor did he try.

Voice 2: His classmates didn't quite know what to make of him, they let him know that, and then left him more or less alone. Small, soft-spoken, gentle, caring, he negotiated his way through the chaos and violence of our new community somewhere on the margins. One of those human beings a teacher will never forget, it's a wonder to me now how at that point I had barely taken notice of him beyond my own first curious impressions.

Voice 1: In the beginning of the year most of my expectations for my students focus on ability to follow routines and successfully produce a product or complete an assignment. Happily, academic achievement at that point takes a back seat to effort. Partially for these reasons, and because of what I thought I knew about Nadji, I reacted with astonishment to his work this day. He had been at a center where rubber stamps, stencils, markers, scissors, and tape had uniformly been rendering very standard work: stamped and stenciled drawings colored with markers taped to other stamped and stenciled drawings, colored with markers. Occasionally a child would cut out one of the pictures and place it somewhere else, creating some variation in this pattern of

work. When I came upon Nadji's book then, a taped together assemblage of pages, each of which contained text describing a different illustration of his own invention, incorporating images from school and home, titled, in every way complete, I overflowed with praise. This was remarkable work, I raved, outstanding, interesting, creative, unique, brilliant. Where had he gotten that idea? Had he ever authored other books like that? Would he teach people who wanted to learn how to do this? My excitement spilled over to his classmates and Nadji was the center of much excitement. His immediate response was one of complete jubilation---he bubbled over. But it was what ensued in the following days and weeks that was nothing short of phenomenal---I began to notice that he was talking. Although I noted this change, I am not aware of the point at which the transformation of my perception of him embedded itself in my consciousness.

Voice 2: Among the information that followed Nadji from his kindergarten year was a copy of a referral to the speech therapist. Having taught kindergarten myself, I know how rare it is in this cash-strapped district to secure a referral for a five year old. Ostensibly "too young" to test, support services are provided only in the most extreme cases. Asking his mother about this, I learn his teacher observed that he rarely ever spoke.

Voice 3: Disorder, the unexpected, disequilibrium, struggle, conflict---all characterize my classroom this year. What is constant is the elevation of my blood pressure as I sit poised in front of my nineteen students at the carpet, fighting to maintain a vision of order that exists in my mind. Although it is now already December, it could easily be the first week in September---so few consistently follow the routine.

Voice 2: Jeffrey is facing backwards, pawing Emir, who alternates between playing and crying out angrily at these sporadic but aggressive advances.

Voice 1: Michael is on his stomach, making sounds that can only be described in vulgar terms.

Voice 3: Sergio and Brian are having a private conversation in the back.

Voice 2: Jesus repeatedly screams at Arthur to "stop that," but can't name what "that" is.

Voice 3: Jerry, though on topic, runs on at the mouth so that his shrill, piercing voice is the background against which my perceptions of chaos play themselves out.

Voice 1: For the third time in our short assembly there I remind the students to sit with their legs crossed, hands near their bodies, mouths closed, and eyes on me. It's not that I let things get this way out of lenience or inattention. I'm stern and demanding. And even though outbursts of disorder last only briefly, these many moments color my perceptions so darkly that I allow myself to be blinded by them. Angry, frustrated, unbelieving that my calls to order are this time largely ignored, I lash out at the one who at that very moment is unfortunate enough to be in my gaze. Although I'm vaguely aware that Nadji's body has been busy throughout the entire disruptive interlude, he had not yet caught my direct attention because of his silence. Unluckily, he voices his loud disgust at Michael's symphony of bodily sounds the moment after I call for silence. I don't hear the logic of his comment, only his voice embedded in what is now my knowledge of him as someone who typically talks at every occasion.

As I fiercely lay into him for blatantly disregarding my need for order, I realize that I've never before reprimanded this child. The horror on his face in response to my anger cuts into me. I feel like I've lost track of these children as individuals and I'm instantly conscious, once again,

that I hate the person I have let myself become in this environment. If only for its ability to pull me out of this self-absorbed loathing, it is my research that saved me this year. Video taping students in discussion has allowed me to step away from the immediacy of the environment and see through different eyes.

Voice 3: I chose four children to be the focus of my study of students' use of language in the context of academic discussion. One of the reasons Nadji was among this group was because he challenged me. Nothing about him was predictable, and few of the things I perceived about him were reconcilable with each other.

Voice 2: He couldn't keep still.

Voice 1: He always got his work done.

Voice 3: He had few friends.

Voice 2: He was kind and caring.

Voice 3: He talked incessantly.

Voice 1: He spoke with crystal clarity.

Voice 3: He hummed as he withdrew inside himself.

Voice 2: His gender expression was non-conforming.

Voice 1: He listened intently.

Voice 3: He often didn't know what question was being asked.

Voice 1: He had original ideas.

Voice 2: The work space around him was always in disarray.

Voice 1: His work was fluid.

Voice 2: His work was often indecipherable to all but him.

Voice 3: Jerome Bruner reminds us that one can love and hate at the same moment and not find it a contradiction. Although I certainly have only ever felt love for Nadji, it was what Bruner was getting at---the co-existence of seemingly contrary characteristics---that Nadji so visibly embodied.

Voice 1: We sit in our small discussion group, video camera on. Nadji lifts his gaze to speak, meeting my eyes with tilted head. The sun illuminates the right side of this delicate face, while the other half falls into shadow. His braided hair, loose from days of wind and play, draws the morning rays like a halo. Had Vermeer painted angels they might have looked like Nadji at this moment of responding. Yet just as the light and shadow played themselves off his face, so too does his participation play itself off the poles of my understanding. One moment speaking to us all singularly focused and still, he displays a presence rare in such a young child.

Voice 3: The next moment he flies off into what I perceive as fits of disengagement, into a detached world of physicality. His actions cycle through waves. First his hand writes circles on the desk in front of him, head swaying in motion with the movement of his fluid strokes. Then he drums violently, hands in fists banging on the table in unison four or five times. Those same fists then find themselves on his eyes, rolling gently around his sockets, growing to include his cheekbones, then temples. That motion expands to include his whole face, one hand dropping and the other opening to stroke first his forehead, then cheek, chin, cheek and back up to his forehead again, around and around, head moving in gentle rhythm with his touch, followed conversely with quick, slapping motions. A brief still interlude foreshadows the severe jutting

out of his chin, the mouthing of sharp words, the jerking back of his shoulders---the visible manifestation of a private drama playing itself out in his head.

Voice 1: Just as quickly as he falls into these actions, back out he comes, gaze again intent upon the speaker or drawn himself back into focused conversation.

Voice 2: Within my various data sources I find I've described Nadji thus: engaged, disconnected, silent, articulate, expressive, calm, unable to keep still, mature, off task, brilliant, lost, intuitive, deep, invisible.

Voice 1: Watching over and over again the various video clips of him in conversation, I begin to notice the many connections Nadji makes to others; finishing sentences for the speaker, clarifying thoughts others had expressed, interjecting an observation that built upon the idea voiced by a classmate---all bridges between himself and the speaker that initially got buried by my preoccupation with what I interpreted as his solipsistic detachment. The data show that he was often engaged at a deep level.

Voice 3: Watching over and over again the various video clips of him in conversation, I count the numerous instances where I drew Nadji out of his silent wanderings only to have him ask me to repeat the question I had just posed to him. The data show that he was often disengaged.

Voice 2: Things Nadji has told me: He lives with his mom and sister. Sometimes his dad lives there too. He has his own bedroom. He doesn't watch much TV. He has four TVs. He chooses his own clothes. He goes to church. He likes eggs. He has a coloring set at home. His father hates him. He lives in an apartment. He's been to a Monster Truck rally. He likes to write poems. He helps his mom. He likes to sharpen pencils. He thinks God could be both male and female. His family doesn't have a car. He has good ideas. He gets up early. He stays inside all weekend.

Voice 1: I watch Nadji on video as he interrupts Keysha's comment with a loud humming sound. His torso is spread out flat covering the table, arms outstretched so that his head and eyes are face down. He seems a million miles away, demonstrating no apparent interest in the conversation. I'm convinced he has no idea what we're talking about. He can't possibly have seen her angry reaction to him, face down like he was. Yet "sorry," his apology for his interruption, follows immediately upon her visual indication of indignation---a very telling expression, but one that he simply cannot see. Her pause, his knowledge of her, an understanding of conversational structure, and his embeddedness in the moment are all that I can draw upon to explain his ability to respond so appropriately. At this moment, though appearing to me completely to the contrary, it seems that Nadji is intimately connected to the conversation.

Voice 3: Divisive in how we've chosen to interpret it, contradiction can have blinding power. We let it stifle us from action, push us to chose sides, overwhelming us so that we shut ourselves off from new ideas. As teachers many of us live within the hold of this power.

Voice 2: We are informed of the standards, yet overwhelmed with barriers of lack: lacks of time, basic resources, collaboration, opportunities for learning and reflection, support.

Voice 3: We are expected to contribute through appropriate administrative channels, yet our input and effort is blatantly ignored.

Voice 1: We are mandated how to measure achievement, yet we know we need to have multiple measures of success for our students.

Voice 3: We are told what kind of learning matters, but we have classrooms full of divergent learning styles.

Voice 2: We are expected to use “teacher-proof” curricula, yet we understand that our children have deep emotional and spiritual needs inseparable from their complex intellectual ones.

Voice 1: We are asked to stick with the academic basics, and yet we see why subject matter needs to be about the richness of the world.

Voice 3: My own reaction to the necessity of mediating these contradictions in the isolation of my classroom has been to flail through my days, feeling guilty both about what I do and what I don’t do, succumbing to an antagonistic stance.

Voice 1: Sitting in their living room one winter afternoon, Susan and Jessica watch with me one of my short videos of small group discussion time. It seems more than coincidence that I have this particular data piece, one that includes Nadji, on my laptop. Jessica has just finished filming for a documentary that addresses questions of gender identity. I don’t mention my concerns about this child, but we are soon deep in discussion about him. A feeling of relief overwhelms me. I haven’t talked to anyone about the many divergent modes of behavior I see in Nadji. Afraid to voice my ignorance, I’ve tried to not acknowledge my confusion even to myself. My thoughts pours out as both help direct me to new understanding. Jessica suggests that I think simply in terms of a spectrum and not feel like I need to make any kind of definitive judgments that explain him away. The many forms of non-conformity I witness, both through my data and in relationship with him---his participation in conversations, his learning styles, his interactions in the classroom, his gender expression---are a richness to be engaged with, not contradictions that need to be resolved. She pushes me to see that it is deeper understanding that will ultimately benefit both of us, not my definitive interpretation of what his behavior signifies, nor my determination of how to categorize him.

Voice 2: Specific things I have learned: Students are often answering a different question from the one I think I am asking; kids who appear to be listening often are not; my intervention in conversation matters; asking very general questions elicits lots of important information I didn’t particularly know I needed to know; kids who appear to be disengaged may in fact be very involved; I often listen for only what I think students are trying to say.

Voice 1: Above and beyond every thing wonderful Nadji is in this world, for me he has also been a teacher. Embodying what I had thought of as irreconcilable dichotomies, I see characteristics that are seemingly contradictory come together in an extraordinary child. I don’t claim to understand why Nadji does the things he does, but in looking at him through my research and in knowing him within the context in which the research is poised, he has challenged me to understand him more fully. And in seeing the fullness of how he interacts, examining him closely through the data and knowing him intimately through relationship, I have expanded what I know about teaching and learning.

Voice 2: In one of many detours on his way to get a drink, Nadji wraps his arms around me in a hug. As he then makes his way across the room he knocks down a chair, stops twice to talk, does a dance, gets distracted by a stray Lego on the floor, and returns to his seat never having made it to the fountain.

Voice 1: In this insignificant trip one might see the circle that is the route we have been taking together: meandering, full of the unexpected, scattered with unforeseen barriers, involving conversation as well as introspection, certainly non-linear, and wrapped up within relationship. Clearly, it's essential that at some point Nadji get to that drinking fountain. But the route he takes, and the depth of my understanding of how he progresses, is where our learning is bound.

References

Bruner, J. (1996). The Culture of Education. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Note

To hear an audio version of one performance of "A Narrative in Three Voices," visit <http://www.goingpublicwithteaching.org/rakin/>.