

Leadership and Storytelling: Promoting a Culture of Learning, Positive Change, and Community

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Abstract

Educational leaders work in increasingly complex, high pressure environments with people who have diverse backgrounds, interests, and goals. To be effective, these leaders must understand the dynamic process of creating and managing culture and change. Stories have the potential to influence culture and to help people connect, develop genuine understanding, and unite around common purposes (Fisher, 1984; Guber, 2011a). This action research study explores the concept of intentionally using storytelling as a leadership strategy and examines the impact and effectiveness of assigning, creating, and sharing stories in graduate classes focused on educational leadership and school improvement.

Keywords: Educational leadership, storytelling, leadership preparation

There is widespread agreement that educational leaders make a difference (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters & Marzano, 2006). However, regardless of title or position, educational leaders cannot merely impose their beliefs and goals on followers. They must navigate complex environments and uncertain conditions over which they often have little control, working amid multiple stakeholders who frequently have different and competing priorities (Duke, 2010). In order to exercise influence, effective educational leaders must strengthen organizational culture, working through and with others to set direction, create a sense of shared purpose, and develop people and the organization (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). One essential tool for leaders who seek organizational change and improvement is storytelling. (Denning, 2004; Hackman & Johnson, 2013; Smith, 2012).

In the words of famed author Madeline L'Engle (1993), "Stories make us more alive, more human, more courageous, more loving." Stories are part of the fabric of the world, and are a portion of the inescapable human narratives that define and sustain us. With the telling of a story, a "person performs the self" (Goffman, 1959), evoking a sense of personal passion and sharing that links one person to another, inspiring self-reflection and a deeper consideration for the world and the systems that surround us. We share part of ourselves when we tell a story (Denning, 2011), "making others feel the ways in which we are similar to them" (Rancière, 1991, p. 71). Stories can create community and encourage an understanding of each individual within that community (Rappaport, 1993). Barthes and Duisit (1975) state that narrative is simply there "like life itself . . . international, transhistorical, and transcultural" (p. 237) and it "constantly substitutes meaning for the pure and simple facsimile of narrated events" (p. 267). Stories become metaphors for life. Stories have the potential to help people connect, develop genuine understanding, and unite around common purposes (Fisher, 1984; Guber, 2011a). According to Boje (1991), storytelling in organizations is "the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders. . . . part of an organization-wide information processing network" (p. 106).

Although storytelling is a powerful communication tool for leaders, and is a topic of popular interest, there are not a large number of empirical studies on storytelling and leadership (Auvinen, Lämsä, Sintonen, & Takala, 2013). Within the scholarly literature, much of the academic work related to storytelling has focused on the field of business and management, with less research aimed towards educational leadership. Moreover, although reflective storytelling is sometimes employed to help students and faculty foster a deeper sense of self-understanding (Brill, 2008; Guajardo et. al., 2011; Guerra & Pazey, 2016),

little attention has been given to incorporating storytelling in educational leadership preparation programs explicitly as a leadership tool (Scott & Solyom, 2011). In fact, aspiring educational leaders may be discouraged from using storytelling because a more dialogic communication style is often associated with effective leadership (Gergen & Hersted, 2016; Gigliotti & Dwyer, 2016).

This action research study explores the concept of intentionally using storytelling as an educational leadership strategy and examines the effects of assigning students the task of crafting and sharing stories purposefully designed to clarify an important expectation, build trust, or positively impact an organization's culture. The impetus for this study emerged because of the instructor's personal experience and curiosity. As a classroom teacher, educational administrator, and non-profit leader, the important influence of narrative kept surfacing. As a result, the instructor began researching organizational storytelling and developed a lesson and assignment around the idea of students telling a story with a purpose. The students were members of four graduate classes in educational leadership and school improvement at a university in Texas. One student, because of her own background in the arts, knowledge and regard for pedagogy, and experience with the assignment, took a particular interest in the topic and became a co-author of the study with the instructor. The authors were interested in discovering if, more than six months after the class, students reported: 1) increased awareness of others using storytelling as a leadership strategy; 2) the assignment had increased their storytelling skills and confidence; 3) they had used or planned to use storytelling as a strategy in the future; and 4) they thought the stories they told had the intended effect.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE, LEADERSHIP, AND STORIES

Educational leaders work in complex environments with people who have diverse backgrounds, interests, and goals. To be effective, these leaders must understand the dynamic process of creating and managing culture, which, according to Schein (2010), is the essence of leadership. The concept of culture has different meanings and definitions in various contexts. According to Schneider, Ehrhart, and Macey (2013), "organizational culture may be defined as the shared basic assumptions, values and beliefs that characterize a setting and are . . . communicated by the myths and stories people tell" (p. 362). Giroux (2004) suggests, "Rather than being viewed as a static force, the substance of culture and everyday life—knowledge, goods, social practices, and contexts—repeatedly mutates and is subject to ongoing changes and interpretations" (p. 60). As the contributing members of that culture alter the collective knowledge, individuals can reach a better understanding of

the community and their own unique selves (Stets & Burke, 2003; Stryker, 2002). The dynamic flux associated with any culture or community can often best be understood through stories that become the form of discourse we use to create culture, and can be used as tools to promote change within that culture (Rappaport, 1993).

Educational leaders are often asked to quickly initiate and implement changes that will result in improved organizational performance. Sometimes embedded within the directive and desire for improved results is the expectation to change an organization's culture. Schein (2010) argues that leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin. Understanding an organization's culture is critical for leaders because of its significant impact on individual and organizational performance and to make sure their efforts are effective and helpful.

Educational leaders, as a result of their roles, often function as cultural gatekeepers, acting as mediators of cultural norms and helping to codify language that surrounds change initiatives and organizational expectations. Fullan, Cuttress and Kilcher (2009) describe developing cultures for learning and evaluation as two of eight drivers critical for bringing about effective and lasting educational system change. According to Bolman and Deal (2013), in order for leaders to have the best chance of success, they must view organizations through multiple frames, including the symbolic and cultural elements that are inherent in any organization. In addition, Schein (2010) describes various methods leaders use to embed and transmit culture. Communicating stories about important ideas, events and people is one of these mechanisms.

In a study focusing on wellness education in American Indian communities in California, Hodge, Pasqua, Marquez, and Geishirt-Cantrell (2002) highlight how important it is that leaders understand how to use culturally responsive stories as tools for educational improvement and organizational transformation. In her book on organizational storytelling for librarians, Marek (2011) describes how stories can be used for effective leadership. Educational leaders can use storytelling to humanize their position of authority and to connect to others in a genuine way (Guber, 2011a; Kuran, 2013; Mládková, 2013). These ideas encapsulate some of the discourse surrounding current trends in organizational leadership. In order for leaders to transform, they must be willing and able to facilitate rather than dictate (Fullan, 2011; Harris, 2002). According to Boal and Schultz (2007), strategic leaders working in complex organizations can foster organizational learning and adaptation through dialogue and storytelling by constructing shared meaning. Similarly, McCarthy (2008) notes that storytelling can reinforce an organization's evolving value system as employees "make their way through their organizational challenges" (p. 185).

Other researchers and writers have also explored the use of storytelling as a managerial technique to bring about change initiatives (Baker & Boyle, 2009; Hsu, 2008; Marshall & Adamic, 2010). Interestingly, the majority of the literature surrounding the topic of using purposeful storytelling in leadership comes out of the business paradigm (Marshall & Adamic, 2010). Denning (2004), a prolific author on the topic, posits, “the age-old practice of storytelling is one of the most effective tools leaders can use” (p. 122). Similarly, Guber (2011b) states, “Magic happens when you narrate otherwise soulless data into emotional nodes that render an experience to an audience . . . that makes the information inside the story memorable, resonant and actionable” (p. 4).

Leadership is, according to Denning (2004), “above all, about getting people to change. To achieve that goal, you need to communicate the sometimes complex nature of the changes required and inspire an often skeptical organization to enthusiastically carry them out” (p. 126). According to Denning, stories do just this. He proposes that by using stories to frame the discourse around change initiatives in organizations, a leader can inspire those within the organization to change, especially if the leader is sensitive to the purposeful and timely use of these stories. Denning (2004) catalogs a variety of narrative patterns that leaders may use to achieve different objectives in different contexts. He describes seven different storytelling aims: sparking action, communicating who you are, transmitting values, fostering collaboration, taming the grapevine, sharing knowledge, and leading people into the future. For example, a story for the purpose of leading people into the future might include a historical allegory of perseverance or a metaphor in order to create an emotional appeal (Simmons, 2016). A story focused on communicating about the leader might include an engaging personal anecdote that reveals something meaningful about the leader, hopefully creating a positive connection between the leader and the listener (Denning, 2004). The “ability to tell the right story at the right time is emerging as an essential leadership skill” (Denning, 2014, p. 129).

Similarly, Ganz (2010) describes storytelling, or what he calls public narrative, as one of four key leadership practices for leading change. He argues that we analyze the world cognitively, looking for patterns and trends, and that we also map the world affectively, “coding experience, objects, and symbols as good for us or bad for us” (p. 8). Ganz (2010) identifies three types of public narratives: a story of self, which communicates the personal values that call one to action; a story of us, which communicates shared values; and a story of now, which communicates an urgent challenge that demands immediate action. Goodman (2010) also writes about the importance of storytelling in organizations, with a special emphasis on the non-profit sector. Goodman argues that individual stories are often

more convincing than sets of data and are underutilized as tools for creating a cohesive culture internally as well as obtaining external support.

In addition to the perspectives provided by Denning and Ganz, there are researchers who examine narrative through an ethical lens and point out that the current managerial focus on culture and storytelling can serve as a form of manipulation and control used to gain power and influence (Auvinen et al., 2013). Auvinen et al. (2013) describe four types of manipulation in storytelling leadership: humorous, pseudo-participative, seductive, and pseudo-empathetic. They reject the distinction between power and influence, attempting to integrate the concepts. They also point out that since leadership is a socially constructed relationship, manipulation can occur in either direction. Takala and Auvinen (2014) state, “stories are information-rich entities for organizational values and beliefs, and contain moral positions” (p. 4). They argue that since the narrator has the power to shape discourse and our shared social reality, we need to examine the ethical dimensions of leadership stories. Similarly, Michel Foucault (1971) argues that “every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it” (p. 19).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COMMUNICATIVE ACTION, UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION AND NARRATIVE PARADIGM

Three theoretical frameworks of human communication provide the foundation for this study. The brief descriptions of these complex theories provided below are necessarily simplified and narrowed due to the purpose and scope of the study. In his theory of communicative action, Habermas (1987) proposes that language plays the role of coordinating goal-directed activities and transmitting culturally stored knowledge, as well as a medium of socialization. Communication is itself a form action, not just a channel for conveying facts. The genuine communication associated with what he characterized as the life-world of human beings creates a dialogue of communicative action where members of any given society work in coordination to derive mutual understanding and meaning. Groups maintain their identities to the extent that their members’ share narratives that overlap sufficiently, securing continuity of tradition and coherence of knowledge. In addition, according to Habermas (1987), narrative not only serves as a way to reach mutual understanding when trying to coordinate action, but also plays a role in developing personal identities and has an important function “in the self-understanding of persons” (p. 136).

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) embodies the notion that in order for people to develop a relationship with another person they must gain information about the other person, develop trust, and thereby reduce both cognitive and behavioral uncertainty between the two parties. According to the axioms and associated theorems of Uncertainty Reduction Theory, appropriate self-disclosure can decrease uncertainty and increase communication and liking. Thus, sharing relevant and appropriate personal and professional stories may result in improved positive communication between and among leaders, staff, and stakeholders.

This paper is also framed by Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm. Fisher suggests that we shift from a rational world paradigm, which assumes people are logical and make decisions based on evidence, to a narrative paradigm, which maintains that all humans are essentially storytellers and story listeners. Because we are narrative beings, the world is a set of stories from which we choose, and all communication is a form of storytelling. Each individual may interpret a narrative's meaning and assess its value differently. The basis for determining the meaning, validity, reason, rationality, and truth of communication is based on people's inherent awareness of a narrative's coherence and fidelity in the context of history, culture, biography, and character (Fisher, 1984). Thus, from a narrative paradigm perspective, people can be more persuaded by a good story than a logical argument. These three interrelated frames taken together highlight the essential role that narrative plays in understanding self and others, as well as in developing and maintaining relationships, and thus its importance to leadership.

METHODS

Kurt Lewin (1946) originated the idea of action research as a way to systematically work in the field to "solve a problem or answer an important question about professional practice" (Willis & Edwards, 2014, p. 10). According to Ferrance (2000), action research "is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research" (p. 1). Depending on the particular circumstance, action research usually involves problem identification, data collection and analysis, data interpretation, action, and reflection (Creswell, 2012; Ferrance, 2000). For this project, the authors were interested in examining the impact of a classroom assignment related to leadership and storytelling.

Seventy-nine graduate students in four educational leadership courses were given an assignment to craft and present a three- to five-minute story designed to reinforce a change effort, support an educational value, clarify an important expectation, or positively shape an

organization's culture. In preparation for the assignment, students read the article "Telling Tales" by Stephen Denning (2004), discussing how different story types can be used for different purposes. Students were asked to think about and select a realistic objective (e.g., sharing knowledge, sparking action, or communicating who you are) and context (e.g., a faculty meeting, a PTA gathering, or a one-on-one conference with a colleague) for their story. Students wrote their stories, recorded them, and orally presented them in person in front of the class. They also wrote a brief reflection describing the process used to develop the story, what they learned about themselves and their organizations, and how they might use the stories, their insights, and the process as educational leaders.

As an introduction to the storytelling assignment, students engaged in a sixty-minute lesson about storytelling that included a short lecture by the instructor focused on the power and importance of effective storytelling, a model narrative, and a small group activity. During the small group activity, students were asked to spend three minutes thinking about a time when they really wanted something and prepare to tell the story of what happened. Each student then had two minutes to tell their small group their story. After the small group activity, the whole class discussed what the stories had in common, what stood out, and other reflections about the activity. Expectations regarding the storytelling assignment were clarified and questions were answered. Students were instructed to thoughtfully choose the kind of story they wanted to tell based on the amount of time available (three- to five-minutes), context, audience, and purpose. Students were given wide latitude in terms of the type and form of the stories they could tell. For example, students were free to share a personal narrative, a parable, or a metaphorical tale. The stories students created could be fictional or based on actual events, as long as they were not deceptive in nature. The following week, students were given approximately 20 minutes in class to work in pairs or small groups to share ideas with each other about the storytelling assignment. As a whole class, students then discussed common themes that emerged from their small group conversations. Students were given several weeks to develop their stories at home before presenting them to the class.

Although assessing the students' intended outcomes of the stories was not a major component of this study, after each story was delivered, the class provided feedback to the teller, including perceived effectiveness and suggestions for how the story might be used or modified for various situations. Because each class member interpreted the stories differently, these conversations provided fascinating insights into the unique perspectives of individual students.

Approximately six months after the assignment, a questionnaire was distributed to the seventy-nine students who were in the four graduate classes. Prior to distribution, the survey was field tested with two students and revised slightly based upon their comments and suggestions. The questionnaire was administered online for two of the classes and in person for two of the classes. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary and confidential. Students were informed that the survey was part of an action research study examining the effects of an assignment they had engaged in during a previous class. The questionnaire consisted of five general demographic questions, nine structured questions using a Likert scale, and two open-ended questions. The Likert questions were aligned closely with the research questions. They centered on students' perceptions of the assignment and if it had influenced their awareness and use of storytelling.

Demographic and Likert scale questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics in order to describe the participant population and report average responses to structured questions. Frequency of responses were calculated for demographic questions and the means for responses were calculated for structured Likert scale questions. Because of the relatively small sample size and purpose of the study, a more advanced, inferential analysis of the quantitative data was not conducted. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed for patterns and common themes using open coding (Glesne, 2010), as well as for identifying connections in the context of the research questions, theoretical frameworks, leadership, and school improvement (Maxwell, 2013).

RESULTS

Forty-eight of seventy-nine students (61%) in four graduate classes completed the questionnaire. Respondent characteristics are shown in Table 1. Fifty-six percent of the respondents were female and 44% were male. Fifty-four percent of those completing the questionnaire identified as Caucasian/White, 29% Hispanic, 6% Black, 6% Multiracial or other, and 4% preferred not to answer. Respondents varied in age from under 30 to over 50, with 75% being between the ages of 30-59. More than two-thirds of the respondents (71%) worked in a K-12 setting. Forty percent of the respondents were educational administrators, 33% were teachers or counselors, 15% were graduate research assistants, and 13% served in various other roles in education. The characteristics of the respondents generally reflected those of all the students in the four classes.

Table 1. *Characteristics of Questionnaire Respondents*

Student Characteristics		Frequency n=48	Percentage
SEX			
	Male	21	44%
	Female	27	56%
RACE/ETHNICITY			
	White	26	54%
	Hispanic	14	29%
	Black	3	6%
	Multiracial/Other	3	6%
	Prefer not to answer	2	4%
AGE			
	Under 30	5	10%
	30-39	22	46%
	40-49	14	29%
	50 or over	6	13%
	Prefer not to answer	1	2%
WORK SETTING			
	Elementary School	13	27%
	Secondary School	10	21%
	Central Office	11	23%
	College/University	7	15%
	State Agency	3	6%
	Non-profit/Other	4	8%
ROLE			
	Administrator		
	Counselor		
	Graduate Research Assistant	19	40%
	Teacher/Instructional Support	2	4%
	Other	7	15%
		14	29%
		6	13%

Note: Total percentage may not equal 100 due to rounding.

Responses to the structured questions regarding the storytelling assignment are shown in Table 2. Overall, results indicated the assignment was remembered, liked, thought about, and had increased students' awareness, skills, and confidence. In addition, most students reported that they planned to purposefully use storytelling as a leadership strategy in the future.

On a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 being "not at all" and 4 being "a great deal," more than eighty percent of respondents reported that they remembered the assignment a great deal, with an average response of 3.8. Sixty-six percent of the respondents reported that they liked the storytelling assignment a great deal, with an average response of 3.7. Fifty-one percent of those responding to the questionnaire reported being a great deal more aware of educational leaders using storytelling as a leadership strategy, with an average response of 3.3. Students completing the questionnaire reported both increased skills, with an average response of 3.2, and increased confidence, with an average response of 3.0, in telling stories.

Table 2. *Student Responses to Structured Questions About Storytelling Assignment*

Question	Mean
Do you remember the assignment in which you wrote and shared a 3-5 minute story with the class?	3.8
Did you like the storytelling assignment?	3.7
Since completing the storytelling assignment, are you more aware of educational leaders using storytelling as a leadership strategy?	3.3
Did the storytelling assignment increase your skills in telling stories with a purpose?	3.2
Did the storytelling assignment increase your confidence in telling stories with a purpose?	3.0
If you have used storytelling as a leadership strategy, do you think it had the effect you intended?	3.0
Do you plan to intentionally incorporate storytelling as a leadership strategy in the future?	3.4

Note: The response scale ranged from 1 "Not at all" to 4 "A great deal."

The results of two additional questions are reported in Table 3. When asked if they had thought about the storytelling assignment since completing the course, a majority reported having thought about the assignment more than three times. Twenty-nine percent reported thinking about the assignment more than five times. Slightly less than half of the

respondents reported having intentionally used storytelling as a leadership strategy more than three times since the completion of the class, although almost all respondents planned to do so in the future. Most students who had told stories as a leadership strategy believed it had the intended effect, with an average response of 3.0.

Table 3. *Student Responses to Additional Questions About Storytelling Assignment*

Question	Response Options and Frequencies (n=48)			
	Not at all	1-2 times	3-5 times	More than 5 times
Have you thought about the storytelling assignment since completing the course?	2	17	15	13
Since completing the course, have you intentionally used storytelling as a leadership strategy?	4	22	15	7

Note: The frequencies may not add up to the total “n” because every question was not always answered.

Although average responses were calculated by sex, age, ethnicity, job role, and job setting, the number of cases in each category were relatively small and few clear patterns emerged from the data. It did appear that females were more likely than males to report remembering the assignment, being aware of leaders telling stories, and that the assignment increased their confidence and skills in telling stories with a purpose. It also appeared that respondents who worked in elementary schools had higher average responses on every question than those who worked in secondary schools. In addition to the structured responses, students were asked to reflect on the assignment and describe what difference it made in their thinking or practice, and what else they would like to share about the activity.

Student Stories, Reflections, and Open-Ended Responses

The narratives students shared ranged from being highly personal and autobiographical to the recounting of stories heard previously that had significant meaning. Students chose different audiences, settings, and purposes for their stories. Most students intended for their stories to communicate important things that they cared about deeply. Several students shared information about themselves they had never shared outside of their families. For example, one student described being placed in special education classes at an

early age and isolated from his peers until a caring teacher correctly identified his learning difference and helped him to recognize and reach his full potential. Another student recounted her own background—poor, hungry, English language learner, parents with only a 4th grade education—and how she was made fun of in school because “she couldn’t speak English the right way.” Now she is “proud to work alongside the third grade teacher who gave me a needed boost of confidence, reassurance, and an extra handful of goldfish during snack time.” A third student shared a story about a young child she worked with during her first year of teaching. In the story, she disclosed how her expectations of the child were negatively altered as a result of her preconceived notions and stereotypes. Her subsequent experiences with the child and his family “opened my eyes and changed my beliefs.” She now shares this story with young teachers she mentors, revealing her own humanity, and emphasizing that potential is not distributed according to zip code or income. A doctoral student wrote an inspiring story about the humorous and touching interactions he had with a fifth grader with special needs when he was a teacher. He submitted the story to a journal and it was accepted and published.

The ideas of “increased awareness” and “personal connection” frequently appeared in students’ reflections and open-ended responses. These concepts extended across students’ descriptions of their own experience of the lesson as well as their developing view of leadership and storytelling. “The assignment helped to focus my thoughts,” shared one participant. “It helped me frame situations differently than I usually do,” explained another. Similarly, a third student reflected, “I used a different thought process to produce the story than I would have writing a research paper. It gave me a chance to connect the desired outcome with my intent of telling the story.” “After the assignment,” a fourth student noted, “I started to notice and appreciate how powerful storytelling can be as a school and community leader. I now identify a lot of storytelling in the articles I read and am much more conscious of my own storytelling.”

In their comments, several participants also discussed the personal nature of the assignment and its effect. For example, one student explained, “I always thought I was a pretty natural storyteller so this assignment was great practice and encouraged me to think more deeply about storytelling strategies and to consider new audiences and venues.” Another remarked, “Storytelling is much more than cold hard facts and figures. I now understand the significance of connecting with my intended audience.” A third student observed that storytelling helped her to build relationships, “providing an opportunity for others to connect to me in various ways because people from all walks of life share experiences.”

DISCUSSION

Several themes emerged from students' responses to the structured questions, open-ended responses, and reflections. First, most of the students who participated in the study indicated that the storytelling assignment constituted new and worthwhile learning that had increased their awareness, skills, and confidence. Although most students "really liked the assignment and actually think about it often," some expressed that it was difficult for them to come up with and deliver a story. However, when provided with "more specific prompts, as well as permission to be creative," students were able to hone in on narratives that were meaningful. "Prior to this assignment," reflected one participant, "I had never been guided about how to craft a story. Now I am able organize my thoughts and align my ideas with real world examples and occurrences." As is true in most classrooms, students appreciated "having the opportunity and freedom to choose the story we wanted to tell." As one student said, "Most of the information we present is in APA format, this was an opportunity to share in a more creative manner." "Presenting the story in front of others was challenging and took me out of my comfort zone," divulged one student. "I was nervous and lacked confidence, but I got over it."

Second, almost all of the students indicated that they planned to apply what they had learned about storytelling in the future, and many revealed that they had already repeated their stories at work, with what they perceived as positive outcomes. One student wrote, "Even though I was nervous during my storytelling, I thought it went well and it gave me the confidence to try it at work." Another student commented, "I have purposely planned and used it in at least three meetings. I can tell a difference in how teachers respond when I use storytelling." A third student remarked that she shared the assignment with her grade level team, explaining to her teammates how she used storytelling as part of a math lesson. She said her team members began to use the strategy in their classrooms with favorable results. Now, the use of stories is integrated into their team lesson planning.

Third, the results of this study affirm that the theoretical frameworks of communicative action (Habermas, 1987), Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), and narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1984) provide useful conceptual models for understanding how and why narratives are so powerful as a leadership tool. For example, Habermas (1987) contends that narratives serve to help groups and individuals develop and maintain their identities. These ideas are supported by the many students who commented that "the experience brought our cohort closer together" and "connected us as a

community,” as well as the participant who shared that telling stories “enables me to create a greater class community with my kids.” Several students also noted that the “reflection portion of the lesson was important. Sharing stories is part of the historical and labeled self we bring into discourse . . . allowing us to evaluate and make meaning with greater understanding and insight.”

A number of students reflected on the assignment in relation to uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). “Stories change how leaders are viewed and make them more accessible,” explained one student. “They give people an idea of who you are, where you are from, and where you intend to go. You can see past their title and their physical appearance into something much deeper,” shared another. Student comments also connected leadership and storytelling to narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1984). “Each story that was told I found myself able to relate to in one way or another,” declared one participant. “Storytelling can evoke emotions. Emotions have the capacity to endure and are not lost over time,” another student observed. Several students mentioned that individual students interpreted each story they heard from their classmates in different ways, creating their own unique meaning from the experience. Interestingly, with no knowledge of the theoretical frameworks of this study, participants nevertheless described how communicating through stories had increased understanding, built relationships and community, and sparked action.

Finally, the results of the study provided useful information about the assignment itself. Students overwhelmingly liked the assignment, thought it was effective, and recommended the instructor “keep using it.” Two students suggested the instructor “provide more examples of stories” and that the activity be “incorporated into difference phases of the course.” Two other students shared that recording the story was particularly challenging. Many students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to discuss the assignment with their peers. Although some students described a “renewed value placed on planning and practice”, a few commented that “rehearsing stories in advance created anxiety and made the process feel inauthentic.” As a result of the feedback, the assignment will be continued, as will opportunities for discussion and practice. More examples of stories will be provided, possibly aligned to different course topics. In addition, the instructor will consider developing a portfolio of stories that he can share with students as a model. Additional feedback from students will be collected in future semesters in order to improve the lesson over time.

CONCLUSION

There is general agreement that leadership, capacity building, and communication at multiple levels are essential to securing sustainable school improvement over time (Harris, 2002). One key strategy for building capacity and transmitting culture is storytelling. During faculty meetings, professional development workshops, community gatherings, and individual conferences, teachers, principals, superintendents, and other educational leaders can purposefully integrate stories in order to set a desired tone, clarify expectations, and communicate important ideas. The results of this study suggest that graduate students of educational leadership, in order to use stories effectively, may benefit from explicit instruction that would increase their knowledge, skills, and confidence. In addition, educational leadership preparation programs and individual instructors might consider incorporating intentional storytelling as part of their curriculum and instruction. Over time, each student could identify, develop, and practice a repertoire of stories that they may eventually adjust and use to achieve different goals in a variety of situations.

This study also raises several questions and ideas for additional research. For example, how often and under what circumstances do current educational leaders develop and use narratives to promote a culture of learning and positive change? What strategies do they use? Several students noted with irony the stark contrast between telling purposeful stories and the current focus in their districts on analyzing numerical test scores. As one student shared, this activity would be an “excellent professional development session for principals and faculty.”

According to McCarthy (2008), “the role that stories play in the change process is a particularly compelling and timely line of research” (p. 166). Another fascinating question for researchers to investigate is whether intentional storytelling by educational leaders is associated with particular organizational factors or outcomes, such as student achievement, school climate, or employee turnover? Given its importance in learning, building relationships, and organizational development, storytelling in educational leadership deserves additional attention in both preparation programs and research. As Bolman and Deal (2013) note, “Effective organizations are full of good stories” (p. 254). This study highlights the positive impact that teaching purposeful storytelling can have on emerging educational leaders and potentially upon the people and organizations they serve.

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