

Chapter 7

Narratives of Anxiety

Jennifer Lynne Bird
Oxbridge Academy, USA

Eric T. Wanner
Palm Beach Sports Medicine and Orthopaedic Center, USA

ABSTRACT

This research project began as a study using both quantitative and qualitative methods to learn about the connections between writing and healing. College students who wrote in journals throughout the semester as part of normal classroom practices for an education methods class in reading and writing completed surveys answering questions about their writing and their health. Initial analysis of the data echoed the findings of previous studies: writing is healing. However, the more important observation became that on one of the health survey questions 92% of the subjects reported experiencing anxiety or stress. Consequently, the research evolved into a social action project to help college students cope with stress and anxiety; stress is a very common cause of a downward spiral to quality of life and overall health. By making a few positive changes in their lives, people can learn to deal with stress.

CURRICULUM INQUIRY USING RESEARCH NARRATIVES

Curricular change begins when researchers develop ideas with the purpose of implementing enduring effective change. It is one thing to notice a problem, another to solve it. Researchers can benefit from envisioning ideas from different perspectives and borrowing ideas from other fields. The field of city planning follows a research process that leads to implementation of detailed

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plans; city planning shares similarities with the qualitative interpretive research fields of narrative inquiry and curriculum inquiry, since both rely on narratives to illuminate issues. Illuminating issues can lead to bringing purpose to life, whether a city planner looks at a piece of land and uses plans to create a new housing development or an educational researcher looks at data indicating college students experience stress and anxiety and uses plans to create a curriculum of healing.

Education endures multiple curricular incarnations throughout the decades, since the only constant in the curriculum of schools remains change. Marshall, Sears, and Schubert (2000) discuss the evolution of curriculum and provide the history that “more than any other philosopher, John Dewey influenced the thought of curriculum scholars throughout the twentieth century, and at the century’s end curriculum questions remain easily related to his definition of education. The enduring curriculum question thus becomes “What adds meaning and direction or purpose to experience?” (p. 2). The question still remains today. What experiences bring purpose to life?

While researchers often study texts or programs from an existing curriculum, the stories of the people participating in a curriculum add another dimension to the inquiry process because looking at policies and procedures cannot take the place of witnessing the implementation of such policies and procedures when adding people to the process. Marshall, Sears, and Schubert (2000) believe, “through biography as curricular text we can see how individuals reconstructed themselves and their work, including the need to reread past decisions and changes” (p. 199). An idea may appear one way in theory on paper, but watching the idea unfold in practice may tell a different story. Educators want their stories to possess purpose; students may repeat the words of an excellent teacher years after that teacher’s lifetime.

This curriculum inquiry research story alternates from the perspectives of the researchers being both participants and observers. Narrative inquiry is the qualitative interpretive discipline which encourages researchers to use first person when describing events and intertwine their own narratives with the narratives of the research participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define narrative inquiry and explain, “it is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives, both individual and social” (p. 20). Therefore, in narrative inquiries, researchers learn about a story, report on the story, and subsequently seek

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