

# Don't Hide the Hurt: Using Storytelling for Trauma- Informed Teaching

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*In this chapter, the author describes her journey through a career in education as a former middle school teacher, public school administrator, and now, as a college professor in teacher preparation. Grounded in real-world experiences, this author illuminates best practices in pedagogy and higher education that weave both trauma-informed educational practices and storytelling. Through multiple personal narratives, the author shares her viewpoint on the importance of time spent “in the trenches” by education professors so that they may share didactic stories with teaching candidates that serve to add relevance and authenticity to their coursework.*

## SETTING THE STAGE

*“The human species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories.”*

*Mary Catherine Bateson*

Growing up in the south, I was raised on good storytelling. I would sit in the swings on my grandparents' farm next to the pond while listening to the horses whinnying in the distance and the cicadas chirping in the trees. As the fireflies sparkled all around us in the dusky twilight, I would relish the deep baritone of my grandfather's voice as he'd tell me about some rascal and his unruly mount he'd dealt with at a rodeo in his early cowboying years. Every story was told in painstaking detail, rising in a crescendo to a dramatic climax, and usually ending with a humorous punchline that underscored the moral of the story. Oftentimes, “artistic license” was taken to enrich the story with exaggerated facts, but that only made each story sweeter and more memorable. Some of my happiest memories from childhood were

those of Gramps sharing his stories, rooted in my own ancestry and irrevocably intertwined with my southern heritage and identity.

As children, storytelling is central to our experience; we hear family histories, local fables, and cautionary tales designed to teach us the ways of life, love, and loss. At its root, storytelling *is* teaching in its most basic form, as it helps children (and adults) make meaning of their own life experiences. Zabel (1991, as cited in Koki, 1998) asserts that “storytelling is the cornerstone of the teaching profession” (p. 1). Perhaps it’s because of my southern heritage and love of storytelling that I was drawn into the teaching profession, eager to share my own stories with the next generation. Stan Koki (1998) posits that “using stories in the classroom results in enhanced cultural awareness through the glimpses that stories afford into other people’s worldview” (p. 2). Likewise, telling stories in the teacher education classroom provides context and relevance to the content and methodologies being shared, offering opportunities for improved empathy, compassion, and perspective-taking for future teachers. Sometimes, these stories are rooted in painful experiences, but often, these difficult stories become our most powerful teachers. I was fortunate to have had tremendous storytellers during my schooling, and it is because of one professor in particular that my career trajectory changed from becoming a K-12 teacher to a college professor.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIENCED MENTORS

### Dr. K

When I was pursuing my teaching degree, I was privileged to have an amazing professor, whom I will refer to as Dr. K, who went on to become my mentor, advisor, supervisor, and personal friend and touchstone before he sadly passed a few years ago. It was because of my great admiration for him—and his “larger than life” stories he shared as my professor, in his thick Queens accent—that I knew I eventually wanted to become a college professor and educate other future teachers. Given my driven, linear ways of thinking, I sat down with Dr. K one day and asked “what’s the quickest way I can get my doctorate and become a professor? I don’t *really* need the classroom experience, right?” Looking back, I want to shake my head at my own naivety; Dr. K, however, paused thoughtfully and wryly stated, “you know, good teaching is just good storytelling... how can you be an effective professor to future teachers if you don’t have any stories of your own?” I didn’t fully understand what he meant at the time, but I now know this was the best piece of advice he could have ever given me; these authentic stories that I now share with my college students are how they make meaning and purpose out of the pedagogy I teach.

### Mrs. C

On the first day of every semester, I share with my teaching candidates the story of my very first day of teaching. It was a third grade class in a rural, impoverished farming community in Appalachia. I had worked feverishly over the summer to ready my classroom with the necessary decorative flair designed to engage my students and help them feel excited about their new school year. All textbooks had been assigned, desk nametags had been painstakingly written and re-written (in multiple drafts to make sure that student names were neatly presented, as I have atrocious handwriting), and I had pulled out my best ice-breaker activities for our first day. When the 27 eight-year-olds walked in my room on the morning of the first day, even though my heart pounded in my chest, I was as ready for them as I could ever be;

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