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THE ROLE OF STORY AND LITERATURE IN A WORLD OF TESTS AND STANDARDS

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Editor's Note: Short explores the major role of story and how it represents the lives, experiences, and ambitions not only of students but of teachers in developing curriculum and in addressing the broader political context of public policy and mandates. Through classroom examples, she demonstrates how story provides opportunities for children to make sense of their experiences and information. Story also provides opportunities for learners to make connections with their histories, communities, and cultures if the curriculum includes the time and space for creating and sharing stories within a literate classroom community. At the same time she critiques how mandates that focus on instructional experiences such as a specified number of informational texts, the reading of short excerpts, and the emphasis on close reading can trivialize the experience of literature in the classroom.

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We live storied lives. Stories fill every part of our daily existence. We talk about events and people, read books and news reports, gossip with a friend, send text messages, listen to music, watch YouTube videos, and catch up on favorite television shows. Stories are woven so tightly into the fabric of our everyday lives that it is easy to overlook their significance in framing how we think about ourselves and the world.

Stories are much more than a book or movie. They are the way our minds make sense of our world. We work at understanding events and people by constructing stories to interpret what is occurring around us. In turn, these stories create our views of the world and the lenses through which we construct meaning about

ourselves and others. We tell stories to make connections and form relationships. Stories bind us together in community.

Stories are also used to influence us, to provide views of the world that manipulate our emotions and perceptions, as often occurs in political ads and debates during elections. The public story about education and teachers has been unrelentingly negative—public schools are in desperate straits and failing economically and academically; teachers are incompetent and willing to be mediocre; adults are entering the workforce unable to perform basic literacy tasks. The public story is that new tests and standards are needed to force teachers to raise the level of their teaching because high school graduates are not college or career-ready. The answers can be found in mandating more focus on informational text, close reading, text complexity, and performance measures.

As teachers, we often feel battered by public stories that crash upon us like tidal waves, pounding and pummeling, washing the ground from beneath our feet. We try to stand our ground and tell our stories about what matters but our voices are lost in the storm. Sometimes we respond by trying to *cope* with the standards and tests so that students can be successful within those mandates without sacrificing what we know about learning. For example, Santman (2002) immersed her middle school students in studying tests as a genre and in an inquiry on test-taking strategies as a way to prepare for high-stakes tests instead of limiting her curriculum to low-level skills. Sometimes, we respond by engaging in *innovation* in order to grow our teaching and create more effective learning contexts, believing that if students become inquirers and critical thinkers they will be able to critically engage with the tests. We also respond by *resisting* and publicly working for change by challenging the policies that locate success within tests and standards and ignore existing educational research and scholarly work.

Since stories play an integral role in how we think about ourselves and the world as well as in how others perceive us, educators need to understand the role of story. We need to understand why stories are important and why they matter to our students as learners and human beings and to our work as educators, both in developing curriculum with students and in addressing the broader political context of public policy and mandates.

Why Stories Matter

If we step back from the pressure of tests and standards and consider why story matters and the ways in which story *is* thinking and world-making, we have time to reconsider and recapture the role of story and literature in classrooms (Short, 2012). Focusing on why stories are significant provides insights into how the public story about schools and teachers frames policies, and provides an opportunity to consider how we can participate in telling a different story.

Story is How We Make Sense of Our Experiences

Story is the way we make sense of the world. Harold Rosen (1986) argues that stories move us from the chaotic "stuff" of daily life toward understanding. An endless flow of experiences surrounds us on a daily basis, and we invent beginnings and endings to organize those experiences by creating a meaningful sequence of facts and interpretations. Stories impose order and coherence on the stream of experiences and allow us to work out significance. Stories thus provide a means of structuring and reflecting on our experiences (Bruner, 1988). We tell our stories to others to invite them to consider our meanings and to construct their own, as well as to better understand those experiences ourselves. Stories are what distinguish us from other living beings. Stories make us human. The nature of a life is that it is a story.

Story is thus a mode of knowing—one of the primary ways in which we think and construct meaning. Story captures the richness and nuances of human life, accommodating the ambiguity and complexity of situations in the multiplicity of meanings inherent to any story (Carter, 1993). Although traditionally thought is seen as an instrument of reason, there are forms of thought that are narrative in nature rather than logical. Barbara Hardy (1968) believes that story is a primary act of mind:

> For we dream, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order to really live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.
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> (p. 5)

Our views of the world are a web of interconnected stories; a distillation of all the stories we have shared. We connect to these interconnected past stories in order to understand new experiences (Rosen, 1986). This web of stories becomes our interpretive lens for new experiences so that story is our means of constructing the world, of world-making.

Sometimes the stories we tell are delusional. In our need to make sense of experiences, we may construct stories that lead us deeper into mental illness, conspiracy theories, and construction of a world that doesn't exist but is "true" in our minds (Gottschall, 2012). If we cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, we make them up, a reflection of the essential role that story plays in cognition.

Story is How We Make Sense of Information

Rosen (1986) argues that the distinction between expository text and narrative text, and between theories and stories, is an artificial one, noting that theories are just big stories. Scientists, for example, create theory by using current information

to tell a story that provides an explanation of a natural phenomenon such as black holes. They change their stories over time as new information and perspectives become available. A story is thus a theory of something; what we tell and how we tell it reveals what we believe (Carter, 1993).

Information does not tend to be retained unless it is connected to a story (Gottschall, 2012). When we attend a lecture or conference presentation, we tune in when the speaker tells a story and the ideas and information connected to those stories are what we tend to remember. Most information bounces off, with little impression and no recollection. Stories engage our curiosity and emotions and make that information understandable and memorable.

Story is How We Connect to Each Other and to Our Histories

Stories of the past are particularly significant in framing our thinking about the world. Milton Meltzer (1981), the author of many nonfiction history books on social issues, argues that history *is* memory, consisting of stories about our past that provide us with a sense of humanity. Without these stories of the past, we are nothing, adrift and unable to compare and contrast our current experiences with the past in order to make sense of those experiences. We are locked in the current moment, deprived of memory, and so blinded from understanding the present. Meltzer argues that governments in totalitarian countries outlaw the collective memory by burning books and imprisoning writers. In the U.S., we neglect it, and so fail to see ourselves as part a larger continuum of life that stretches far behind us and far ahead as well. We need stories of the past to locate ourselves and to envision a reason to take action for social change to create a better world. Without the stories of the past, we are unable to see the possibility of change.

Story is Where We Explore Our Fears and Our Futures

Many people dismiss story as escapism and believe that we tell and read stories for pleasure to escape the stress of daily life. Gottschall (2012) points out that the problem with this belief is that the stories primarily focus on trouble. Oral folklore and written novels are full of conflict and struggle that go way beyond what we encounter in daily life. Stories are not about our lives as actually lived, which would be quite boring and not useful to readers; instead, stories focus on conflict and crises that lead to some kind of resolution.

The same focus on crisis characterizes our dreams. We often think of dreams as positive, as wish fulfillment, but Gottschall (2012) cites research studies that indicate our night dreams can be horrorscapes, full of discord, violence, and flight or fight responses to situations that reflect our greatest fears. Horrible things happen in our dreams to those we love or catch us in embarrassing situations (standing naked in front of the classroom). He argues that the purpose of the stories we play out in our dreams is to cope with the anxieties of our waking lives.

The stories we read and live out in our dreams allow our brains to play out events and emotions without risk and test possible responses to those events. Just as pilots train on flight simulators to develop strategies for safely flying and landing planes, we use story as our flight simulator for social interactions. Young children engage in story through play in much the same way that they rehearse for adult life (Engel, 1995). Story gives us the benefit of practice for the big dilemmas of life and that practice, in turn, improves our ability to engage in more effective problem-solving in daily life. Gottschall (2012) points to research showing that our neurons fire as much during the experience of a story as in a real life experience, challenging the assumption that story is a vicarious experience—story *is* experience.

Story is Where We Develop Values and Community

Not only are stories full of conflict and crisis, but they are also moralistic, with strong messages that reinforce the values and norms of our society and connect us as a community. Stories allow us to construct a vision of the world as a place which goodness is usually rewarded and endorsed and badness is condemned and punished (Bettelheim, 1976). We come to believe in justice and a just world because of story, even though justice does not always prevail in real life. Story is the center that holds us together despite our individual differences and agendas. Gottschall (2012) argues that story is the glue that binds us within groups and makes it possible for us to form communities around common core values.

Story is a Way to Change the World

One of the most powerful examples of how story can change the world is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1852), a compelling and heart-rending novel that changed the way in which Americans viewed slavery. The facts about slavery did not influence public perception or awaken a strong voice for change, but the story of a human being caught in the inhumanity of slavery incited a nation to take action. Story can also have a negative effect in changing the world. Hitler's view of himself as saving the world grew, at least partially, from his immersion in the musical stories of Wagner's operas (Kohler, 2000). Story constantly nibbles and kneads us as one of the primary sculpting forces of individuals and societies.

Another way in which story changes the world is by influencing our global perspectives and understandings. Story provides a way for us to move between local and global cultures and to explore the ways in which people live in cultures that differ from our own. Through story, we can challenge stereotypes and go beyond a tourist perspective of just gaining information about another country. When readers immerse themselves in story worlds, they gain insights into how people feel, live, and think in other parts of the world (Short, 2009). They can come to see themselves as connected to people around the world through

common humanity and, at the same time, come to value the differences that make each culture unique. We need more than facts to understand the storied lives of people in diverse global cultures.

Story is a Strength for All Learners

The ways in which we create and tell stories are culturally-based. Our human need to story our experiences may be universal, but there is no one way to tell stories (Bruchac, 2003). Our stories are always intertextualized and interwoven with the stories that exist within our own cultures, both in content and in the style and structure of the telling. All children come to school with stories, although the types of story that they are familiar with and the ways in which they tell stories may be quite different from school norms. Shirley Brice Heath (1983), for example, found that children coming from an African American community had learned to tell fanciful stories in order to get adult attention and to aggressively push their way into conversations in order to get their turn. These children were viewed as rude and as telling "tall tales" at school, a misunderstanding of the cultural context of their homes and stories.

The challenge for teachers is not to judge children by what they are lacking, but instead to build on their strengths through the stories they bring to school from their families and communities. Children from families where they have not been read aloud to on a regular basis are often labeled as "disadvantaged" or "at risk," instead of drawing upon the wellspring of their stories. Their stories may be based in daily life and television rather than in oral tradition or books, but they are still stories. If the culture of the community is to enter the culture of the school, that community's stories must be viewed as a valued form of meaning-making.

Story and Literature within Classrooms

The broader context for story as meaning-making provides a way to reexamine the significance of story and literature within classrooms. Descriptions of children's literature in elementary classrooms typically focus on how to *use* children's books to teach something else (Short, 2010). Literature is viewed as a material used to teach reading, math, science, or social studies, a means of teaching comprehension or writing strategies, celebrating cultural diversity, or raising issues of social justice and equity. Even scholars who argue for the significance of reading aloud and providing time to read for enjoyment in an independent reading time do so from the perspective that these engagements will help students become more proficient readers, rather than because reading literature adds significance to a child's life.

What is often overlooked is that literature and stories are a way of knowing the world. Literature illuminates what it means to be human and makes accessible the most fundamental experiences of life–love, hope, loneliness, despair, fear,

and belonging. Literature is the imaginative shaping of experience and thought into the forms and structures of language. Louise Rosenblatt (1938) argues that children read literature to experience life; they live inside the world of the story to engage in inquiry that transforms their thinking about their lives and world. These stories can take many forms and the increasing variety of digital and interactive formats invite a greater range of readers and so are cause for celebration, not concern, as they invite the active participation of readers in the worlds of story.

Reading literature to learn content more effectively or to experience life is not an either/or proposition. Literature can encourage student interest in certain topics and help them understand information and issues. Literature can provide a vehicle for learning about written language and engaging in curricular inquiries, and, at the same time, these experiences can occur within the context of literature as a way of knowing and critiquing the world.

Literature and Story as Transformation

Charlotte Huck (1982) often reminded us that literature provides experiences that go beyond entertainment or instruction by offering the potential to transform children's lives, connecting their hearts and minds to integrate reason and emotion. Children find themselves reflected in stories and make connections that transform their understandings of themselves and the world. Literature offers a tool for children in re-envisioning their lives in Leslie Kahn's sixth grade classroom (Short & Harste with Burke, 1996). Gangs and racism were such a common part of their neighborhood that students accepted them without question. Kahn decided that looking at history to take a more distanced perspective on racism might support students in bringing new perspectives on their lives, and so we developed an inquiry around the genocide and racism of the Holocaust. The students' initial questions were disquieting, focusing on the horrors of death, and so we immersed them in stories including novels about Holocaust experiences, visits by Holocaust survivors, and dramatic engagements of victims, bystanders, aggressors, and rescuers.

The students' final investigations reflected the transformations in their perspectives on racism to their lives. For example, several surveyed children in their school to find out how they chose their friends and whether those friendships crossed racial lines. One particularly powerful inquiry was a boy for whom gang membership was a valued and accepted practice in his family. His previous focus had been on which gang to join, not whether to join, because he had uncles in opposing gangs. The stories of the Holocaust survivors led him to question gangs as he investigated the similarities and differences between gangs and the Nazis and Hitler Youth.

Literature expands children's life spaces through inquiries that take them outside the boundaries of their lives to other places, times, and ways of living to see alternative ways to live their lives and to think about the world. Kathryn

Tompkins (2007) read aloud *When My Name Was Keoko* (Park, 2002) to her fourth grade students, a book about the Japanese occupation of Korea during World War II, and the loss of freedom for Sun-hee and her family as they are forced to take on Japanese names, language, culture, and history. The students connected powerfully with issues of freedom and their own struggles with the limits imposed on them by parents and teachers and engaged in inquiries about this time period and Korean culture. Sun-hee's story took them outside of their own cultural experiences and transformed the ways in which they thought about freedom and responding to limitations on freedom.

Literature stretches children's imaginations and encourages them to go beyond "what is" to "what might be." Hope and imagination make it possible for children to be resilient and to rise above their circumstances, to challenge inequity and to envision social change. Jennifer Griffith read aloud to her first graders *You Be Me, I'll Be You* (Mandelbaum, 1990), the story of a biracial child who is concerned that she does not look like either of her parents. Many of the children came from multi-racial Latino families and this discussion facilitated their awareness that members of their family who had darker skin were treated differently in the community. Because they loved these family members, they were deeply concerned and questioned the way in which our society judges people by the color of their skin.

Transformation occurs as children carry their experiences and inquiries with literature and story back into their worlds and lives. This potential for transformation is also available in reading informational books that are written from the perspective of one enthusiast sharing with another to "light fires" in children's minds, rather than from the perspective of textbooks written to instruct. Literature includes fiction and nonfiction; they are not in opposition to each other.

Louise Rosenblatt (1938) argues that "literature makes comprehensible the myriad ways in which human beings meet the infinite possibilities that life offers" (p. 6). They participate in another's vision, transforming that vision as well as their own sense of possibility, made possible because literature provides readers with a "living through" and not just "knowledge about" life.

Reading literature and listening to stories encourages readers to put themselves in the place of others, to use imagination to consider the consequences of their decisions and actions. Imagination and the balance of reason and emotion are further developed when readers move from personal response to dialogue where they wrestle with their differing interpretations of a story. These discussions are not just a better way to learn, but essential to democracy. Rosenblatt's vision of democracy is equitable social relationships in which people choose to live together by valuing individual voices within recognition of responsibility to the group. She believes that people need to have conviction and enthusiasm about their own cultural perspectives, while remaining open to alternative views and becoming aware of other's needs.

Dialogue about literature provides a significant context within which students learn to live with the tension of recognizing and respecting the perspectives of others without betraying their own beliefs. Through dialogue, students develop faith in their own judgments while continuing to inquire and remaining open to questioning their beliefs. Paulo Freire (1970) argues that dialogue has the fullest potential to support transformation and social change in the world.

Story and Literature Within a World of Standards and Tests

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have created new conversations around literacy and the types of reading experience and material that are valued in classrooms. Although some of these conversations result from misconceptions of the standards, the outcomes are administrative mandates and literacy programs that influence the ways in which story and literature are accessed in classrooms.

One major emphasis of the CCSS is a focus on informational text at all levels, with a call for a 50/50 split of literature and informational texts at Kindergarten and a gradual increase in informational texts as students move through the grade levels. Fiction is viewed as appropriate for classrooms, but not essential to success in college and careers. The problem with this dichotomy is that informational texts frequently make use of narrative to tell a story and engage readers. Straight information, a list of facts, is boring and not compelling for readers, except to use these texts to locate information needed for a task—as a reference tool, rather than a reading engagement. When these narrative structures are missing from an informational text, readers will often create their own narratives around the information, such as a young boy who reads the facts on a baseball card and imagines himself inside the life of that player. What this false dichotomy also ignores is that fiction often contains a great deal of information, so that readers of historical fiction, for example, gain many facts and insights. Children's literature is defined as both fiction and nonfiction so many of the texts that the standards label as informational text in opposition to literature are actually literary texts. A dichotomy between expository and narrative texts has been created that does not reflect the actual text structures of literature or the ways that readers engage with these texts.

Another major instructional trend is a reliance on instructional tasks that require students to read short text excerpts, followed by comprehension exercises that involve a close reading of the text to develop text-based answers. The problem with this emphasis is that students are not reading whole texts and stories. Reading one chapter from a novel or an excerpt from a longer text does not provide enough context or story to engage readers and draw them into the world of that story in order to develop complex interpretations. Readers cannot make the connections necessary to go beyond a surface level understanding and are being taught to read all texts as phone books or a set of directions to search for

information, not to understand at a deep level. When reading adds nothing of significance to readers' lives, the danger is that they will develop the perspective that reading is not important except when needed for a task. If what they read never challenges them to think in new ways, then reading becomes a chore to get through, a task to complete, rather than something of value in their lives.

Rosenblatt (1938) argues that the stance we take as readers is influenced by what we are asked to do with a text. When readers know they will be asked literal level text-based questions or will be required to give a summary or retelling to make sure they have "comprehended" that text, they often read from an efferent stance to get information to take away. They read a story as if it were a reference source. Many of us read high school history textbooks in this way, not actually reading the chapter but skimming for answers to the questions on the study guide.

The problem is that an efferent stance involves staying outside the world of that story and readers can walk away with details but not construct a sense of the larger themes or ideas—they miss the story. When they read from an aesthetic stance, they immerse themselves in the story world and experience the story. They construct a complex understanding of that text, even though they may not have all of the details. The details are addressed as they become relevant in their dialogue about the story, rather than as the focus of the initial sharing. Rosenblatt's theories challenge traditional hierarchical taxonomies, such as the Bloom taxonomy, that assume that readers start at literal comprehension and then move to inferential and evaluative thinking. Most adults in book clubs have experienced coming to the group with a deep experience around a book and complex understandings of the issues, only to realize that they missed important details that other readers point out and that may support or challenge their interpretations.

A third instructional trend related to the CCSS is an emphasis on close reading and teaching reading and writing strategies. Teachers are being given the message that any text read to or by students should be used for instructional purposes, to teach something. If students respond to a text by talking about what it reminds them of from their lives, teachers are told to steer students back to the task and ask them to talk about what the story is about—to get the details and to support their statements by citing evidence in the text (Calkins, et al., 2012). Teachers are to ask text-dependent questions and value evidence, not connection.

Rosenblatt (1938) reminds us that first we need to respond as human beings, to share our experiences of that story, *before* we use the text to teach. Literature was not written to teach a strategy but to illuminate life. The first questions we should ask are, "What are you thinking?" "What connections did you make?" instead of "What was the text about?". These personal connections and responses are essential, but not sufficient, as readers then need to dialogue about their interpretations, critiquing those interpretations and examining whether they are supported by evidence from their lives and the text. Our first response to a text should not violate the nature of the text itself as an experience of life. The second response can then move into close reading of that text.

Teaching something from a text should come after personal response and dialogue, after readers have a chance to see that text as significant. That teaching should focus on one aspect of a text or one reading strategy. Beating a text to death with skill after skill is counterproductive—the reader walks away determined never to return to the text again and with little retention of the skills. By choosing one text structure or reading strategy, teachers provide a focus for students to explore and come to understand without destroying the text. It is much more useful for students to examine one or two significant metaphors in a particular work of Shakespeare, for example, than to identify every metaphor in that work.

Another instructional emphasis as a result of the focus on close reading has been to teach one text at a time, digging repeatedly into that text. The problem is that readers need to be able to build connections and complexity across texts in order to think conceptually and critically. If students are only reading one text at a time and each is separate from the next, they remain on the surface of each text. By making connections across texts, they build on the knowledge and insights gained from each text to construct complex interpretations and understandings.

Surrounding a novel with many short texts or gathering a set of related picture books to read aloud to young children over time supports this greater complexity of connection and understanding. A historical novel such as *When My Name Was Keoko* (Park, 2002), about the Japanese occupation of Korea, can be surrounded by informational texts such as maps of Korea and Asia, time lines of events, old newspaper clippings, examples of the two written languages, images of Korean cultural symbols, current newspaper articles on negotiations between Korea and Japan, and artifacts such as flags. Contemporary fiction, such as *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012), can be surrounded with books that connect to the theme of bullying as well as articles and internet postings. Rather than "read a paragraph closely," it is more consistent with the CCSS for students to surround a good book with other texts, with fiction, nonfiction, and informational texts.

As educators, we need to keep reminding ourselves that our goal for students is that they become literate—we aim too low by only focusing on literacy. Literacy involves being able to function and carry out the tasks of daily life at home and in our jobs. To be literate is to be able to think and use what we read to transform our minds and lives. Students do not become literate without extended opportunities to read and talk about their reading, to discuss what a book or text means and how it means. They also need to read works that are worth the effort. Students have no reason to value a process that is difficult and has little personal significance. We can drill them into literacy but can only invite them to become literate; they make the choice. The experiences that many students are having around reading in our schools are leading them to reject a literate identity.

Stories as Professional Identity and Possibility

Ludwick Fleck (1935) argued that we form thought collectives as we interact and talk with others to create a history and language with each other. All of us know that when we gather within our thought collectives, we talk story. As educators, we make sense of our classroom experiences by sharing stories in teacher lounges as well as in conference presentations, workshops, and publications. By immersing ourselves in stories of practice, we are able to envision the possibilities of those ideas in our own settings.

Story can also determine how we are viewed as teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. The public story about education in schools and universities has taken a consistent negative stance in recent years. We may choose to close our classroom doors and teach, but that allows others to tell the stories that define our lives, while we are closed out from that storytelling. Many of us complain about how public policies and mandates ignore research and the knowledge base we have built in education and instead go with what politicians view as "common sense." Their programs and solutions often make better stories—we understand the complexity of learning and teaching but they provide a simple story that makes a good sound bite. The simple story wins out and we fail to tell our story.

We need to teach the public to re-author their stories of school, a difficult task because negative habits of mind are deeply embedded in our consciousness and society. Jerome Bruner (1988) noticed that members of the same family spoke about the same events but in completely different ways. Some only had memories of problem-filled experiences and filtered out everything else, taking away hope and capability, while other family members related that same story as change and possibility. He argues that the ways we tell stories are so habitual that they become recipes for structuring experience itself—life *is* narrative. Our identities are thus a story subject to revision, and we may need to re-author our stories in order to re-author our lives.

This same re-authoring is needed for stories of school. Frameworks Institute is a nonprofit organization that identifies communication strategies to advance public understanding and action on social problems. This organization is looking at ways to re-author the "core story" that defines public conversations about educational reform in the U.S. (Bales, et al., 2012). They point out current stories of education and the problems inherent in cultural models framed around consumerism, the basics, naturalism, effort, and compartmentalization. The naturalism cultural model, for example, contains the idea that a good teacher is a "caring person," who intuitively engages students' inherent desire to learn. Since good teachers are naturally caring individuals, teacher education and professional development are not valued. The public conversation instead is around better recruitment of these "natural" teachers. The consumerism model focuses public attention on education as a limited commodity; any achievement that one group

gains takes away from your child when the focus is on individual achievement rather than the benefits of education to society. Through focus groups, the Institute has found that framing reform around the value of progress provides a more compelling story for the public than other values, and so they are working at telling the education story around this value and developing easy-to-understand metaphors around progress.

We live in a world in which stories are used against us as educators while, at the same time, our own stories are no longer valued or welcomed. Qualitative research, which is based in stories constructed around data, is not considered rigorous, replicable or reliable for making decisions or establishing policies. Textbooks, basal readers, and facts are again replacing books and taking away the time for experiences around books from which children can construct significant stories and memories. School and public libraries are being closed or cut back in hours, certified librarians, and purchases of books. Even in innovative literacy instruction, we are so busy teaching comprehension strategies, units of study, and mentoring with texts that we are losing sight of reading as a way to immerse ourselves in the world of the story simply for the sake of what that story adds to our lives. We stand on top of the story and send down probes to mine the richness for other purposes.

Although there is a great deal of merit in these approaches to literacy and the ways in which real books are used to think about reading and writing, an emphasis on teaching with every book that is read aloud by the teacher or read by a child violates story as life-making. Stories are supposed to provide us with shattering, hopeful encounters that allow us to experience deep emotions and make us richer, more compassionate human beings. They cannot accomplish that purpose when they are always used to teach something else, no matter how important that something else is.

Stories as Democracy of the Intellect

Katherine Paterson (2000) argues that books and stories provide the basis for the democracy of the intellect, a term she borrowed from Jacob Bronowski (1974). When people can read freely and widely and engage in dialogue with others about that reading, they begin to question, something not necessarily valued by politicians and those in control. Public policies and laws that close libraries, limit the availability of books, impose narrow definitions of literacy and research, and dictate what happens in classrooms are a response to the threat posed by the democracy of the intellect.

We do not "require" stories; they can be little more than a frill, unless we believe passionately in the democracy of the intellect and in providing the time that children need to gain the experiences necessary to make wise decisions and develop freedom of imagination. A true democracy of the intellect breaks open

the narrowness of the spirit and challenges the selfish interests of the privileged few. This democracy of the intellect supports us in critiquing society to question what is and who benefits as well as to consider what might be in order to take action and work toward a more just and equitable world (Freire, 1970).

Stories summon us to wisdom, strength, and delight and make the richness of imagination available to all of us in order to envision a better world and to take action that makes a difference. Stories have the power to direct and change our lives and world—*if* we provide the time and space for creating and sharing those stories within a literate community.

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of events in their own country. Collectively they offer a critical analysis of the condition of literacy education past and present and suggest alternative courses of action for the future.

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