



EQUITY IN FOCUS

Angela M. Ward

WHY WE TELL OUR CHILDREN'S STORIES

A baby boy is born, a precious gift to his mother and father. As he enters pre-K, he is overjoyed helping his classmates and modeling — as they develop at a different pace than their peers — what learning and playing in school looks and sounds like.

But when he gets to kindergarten, his teacher doesn't see his gifts. She is intent on making him comply. She places two names — the only two black boys in the class — on a behavior chart, moving down a clip each time either does something “bad.”

I am the mother of two black boys. This narrative is the lived experience of my older son, and I was the assistant principal of his school. I bring this awareness to the antiracism work I do in schools.

In 2016, I led a team of educators and community activists to address the scourge of the school to prison pipeline that funnels black boys into systems of oppression. We were tasked with making a recommendation to the school board to end suspensions for students in prekindergarten through grade 2 (ages 3-7).

I needed the group to tell our students' stories and how they experience our system disproportionately based on race. I asked the group to review data from high schoolers who had been in our district's care since pre-K. Their outcomes were dismal.

To get the group to the level of empathy needed to tell the students' narratives, I told my family's story through photos of my then 14-year-old son as he matriculated from birth to high school. I acknowledged that he had us as parents to combat the negative impact

on his developing identity in elementary school. As an educator, I know the language, understand the system, and coached my husband to speak in the meetings where I could not muster the professional language necessary to speak for my child. Many parents do not have that advantage.

Working toward equity requires educators to recognize that each child is different. Telling our students' stories helps us do that. Leaders must create the dialogue spaces for staff to expand their lenses to see how “teach to the middle” instruction and punitive discipline strategies leave no room for children to blossom into self-assured, efficacious leaders. We must develop and use our differentiation skill sets so every student's gifts are accessed and their needs met.

As a coach, I encourage leaders and teachers to be critical of their praxis. Praxis is developed through a conscious awareness of how your philosophy of education manifests in the everyday practice you employ in school. A teacher's philosophy may focus on education as compliance or the opportunity to develop students' sociocultural knowledge. A school leader might focus on being a manager or a community builder.

I ask you to critically self-reflect on your philosophy and how it affects your role daily. What will you do right now to ensure that each child in your care has the best opportunity in your school system? How will you prepare school for students to build agency as early as pre-K and sustain that agency through high school? How will you work with staff, families, and students to build the school community necessary to hold our children in this age of pandemic and social unrest?

Above all, what story will your ancestors say about the legacy you left in your current role in schools? Make sure it is one you and your students would be proud to read. ■



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Editor's note: Per our policy on style and word usage (see p. 6), we have deferred to the author's preference for terminology and capitalization with regard to race.