

Finding a Voice in Truth–Telling and Reconciliation

by Shanna Pargellis

Helping Children Find Their Voice in Hard Circumstances

I am ready to interview a new student. The child is five, tall for her age, but the parents have requested an interview for preschool. Carla enters the room, saying nothing and clinging to her father like a toddler wanting to be carried. We sit on the rug where there are blocks and puzzles and beads. Eventually she lets go as they both start to work with the art materials nearby. She never says a word, although she can speak.

Darlene's family is from Ecuador and she returns there every year. A bright-eyed child, Darlene has a basic vocabulary and freely communicates her thoughts and stories. As a young child, she is always much better at telling what she knows rather than responding to what others are asking or suggesting. After one of her family

visits to Ecuador during the school year, she starts to flounder at school. Her eyes tear up at minor difficulties that she used to brush off,

but they now overwhelm her, and the words to tell what is happening seem stuck in her throat.

Sean is never at a loss for words. He makes announcements, initiates conversations, and seems to have a ready response to most questions,

unless there is a question of wrongdoing. Then the response is usually frozen silence with blushing cheeks or a lie to cover up the offense. There is no apparent remorse, but seemingly chagrin at being caught.

How do educators help these children find their voice—a voice that will speak to the truth of who they are, their longings, their woes, their inadequacies, their hopes, their sins, their identity as children of God of infinite worth? How do we create learning environments where students feel safe enough to be vulnerable and strong enough to take risks?

I think that most teachers would agree with me that we want our students to be ready to speak up for truth and justice—not to be bystanders or victims, not to just give silent assent to the current state of anything, but to be discerning people and agents of change in their actions and with their words. I have often portrayed decision-making to students in three parts: there are those who *promote* something, those who *protest* it, and then there are those who *say nothing*. The silence is often taken for assent, which is not necessarily true. Silence speaks.

At our school, we encourage children very early on to advocate for the truth, confess the wrong, and to learn the

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language of apology, in other words the acknowledgement of sorrow and the granting of forgiveness. We intentionally work to know each child and to develop a sense of community. It is in this context that we support children in finding a voice. There are probably a variety of elements that contribute to this growth, but here are a few key practices that promote it.

During the first six weeks of school, teachers focus on developing routines, teaching practices that we want students to use, and learning about each child in the class. We develop community among the class through conversations, stories, games, and trips off campus. We come to know our students as they articulate their hopes for the year, and as their parents speak about them at listening conferences. The social curriculum takes priority during this time, and if necessary, academics are set aside to address the task of how to learn and work together. We are confident that any lost academic time will be made up later because the class is better equipped to work effectively together.

Students meet daily in multi-class gatherings for worship and as a class for class meetings. Daily worship follows month long themes, such as justice or the prayer of St. Francis. Themes of worship are developed further in the class meeting. The work of the teacher in the meeting is to know the life of the class—to listen, to pay attention, to notice, to commend and challenge, to offer time for confession or apologies and sharing of concerns and blessings before the close of the day, to question how we live out the truths that we hear in this time and this place.

Each class develops a covenant, which is then posted in the classroom, and each child signs it at the beginning of

the year. The covenants vary, but most are centered on respecting the work, the people, and the materials in the class. They are stated in the positive. Because the students write them as a class, they own the class behavior. From time to time in the year the teacher may remind them of their promise—it is a living document.

Each child's strength is acknowledged.

Affirmations are given to each child, often within the class meeting or in the course of the day. They are as simple as a thank you, or more involved in remembering an experience of how a class member was thoughtful or brave or hard-working.

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All children are expected to fail and to fail well. As humans we are limited. Failure and making mistakes is a part of growth. Failing *well* means that you learn from it and do not try to hide it or become upset because you were not successful. When teachers make mistakes, they use that as an opportunity to encourage students to feel comfortable in making mistakes of their own.

Children are taught about reconciliation and conflict resolution. They learn about and witness confession (owning up to wrongdoing or silent assent to it). They learn how to say sorry for a specific behavior and the need to hear the words "I forgive you" so that both persons can be free to work towards healing the relationship and reestablishing trust. When children are taught this at a young age, we find that they are more willing to acknowledge their own wrongs and to make things right. There is less

defensiveness because grace is given. When restitution is called for or when more time is needed to forgive, this is granted, but not forgotten. Effort is required by both persons to move into a restored relationship.

For three of our students, this has been lived out in very different ways. Carla had attended a school where she had been teased for her dress and her gawkiness; her artistic talent seemed to have no voice. After two years in our school, she was a leader in artistic expression and spoke clearly with confidence. When she moved away her mother reported that she was telling her classmates in her new school that they needed to say they were sorry to each other and forgive each other. She had found her voice.

After a breakdown in music class one day, Darlene requested to speak to the class in their closing meeting. She sat up front and pointed to the covenant on the wall and reminded the class that they had not followed it. Her classmates had laughed earlier when she made a mistake in music and this was not what they were to do. Without teacher intervention, some voices spoke up in the meeting saying they were sorry, admitting that they had laughed, but what became clear was that they had not wanted to hurt Darlene's feelings. Forgiveness was articulated clearly.

Sean was caught, yet again, in another lie. How hard it is for him to tell the

truth. There is a way in which he still does not know the freedom of truth-telling and covering up is all too easy. One time, his offended classmate talked him through an apology, for which he seemed to be grateful. His teacher also devised a chart of things that were true and were untrue about him, some obvious and others not, to help him become more open to telling truth from lies. The habit of telling lies is insidious, and Sean is somehow caught in its trap. It is hard work for him to become a truth-teller.

We know that for a community to work well, there must be trusting relationships. There can be no trust where there is no truth, so if we expect to develop strong learning communities, then we need to find a way for each voice to be able to speak the truth of each one's experience. As teachers we need to lead by example, provide safe space, allow time for all voices to be heard, and teach students the words they can use to reconcile with one another. It is a work that continues beyond our teaching. Giving a child a voice to speak the words of life is an incredible gift; it is a blessing not only for the child, but also to those whom they encounter.

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