



ERIKA SHAKER

A Trick of the Tale

We're pretty serious about story time in our house. My educational background is in History and English, and my partner's in Communications. Both of us and our kids are big readers (though admittedly I have much less time these days to read for leisure), or readers-by-proxy, and night-time rituals have always included books (or books on CD when it's time for lights' out).

But beyond books, the sheer act of telling stories — of when the kids were young, or when we were little, or about our favourite memories from last summer — is also a big part of bedtime. And so is how these memories change and adapt over time, and how they become part of our collective histories and our personal and interconnected storylines.

For this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* I was privileged to work with Kristina Llewellyn, Associate Professor in the Department of Social Development Studies at the University of Waterloo. Her expertise in Oral History Education is why our readers are being treated to this thoughtful and multifaceted collection on the same subject.

As Kristina and her co-authors Nicholas Ng-a-Fook and Hoa Truong-White explain: "The six papers included in this issue ... demonstrate that oral history education can equip young people with the ability to transform national narratives and thus a nation's political future. They ask how oral history education in K-12 and post-secondary classrooms,

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across multiple disciplines, can provide for democratization and conscientization¹, two core tenets of democratic engagement.”

But Oral History Education constitutes only half of this issue of *OS/OS*. Laura Pinto looks at the Shopkins phenomenon (one that many parents became familiar with over the holidays, no doubt). She explores the “collecting” impulse among kids, and how Shopkins can reinforce both gender and consumerism in this broader context:

Play is an important part of childhood — how we play and what we play as children helps us to make sense of the world around us, it is an important part of socialization (when play involves others) and identity formation. Shopkins implies that “shopping is for girls/women,” a stereotype that is not necessarily positive. Stereotypes like this one conveyed by toys and the way that they are marketed correspond to inequalities we see in adult life.

Because we can never get enough of Laura, we’ve included a second article by her that looks at the debate around dress codes for teachers. She sees this debate as an opportunity to rethink definitions of “professionalism” and power, gender(ed) stereotypes, and the struggle between freedom of expression and conforming to social norms. ‘Rather than a regime of “ban” and “control,” she suggests, “why not seize appearance controversies as “teachable moments” to interrupt the underlying assumptions and taken-for-granted that led to the problems in the first place?’

Drawing on her experience as a new teacher, Sarah Burm examines the responsibility of non-Indigenous educators to incorporate and integrate Indigenous perspectives, cultures and histories into their practice and their classrooms, and pushes her colleagues to take this on and challenge themselves. She’s very honest throughout about her sense of deep insecurity that she acknowledges was “rooted in fear, a fear that I would have to confront how little understanding I had”.

Drawing on his work at and experience in both the K-12 and post-secondary levels, Rick Hesch explores a related topic: how to become and remain an ally to Indigenous peoples in education. Evident throughout his article is the lifelong commitment he is making, and calling on all of us to make. “Becoming an effective ally requires hard work, perseverance, and courage,” he writes. “Simply giving a nod to or acknowledging the characteristics of effective alliance-making

presented here and then continuing with life as most of us know it will not be helpful. Both personal and social change are necessary if we're going to make a difference, and that includes changes in our schools, our teaching, and our educational systems."

Jerry Diakiw and I look at different elements of the connections between poverty and education. Jerry explores the importance of early intervention and the tremendous economic returns on this necessary investment. "It's good for kids and good for us," he explains. I examine the broader issue of systemic and structural poverty, "the role that education can play in this debate, and — maybe more significantly — the role that it should resist playing."

The "responsibility" of the school to "fix" economic and social woes is also the topic of Alison Taylor's article. She encourages us to rethink vocational education in the context of the "skills shortage/skills mismatch" debate, and to confront the dominance of the view that educational reform will "solve" economic problems. She suggests that a "connective curriculum" would be more effective at integrating formal and informal learning.

Fred Harris has provided us with a series of reviews the past issues of *OS/OS*; here he examines how the "symbols" of education (symbolic learning) in the form of literacy and numeracy, often expressed through test scores, has replaced true (and often experiential) education. This focus on symbolic rather than authentic learning, he argues, shortchanges the act(s) of education and does a disservice to all students.

Although this issue is divided into two distinct sections, I encourage readers to think — as I am doing now — about the ways in which the principles and practices of Oral History (as discussed by the authors in this issue) resonate with many of the other seemingly-unrelated articles. (Bailey Garden's article on the BC Labour Heritage Centre's Oral History Project is, of course, much more explicitly connected.) Alternative histories, perspectives, and teaching and learning styles. Rethinking the (traditional) hierarchy between educator and student. Accepting discomfort as a valuable learning experience for all classroom participants. The role of community and of family. Learning by doing (or "learning as we walk"). And I urge readers to take to heart the advice of Kristina, Nicholas and Hoa:

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The work before all of us, as educators, is well worth it if we want to re-story political futures, keeping in mind that “We live our lives as narratives. We do not just tell stories. We *are* stories.”

My thanks to all the contributors, and especially to Kristina Llewellyn for her generosity and excitement in helping assemble this issue of *OS/OS* and providing our readers with the opportunity to learn from those doing truly groundbreaking work in Oral History Education. Thanks also to Nicholas, Hoa and Barbara for their assistance. And, as always, my great appreciation to Nancy Reid for her craftpersonship and patience in helping put together this collection.

Happy 2016.

ERIKA SHAKER is the Executive Editor of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.

ENDNOTE

1. Oral history facilitates what Freire termed *concientization*; the development of a critical awareness rooted in learners' lived realities that inspires them to take action against oppression.