

Chapter 7

Digital Storytelling: A Student–Centered Approach for Shifting the School Discipline Narrative Using Story, Technology, and Data as Interventions

Kisha Solomon

Independent Researcher, USA

ABSTRACT

Storytelling is an effective technique for resolving disputes and conflict while preserving relationships, self-image, and cultural standards. With increased access to the internet and social media, digital storytelling has become instrumental in spurring awareness and change in areas of social injustice and inequality. This chapter briefly examines the science and culture of storytelling and explores the use of digital storytelling in multiple contexts. The author establishes evidence-based support for the use of storytelling and/or digital storytelling 1) to mitigate educator bias in school discipline policy and practices; 2) to counteract and/or reduce negative psychological, emotional, and cultural impacts of excessive or disparate disciplinary practices; 3) to increase cross-sector awareness, advocacy, and engagement on exclusionary discipline issues. The author also proposes a counter-storytelling method for enhanced qualitative and quantitative data-gathering in school discipline cases.

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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is an activity found in every culture. It has been used for knowledge-sharing, cultural preservation and dispute resolution for generations (Reese, 2012; McCullum et al., 2014; Utley, 2008). When properly utilized, storytelling can also have a profound effect on human psychology, neurology and behavioral responses (Pak, 2013). Storytelling can change how we think and feel about ourselves and others, and how we act on those thoughts and feelings.

Storytelling and structured story have been used in a wide variety of behavior modification approaches – from child-rearing and disciplinary practices in Inuit culture, to psychotherapy techniques for people recovering from trauma (Doucleff and Greenhalgh, 2019; Vanden Poel and Hermans, 2019). When combined with digital technology and media, storytelling becomes an even more reliable and effective tool for shaping behaviors, sharing contextualized data, and transforming cultures and communities. By combining visuals, text and sound, digital storytelling allows for the transmission of rich information, meaning and context.

Context is critically important with regards to school discipline outcomes. The more context there is, the more accurate conclusions can be drawn from both individual cases of school discipline and the systemic trends and patterns in school disciplinary actions and policies. Two contextual themes seem to regularly appear at the epicenter of the decades-long discussion about school discipline disparities: interpersonal conflict and internal bias. With both of these themes, story and narrative play a significant role. Behind every interpersonal conflict there is a story of differing perspectives. Behind all internal bias there is a story that lacks perspective. The stories being told by educators about students involved in disciplinary actions are often one-sided. When classroom conflict stories are told solely from the perspective of the educator or disciplinarian, the storyteller is considered to be infallible – their version of the truth is often the only version of the truth that is allowed to be heard or documented (Bell, 2020). More stories from varied perspectives are desperately needed to shift the balance of power in schools and the dominant narrative surrounding school discipline disparities from school-centered to student-centered.

Much of the effort toward reducing school discipline disparities has focused specifically on identifying the causes of, and implementing deterrents to students' bad behavior in the classroom. Yet, research has shown that differences in rates of disciplinary referrals, suspensions and expulsions cannot be attributed solely to students' behavior (Carter et al., 2014, p. 1). Evidence suggests that personal and interpersonal differences between educators and students – and the incomplete or incorrect stories that often accompany them – are primary contributing factors to schools' disciplinary disparities (Gregory et al., 2014; Fallon et al., 2021). Where educators are unfamiliar with or have internal bias against students of a different race,

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