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## USING STORYTELLING IN THE UNITED STATES TO BUILD EMPATHY FOR CHANGE

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We know a good story when we hear (or read) one. This fundamental form of sharing information shows us a path for effectively translating research into action. In common channels for sharing research findings, such as academic articles and policy briefs, the expectation is to aggregate and abstract individuals' experiences, presenting statistics about the number of schoolchildren who do X or describing the systems that mean that American schools do Y. While such abstractions are a necessary part of figuring out and explaining a particular situation, we suggest that stories can provide an important context for these types of findings. And when the goal is political change, stories create empathy in the reader that will spark new or different behaviors that can contribute to social transformation.

Further, stories can especially call attention to the lived experiences of those whom others often do not listen to. A story can help the reader better understand, and empathize with, the difficulties caused by a particular policy or practice, making clearer the case for change and the imperative of action. Stories are also a useful mechanism to highlight and share information that a wide audience might not be aware of. Including the perspectives of diverse people actively participating in all parts of the school food system is crucial to both conceptualizing and achieving more participatory school meals programs that ensure the well-being

of students, value workers, and other stakeholders, and contribute to socially just schools and communities.

In this chapter, we describe the purpose and practice of using stories to inspire changes in school food policy and practice. We highlight the power of storytelling in building empathy as well as communicating diverse stakeholders' perspectives and the ways in which advocates have centered stories to effect change in school food and other political arenas. We also present composite narrative as a method of sharing stories collected through qualitative research. Drawing on two research projects that collected and shared stories of those engaged in school food systems, we explain the rationale and process of using this technique and offer three composite narrative vignettes as examples.

## STORIES AND EMPATHY

Well-crafted stories introduce the listener or reader to believable characters inhabiting relatable worlds. Stories attract and convince us by developing the texture of lived life through seemingly minute details and by evoking sensory experiences that stimulate the imagination. It is through this believable and relatable portrayal of life that we connect with characters and respond to their circumstances.

Feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan suggests that hearing another person's particular and specific story engenders a "responsiveness" in the listener or reader that is built on care. Her work was motivated, in part, as a response to the "objectivity" that dominated traditional social science of the time. This paradigm did not recognize particulars of experience and strove to be "value neutral," which she came to find to be ethically untenable in the face of great injustices. These culturally dominant notions of neutrality, objectivity, and ultimately abstraction and reductionism obscure the social forces (especially processes of power related to race and gender) that structure social interactions and, in turn, social problems. In Gilligan's work responding to these invisible processes of power, she reflects on the erasure of women's experience and recenters care, relationships, and empathy as positive psychological characteristics.

Gilligan uses interviews to examine the nature of relationships and the role of care in motivating values and choices that are responsive to

others' needs. The analysis she presents in her seminal text: *In a Different Voice*, integrates the "voices" from these interviews in the form of short narratives to illustrate the forms of care present in the individuals' experiences, often ones of conflict or challenge. For another person, hearing or reading such real stories of personal struggles is "tied to feelings of empathy and compassion."<sup>1</sup> Gilligan emphasizes that this kind of contextual (as opposed to abstract or objective) understanding is critical—an understanding that centers care and empathy.

Sociologist Marshall Ganz, in his work on public narrative, also emphasizes the connections between narrative, empathy, and personal understanding. He argues that we experience our values emotionally, and so our moral choices can only be made based on our emotions. As a result, it is not enough to *know* that we *ought* to act; we must also *feel* like we *must* act. Ganz suggests that when engaging with narrative, "because we identify empathetically with the character, we experience the emotional content of the moment."<sup>2</sup> In this way, narrative mobilizes the "heart," equipping individuals with the motivation to make the changes that the "head" recognizes as important.

Traditional mechanisms for sharing research findings might clearly contribute to the "head" argument for why a situation should be changed and what to do about it, but they are less convincing at motivating a person's "heart." The abstraction of data in a way that removes the detail and texture of lived experience does not engage our human capacity for empathy. While statistics indicating the breadth of an issue may impress us, and a critique of a policy offers important information on how to change it, they may not be as effective at activating a caring or empathetic response. Narratives that share real experiences, especially when presented with context and in the voice of the individual, may support empathy in the listener or reader and prime them for action in ways that other methods of presenting the rationale for changing policy or practice do not.

While use of narratives may not be common in most academic writing, several advocacy organizations offer evidence of the value of stories to contribute to policy change. Narrative 4 (N4) is a global organization that focuses on young people and elevates the power of their narrative to build empathy and elicit change. They work with educators and youth to facilitate "story exchanges," which "help students understand that their

voices, stories, actions and lives matter, and that they have the power to change, rebuild and revolutionize systems."<sup>3</sup> The founders assert that the sharing of personal narratives can help participants "see the world . . . more empathetically through the exchange of personal narratives."<sup>4</sup>

N4 uses this process to build understanding across a broad number of social challenges faced by youth around the world. For example, their ongoing "Empathy Into Action" campaign launched with "Guns and Empathy," a documentary video that captured story exchanges between people on both sides of gun policy debates. Viewers bear witness to the impactful experiences of the participants as they offer their stories of gun-related violence. In an accompanying *New York Magazine* article, the writers document the policy viewpoints and shifts in position, remarkable even if subtle in their difference, inspired by the understanding gained through the story exchange process.<sup>5</sup>

In the school food system, we have also seen the power of stories to influence public opinion and spur political change as demonstrated by recent public discourse around "lunch shaming" practices. Reports of students stamped with a message indicating they need lunch money and cafeteria staff forced to throw meals away instead of giving them to students with negative account balances have fueled public discontent over these practices.<sup>6</sup> In New Mexico, a state senator introduced legislation to ban practices that single out children whose parents owe money for school lunches. He promoted the bill, which ultimately became law, by sharing his own story of growing up in foster homes and having to mop the floor of the cafeteria to help pay for his lunches.<sup>7</sup>

People have responded to individuals' stories of being shamed or forced to shame others with concern for those who have had this experience. These stories engender empathy toward the students and cafeteria staff given how obviously these practices go against commonly held ideals about caring for children. This empathy for children and workers has been channeled into tangible changes in school food policy and practice, such as the New Mexico law and other efforts to end similar practices and, in some cases, the structural conditions that cause them.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to recognize that policymakers, parents, and the public would not have known about the need to disrupt lunch shaming

practices without workers and students sharing their personal stories. Although lunch shaming practices may be widespread, those not working or eating in a school cafeteria would not necessarily be aware of them. Even within the school food system, those who are involved in one element may not know or understand the experience of others. In this case, simply by sharing what had happened to them, workers and students initiated what seems to be a widely desirable and seemingly durable transformation to school food practices. Such surfacing and centering the perspectives of all stakeholders is necessary for understanding the changes the school food system requires.

### COMPOSITE NARRATIVE

Once we see individuals' stories as crucial to justifying and encouraging policy change, we must consider how to share them. Narratives can take different forms: they can range from the simple to the complex and draw on all forms of experience, both real and imagined. Thompson and Kreuter lay out three categories of narrative: authentic, fictional, and composite. Authentic narratives relay the information that a researcher has collected about a participant.<sup>9</sup> These are like case studies in that they are the "real" story of someone's experience. Fictional narratives seek to express a targeted message and may be constructed from a variety of sources, primarily the author's "observation and experience," including their imagination.<sup>10</sup>

The composite narrative presents individuals' experiences and perspectives in a blended picture that conveys key themes found across the body of data collected for a given project.<sup>11</sup> It is not a simple and straightforward retelling as in authentic narratives, yet it remains thoroughly humanized and grounded in the details conveyed to the researcher by those sharing their experiences. Composite narratives draw on multiple stories shared by participants, filtered through the reflexive process of the researchers, and grounded in their knowledge of the literature related to the issue. A practical benefit of this approach is the capacity to represent several key themes in a relatively concise form without losing the quality and form of story and natural voice that may add to the reader's understanding of these experiences. At the same time, a major ethical benefit of

composite narrative is the representation of contextualized lived experience in an evocative manner without compromising the confidentiality of participants.

The composite narrative vignettes we include in this chapter present the lived experiences of those participating in our projects, with the aim of providing “true” though not “real” stories. The intent is to highlight prevalent ideas and issues expressed by our participants, using details from their reports.<sup>12</sup> The composites are constructed systematically, synthesizing the participants’ voices, their context, and the key themes to convey both the content and the texture of their experiences.

Composite narratives can be used as a technique to share findings from projects using diverse methods for qualitative research. Our vignettes are drawn from two large, multi-method projects examining various aspects of school food in the United States. The FoodCorps project “Reimagining School Cafeterias” (RSC) used human-centered design as a methodology to understand and amplify the voices of school food stakeholders from a diverse profile of nine schools and districts across the United States, with an emphasis on students’ experiences of their cafeterias and meal programs.<sup>13</sup>

Human-centered design (HCD), the framework used for RSC, is a solutions-oriented approach to design, used in a variety of applications and contexts, including K–12 education. Traditional HCD methods foreground empathy as the initial step in the design process, with the rationale that to effectively design for and with people, one must understand and collaborate with those most impacted by the topic at hand. Equity-centered design frameworks, such as Liberatory Design and Equity-Centered Community Design, more deeply center community members directly impacted by design outcomes, explicitly seeking to advance equity through both the design process and the designed outcome. These flexible, nonlinear approaches integrate history and healing, acknowledgement and dismantling of power constructs, complexity theory, and other equity-driven mindsets and methods into practice. This ensures that individuals and communities with lived experience of the topic lead and control the outcomes of the process.<sup>14</sup>

The second project, “PreK-12 School Food: Making It Healthier, Making It Regional” (MHMR), initiated by School Food Focus, examined meal program operations in six US school districts.<sup>15</sup> MHMR incorporated the qualitative approaches of participant observation, informal and formal

in-depth interviews, graphic elicitation, and focus groups. The researchers combined these qualitative findings with quantitative analysis using surveys and secondary institutional data.

While RSC and MHMR used different frameworks for approaching and conducting research, both projects prioritized listening to and learning from community stakeholders whose perspectives are not often heard and demonstrated the power of individual and collective storytelling. Techniques used to gather information and learn from clients in HCD mirror many of those used in critical qualitative research, reflected in meaningful overlaps in the two projects presented here. Specifically, both projects utilized open-ended interviews and conversations, semi-structured interactive group activities, and observations to gain an understanding of student, staff, and other stakeholder experiences of their school meal programs. These techniques aim to collect data drawn from lived experiences and document them in the participants' own words. The researcher also may observe and interact with project participants in their own environments as well as conduct secondary research on topic history and context.

To create composite narratives, the researcher draws on the stories shared by study participants as well as any secondary research, observations, and/or interactions with participants. The first step of developing a composite narrative involves identifying who will be represented and ensuring that the research process elicited enough understanding to allow the reconstruction of truthful stories. The researcher reviews the synthesis of what stakeholders shared, the full set of direct quotations or transcriptions, secondary research on the history and broader context of the topic, and key themes that have emerged. For each stakeholder group represented, the researcher weaves together pieces that build the profile and story of a composite individual, remaining aware of and attentive to misrepresentation. The researcher uses themes as anchoring elements, incorporating anonymized direct quotations and other realistic details that add texture and specificity to the story. The goal is not to create a profile that is all-encompassing of every person's experience in that stakeholder group, but stakeholders should validate the final composite narrative for accuracy. Ideally, composite narratives should be considered alongside the full set of data and contextual learning to provide an informative and nuanced view of people's experiences.

As part of the process of creating a composite narrative, we stress the responsibility of the researcher or story-sharer to consider their own positionality, personal biases, and other historical and cultural contexts. These all affect how the researcher will interpret and present others' stories. We recognize that typically in American, white-dominant culture, individuals with power and privilege facilitate story sharing. The authors of this chapter are no exception—through this very process we, from our social position as academics and experts and having benefited from white privilege, are demonstrating our power to share and frame others' stories. In addition to self-reflexivity and attentiveness to issues of bias, we suggest that when creating composite narratives the researchers offer transparency about their own position (for example, by including a positionality statement explaining how their identities, lived experiences, and other social lenses could influence their research) and look to research paradigms focused on equity for guidance. To the extent possible, the researcher should include those whose stories are being shared as cocreators of the composite narratives. Depending on their interest, story-sharers could collaborate on writing the narratives, provide feedback on drafts, or be credited in a way that is desirable to them.

### **CAFETERIA VIGNETTES**

The composite narrative vignettes that follow share insights from students, food service managers, and school administrators from their respective positions: the nuanced likes and dislikes of students, the Sisyphian-like responsibilities of a cafeteria manager, and the balancing act of school lunch for a principal. We selected these three stakeholder groups as they are some of the most impacted by school cafeterias, while recognizing that many other school food community members, including other kitchen staff, custodial staff, teachers, and caregivers, are integral members of the cafeteria and school meal ecosystem. Constructed from data integrated from our two projects, they present key themes and concepts shared by participants, transformed into stories that reflect their voices and the context of their lived experience.

In the United States, the food served, how it is offered, and the environment in which students eat differs by school district and by school. However,



through our research we have noticed broad similarities across schools of varying size, free and reduced-price meal eligibility, racial demographics, and location. The vignettes presented are set in a US middle school (often grades 5-8) with an above-average percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price meals, which is often associated with a higher percentage of students who eat regularly at school as well as a greater recognition of the importance of the meals program as understood by school administrators. We have not defined other specific characteristics of this fictional school as we believe the perspectives presented reflect common themes that are not necessarily attributable to demographic characteristics.

### STUDENT VIGNETTE

Mia: Lunch is pretty OK here. I like talking with my friends.

Jayden: Except when it's so loud you have to scream to hear anything. And then the teachers start screaming at us to be quiet, and man, it just gives you a headache.

Mia: Yeah, that really sucks—it's like, this is our only time to relax.

Jayden: It's also really crowded, especially in the part where you get the food, like people always pushing and stuff.

Riley: Yeah, everyone's always pushing and cutting and trying to get through faster so they have more time. That's the worst part—lunch is too short so by the time you actually get through the line you have to decide if you want to talk or eat.

Jayden: I just don't eat—the food is nasty. It's either like "What is that? How long has that been there?" Or it's just straight up gross—one time the middle of my chicken sandwich was just not cooked and that is not ok.

Riley: Oh yeah! Didn't Caitlin find a hair in one of the chicken sandwiches? So nasty.

Jayden: Yeah! She definitely did! I was there and—

Mia: I don't think the food is that gross; it's just boring. It's like always the same thing—like, pizza again? Really?

Jayden: The baked potatoes they had today are the bomb though—you know it's fresh because they open them right in front of you, and you get to pick your butter or cheese or whatever to go on it.

Mia: Ok, yeah, those potatoes are definitely the real deal.

Riley: Yeah, it's like when they used to have that salad bar, that was so good, and you got to choose what you take. Sometimes it's like um, no, thank you, I don't want slimy carrots again today. I like carrots but come on, how can the lunch ladies mess up carrots? It's like, 'Did you even try them?'

Jayden: They definitely don't try the food. Adults would not eat this food.

Mia: But most of the lunch ladies are really nice though. The one who's usually in the middle, the one who's always like "hey, baby doll, how you doing?" She knows I can't eat ham so if it's a sandwiches day she'll always get me a turkey one.

Riley: Yeah, I guess they are trying, but they really need to just, like, ask us what we think. Why do they keep serving stuff we don't like?

Jayden: At my elementary school the food actually got better because they went around with little samples and had people try things at lunch and then we voted. That was cool, and it was like they actually cared what we think.

### CAFETERIA MANAGER VIGNETTE

It's 300 percent go go go here in the kitchen. First, you're getting everything ready, then the bell rings, and we have ten minutes to get all the students through. A few years ago, they cut back our staff, so I just don't have as many ladies as I need. We're doing fresh-topped baked potatoes today and whew, it's a challenge—it takes a long time, and a lot of hands, but the kids would just cry if we got rid of 'em.

And that's our job, making sure each child has something that they want to eat, that they get the nutrition they need. And also, just to be that person who notices if they're having a bad day or compliments their new hairdo or just gives them a friendly smile. We just love our students. That's why we're all here—sure isn't for the pay, I can tell you that!

I do wish we heard more from them about what they like or not. Some days I'll have a minute to walk around and ask the kids what they think about things. We'd much rather give them what they want and not have so much waste, if we can do it, you know, within the regs and the budget and all.

I think the teachers see all the waste and judge us. They don't get all the regulations and why we serve what we do. It's like, we're all on the same team, you know? But some are great, they eat the food, and they'll ask us to come in when they're learning about nutrition or they'll bring their class down and we'll do, like, a little lesson on cooking and math.

I wish we could bring the parents in too, show them what we're all about. School food gets such a bad rap; I just want all those busy parents to know, hey, we got this, you don't have to worry about packing a lunch, your child can get something really tasty and healthy from us here. And for free!

The new principal, Ms. Douglas, she really gets it. The last one, I don't think he even knew any of the other ladies' names. I know Ms. Douglas would like to give us a little more time for the lunch period, but there's just so much they're trying to cram into the school day nowadays. But these kids, they just need a break, need some time to socialize and relax.

### SCHOOL PRINCIPAL VIGNETTE

In general, I think lunchtime is an important point in the day for our students. Breakfast, too, as far as nutrition goes. It's pretty obvious that if students are hungry they aren't able to focus in class. They can't learn. And when they're hungry, that's when you see more behavioral issues. Our free and reduced lunch rate here is hovering at around 70 percent, so making sure students who need it are able to get their breakfast in the classroom is a priority for us. Custodial doesn't love it—the mess and everything—but I think everyone recognizes why we're doing it. As for lunch, it's also a time for the kids to just be kids and socialize.

The lunch period is also important for the teachers. It's really their only scheduled break during the day. We have other monitors in the cafeteria during lunch. Occasionally teachers will drop in to grab some food, but most of them don't stick around to eat. Thirty minutes isn't much, so they need that time duty-free. I wish we were able to add a few extra minutes to lunch for students and teachers, but it's just not feasible right now given necessary instructional time. But I will continue to evaluate what's possible in future years.

I personally try to be in the cafeteria a few days a week. This is only my second year here, so it's a good way to get to know the students and kitchen staff. In my role, there's a lot going on at any one time, so it would be pretty easy to limit engagement with kitchen staff. When I started last year, it didn't seem like school administration had much of a relationship with the kitchen. Mrs. Hill and her team run their own shop and have a lot to manage with feeding the kids, meeting the regulations. But we're all here to create the best environment for our students, so I try to keep good communication with them, though there's always room for improvement.

And with the students, you can learn a lot about their preferences just by observing and asking questions. In my opinion, the food here is fine. Nothing gourmet, but the choices are good. But kids learn over time that it's not cool to eat school food. There's such a stigma attached to school food that some older kids don't eat anything. Peer influence is huge at this age. Baked potatoes—I think those were today—are semi-popular, though. I also know the food served here looks different from what a lot of kids get at home. I'm not sure how much parents are engaged in the program. I think all of us here would like to increase family engagement.

### CONCLUSION

As researchers, we see the information relayed through these vignettes as an important part of understanding the conditions of school meal programs, and as school food advocates we see these stories as both a means to honor the experiences shared with us as well as a call for action. We hope

readers find in these narratives a sense of the texture of life in the cafeteria from these various perspectives, giving a glimpse of what it's like to be a student, cafeteria manager, or principal in the US school food system.

It is imperative that practitioners and policymakers prioritize listening to and learning from the stakeholders who are most impacted by the school food system. We also suggest that those researching or otherwise working in school food systems consider stories, potentially through the tool of composite narrative, as a way of sharing what they and other stakeholders know about school food. Sharing stories offers valuable information about the challenges of contemporary school meal programs, and hearing directly from those experiencing them can inspire in others the empathy required to act on these challenges. Understanding and empathizing with each other's experiences is foundational to cocreating a more equitable and just school food future.

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# Transforming School Food Politics around the World

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