



---

Learning to Teach Through Collaborative Conversation: A Feminist Approach

Author(s): Sandra Hollingsworth

Source: *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Summer, 1992), pp. 373-404

Published by: [American Educational Research Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1163373>

Accessed: 14/06/2011 08:03

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=aera>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



American Educational Research Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Educational Research Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## Learning to Teach Through Collaborative Conversation: A Feminist Approach

Sandra Hollingsworth  
*Michigan State University*

*As part of a longitudinal research project on learning to teach literacy and as a personal quest to make her work as a teacher educator more supportive, this researcher arranged an ongoing conversation for members of three cohorts of preservice and beginning elementary teachers. The conversation was prompted by an interest in beginning teachers' critical responses to the personal support for learning to teach that they receive from their teacher education programs. From the social, collaborative, and nonevaluative conversations, personally and contextually relevant issues in learning to teach emerged, as did the processes of identifying and understanding them. The result was not only a clarification of important relational and political issues that seem prerequisite to issues of academic learning, but also the emergence of a feminist consciousness—in both teachers and researcher. The method of studying the group's learning, then, became an example of feminist praxis: a willingness to risk and examine personal experiences as women and to be changed by the research process itself. The value of this conversational approach for learning to teach in urban settings becomes clear in the narrative.*

---

SANDRA HOLLINGSWORTH is an assistant professor in the College of Education, 116R Erickson Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824. She specializes in literacy and teacher education.

---

Once a month for the past 3½ years, I've met with seven beginning elementary school teachers for dinner and conversation about learning to teach. These teachers were part of a longitudinal study on learning to teach literacy that began with their preservice teacher education programs at a graduate school of education (see Hollingsworth, 1989a). These people were asked to continue because they remained in the local area to teach and were roughly representative of the cultural, biographical, grade-level, and school-site differences of the full complement of 28 teachers across three cohorts and two programs.

At graduation, most of these middle-class teachers took jobs in the lower-class environments of urban schools. Even those who took jobs in suburban settings were usually given the most difficult and diverse classrooms. In both cases, the new teachers found many variations from the middle-class school norms in which they were educated. They welcomed a chance to meet, exchange ideas, and get feedback on their work. They valued the opportunity to support each other through the upward spiral of learning to teach, with all the pain, confusion, regression, joy, and integration embedded in the process.

This article takes the resultant collaborative conversation that grew out of our monthly meetings as its focus. The conversation is described here with regard to both the issues raised about teaching in lower class environments and the process of making sense of those issues. My intent in telling the story of our work together is to contribute to an epistemological understanding of learning to teach while raising questions about appropriate stances for facilitating and studying beginning elementary teachers' learning.

### **The Concept of Collaborative Conversation**

Developing this approach of talking together as both a method of longitudinal research and a means of support in learning to teach evolved from teachers' criticism of the support structures offered through traditional formats such as course work and supervision. As one of their reading methods instructors, I had heard their critiques firsthand. I learned that, although teachers both appreciated and came to believe the academic theories on learning and literacy promoted by their programs, they felt few connections between formal teacher education settings, their personal beliefs about teaching, and their particular classroom problems (see Hollingsworth, 1988). Their experiences were not unlike those of women in a world dominated by men and "male" ideology: they were aware of a need to learn previously established rules for social survival, yet sensed that the norms they were expected to adopt both devalued their own knowledge and excluded their potential contributions (see Weskott, 1979). In short, these teachers perceived their teacher education programs as providing too many preexisting theoretical answers and not enough questions. The lack of inclusive support for their own evolving knowledge was one of the reasons that one-

quarter of the graduates I studied left the profession at the beginning of their careers. Similar findings are also reported elsewhere in the professional literature (see Howey & Zimpher, 1989). Thus, our group attempted a different approach in the form of regular social meetings where questions could be posed and issues in learning to teach could be raised and investigated.<sup>1</sup> The change was both methodological and philosophical: I hoped to better understand teachers' learning while providing a supportive structure for its development through the difficult early years.

Politically, the move to the conversational format for support and research involved a shift in power from my previous role as the teachers' course instructor. I had to change my interactions so that I was no longer telling teachers what I knew (as the group's "expert" on the topic of reading instruction) and checking to see if they had learned it. I had to develop a process of working with them as a colearner and creator of evolving expertise through nonevaluative conversation. To accomplish this shift, I had to be still and listen; I also had to struggle publicly with what I was learning. Our change in relationship now required that I look at transformation in my own learning (as a researcher and teacher educator) as equally important in determining the success of *teachers'* knowledge transformations.

The conversational approach to learning to teach involved environmental aspects that supported the political and philosophical nature of our work (see Buchmann, in press). The social context of our dinner meeting allowed all of us to take the floor as "experts" in special areas of interest and teaching; this context exemplified Freire's (1988) notion that education includes yet moves beyond the physical dimensions of schooling. The safety of our continuing relationship provided an occasion for raising questions, sharing the passion and frustration of what we were learning in our own voices, and confronting our anger about our silence and lack of appropriate support in other settings. Our talk did not usually take the form of dialogue; nor was it simply a discussion of prearranged topics and readings through a formal discourse structure. Rather the collaborative talk became the exchange of ideas or informal and intimate conversation. Given the collaborative or mutually informed agenda that developed through this process, the extended conversation both identified and helped us understand our common stories about learning to teach. Our subconscious knowing about elementary school teaching was thus elevated, voiced, and connected.

The idea of collaborative conversation as a means of both learning and support for learning is grounded in the following: theories suggesting that personally meaningful knowledge is socially constructed through shared understandings (Vygotsky, 1978); cultural feminism, which emphasizes a holistic and collective orientation to world and work experiences (Gilman, 1988); feminist epistemology, which values considered experience as knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986); feminist therapeutic psychology, which embraces emotion as a means of learning about self and

relationships (Schaeff, 1981); and the critical and contextually relevant nature of the social use of knowledge (Lorde, 1984; Zeichner & Gore, 1989).

### A Feminist Approach

Unlike a traditional apprenticeship approach to teacher education, which basically values and measures cognitive/academic knowledge as it is transmitted from experts to novices (e.g., the stance I had initially taken as a beginning teacher educator), our approach became a process of articulating an emerging feminist consciousness that validated and encouraged cognition and the rationality traditionally associated with male epistemic processes as well as the emotion, intuitive leaps, and other less verbalized feelings that have been linked with women's learning. Our process was also therapeutically and publicly supportive of the personal changes that accompanied the changes in our knowledge. The method of studying our learning, therefore, could not take on a rational analytic stance; nor could it "bracket" (or hold in abeyance) our personal biases from influencing the learning process (Schultz, 1967). Our conversational approach thus became a means of facilitating

continuous interaction between how we understand the world and who we are as people. It shows how our emotional responses to the world change as we conceptualize it differently and how our changing emotional responses then stimulate us to new insights. . . . [It demonstrates] how the reconstruction of knowledge is inseparable from the reconstruction of ourselves. (Jaggar, 1989, p. 148)

The approach we developed to facilitate and learn from the collaborative conversation is thus *an example* of feminist research in which the features of the method are at least as important as the method itself. As summarized by Harding (1987), feminist research recognizes the epistemological value of using women's experiences as resources for discovering new theory. Instead of simply validating or uncovering "scientific truths" about mainstream cultures, feminist research asks questions that lead to social changes in oppressed conditions, usually those of women, but that can also apply to men and children in underpowered life roles. The context of this research site, the world of beginning elementary school teachers, encompasses the feature of "women's experiences" in the broader sense. The second feature of this research—inquiry aimed at women's needs—is related to the first. Since elementary teachers are primarily females—but include males who also support traditionally "feminine" values (see Laird, 1988)—the gender-based needs and values of elementary school teachers in gaining support for learning to teach were central to our method. Equal vulnerability is the third feature of this work. That is, the researcher is cast in as critical a perspective as the researched. The investigator is not an in-

visible, anonymous voice of authority, but appears as a real, historical individual whose beliefs and behaviors must be open to critical examination.

Because many feminist analyses include similar features, they are often uncomfortable. They “unsettle traditional assumptions about knowledge as they challenge familiar beliefs about women, men and social life” (Harding, 1987, p. 189). Using these features, the feminist approach we came to adopt for our conversational method became a process through which we could critique the norms of teaching previously claimed through established epistemologies and research paradigms, re-vision our own gender-inclusive norms, and interpret the process of our epistemic development. The willingness to take such risks and be changed by the research process itself evolved into a form of feminist praxis, “an encompassing of both reflection and action as a form of inquiry that promotes ‘a better, fairer, more humane’ world” (Miller, 1990, p. 13). The use of such an approach was justified not only by our experiences as women and the context of our work in urban schools and challenging classrooms, but also by the personal and social intent of our study. Again, a primary goal of this research is to explicate the conversational processes that demonstrate some gender-inclusive perspectives on how beginning elementary school teachers make sense of their teaching and themselves. The insights that emerged from this process should also broaden our understanding of the epistemology of learning to teach.

### **Method of Study**

As our method of study unfolded, the educational issues raised for discussion in our group and the collective processes we developed to learn about them were articulated or categorized in conversation through our collective sense of them. Part of my role was to synthesize various experiential examples presented by individual teachers and then check out those understandings with the group. Through this process, we noted that the issues that emerged were more connected than hierarchical, were rooted in everyday experience, and were consistent with many “feminine” values and political aspirations (employing care, compassion, and critical questioning).

As we talked, we decided to retain two empirical features of more traditional methodologies—documentation and systematic analysis of our conversations. We made these decisions for two reasons: one was to help us with the reflective development of our own knowledge through its documentation; the other was to have a means to make public and fuse what we were learning with the larger world of educational research, which is still grounded in empiricist science (see Nielsen, 1990). Being taken seriously seemed an important prerequisite to acceptance of our alternative approach. To that end, we tape-recorded our conversations and sent them to Lisa Anderson Thomas, a former research assistant with our project, for transcription.

Using the collectively articulated framework as a guide, two research

assistants and I systematically reviewed the transcripts, thematically identifying common issues and the processes of making sense of them within a day or across several days. The unit of analysis depended upon the length of time an issue was discussed. The analytic commitment was to a holistic sense of our learning across conversations, not with any given unit or topical category. To accomplish that purpose, we comparatively analyzed all units (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We then summarized the findings by noting salient categories and verified the summaries with the teachers. Finally, we all composed narratives describing the issues we had discovered together; each of us contributed our own interpretations and words to the stories. Using an empirical narrative structure to represent our learning seemed to transform our experiences into a universal story form that was transferrable (as it connected with and had meaning for others' experiences and stories) and familiar and useful to other teachers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Internal accuracy was determined by returning both the transcripts and narrative text of the stories representing categorical issues to the participants for review and correction. External accuracy meant comparing these conversational data with classroom observations and individual interviews collected during the same years. We assessed validity by confirming attention to similar issues across three cohorts of preservice teachers.

The narrative that unfolds in the next section of the article represents one version of that process. It describes the teachers' raising, discussing, researching, and making sense of issues important to their learning to teach. It becomes an example of a feminist claim to and method of articulating women's knowledge. Samples included from teachers' individual stories are primarily intended to show that the conversational process allowed middle-class teachers to raise issues pertinent to teaching children in lower-class communities and to educate each other with their experiential knowledge and, secondarily, to demonstrate transformations in learning to teach. (Complete stories extending these issues are cited throughout.) The narrative of this article concludes with a brief discussion of both our emerging feminist consciousness and the structural features of the conversation that supported the transformation. The features summarize what we have learned epistemologically through collaborative conversation to help us better understand and provide supportive scaffolding for learning to teach.

### **Stories of Learning in Collaborative Conversation**

Let me begin the narrative by introducing my first-year dinner guests. Two of them were doctoral students and research assistants who worked collaboratively in teachers' classrooms. Mary-Lynn Lidstone was a 28-year-old doctoral student in school psychology. Inspired by her mother in nursing to enter a helping profession, she was committed to principles of equity and relevance in education. Mary-Lynn's research partner, Karen Teel, was 42 and a doctoral student in teaching and curriculum. Karen differed from

Mary-Lynn not only in her program of study, but also in that she was married and had three children. Nevertheless, her career vision matched Mary-Lynn's, the other teachers', and my own. Mary-Lynn, Karen and I shared primary responsibility for documenting the process of learning to teach.

Five teachers joined us for the first year and continued into the second. Four of them taught in urban schools characterized by ethnic diversity, limited economic resources, and locations in high-crime areas. Lisa Raffel taught fourth grade in such a setting and made good use of her background in peace studies. A feminist in her late twenties, she was brought up in a single-parent family where independence was prized. Leslie Minarik and Mary Dybdahl came to teaching in their mid-thirties with previous managerial experience in the business world. Leslie taught second grade in a school that lacked supportive services. That she brought her talents as a mother, partner, and manager into the classroom assumed additional significance. Mary taught a third and fourth grade combination class in a school that lacked not only sufficient materials and support personnel, but heating and cooling as well. Mary's calm and self-accepting nature, plus the support she received from her principal at school and her lifetime partner at home, helped her cope with the challenging teaching environment. Jennifer Smallwood, the only person of color in our group, was a 33-year-old African-American who came from a very supportive family background. She taught a second grade class of African-American children who lived in poverty. The fifth teacher in our group was Anne Weldon. At 24, she was the youngest, having just completed her bachelor's degree in developmental psychology before entering the graduate-level credential program. After graduation, she team taught sixth grade in a suburban school where most of the children were Caucasian and came from middle-class families.

The last two members of our first-year group were Marcia Cantrell and Lori Holmes, preservice teachers in their late twenties working in urban elementary schools. Lori decided not to teach after graduation. Marcia came into the credential program with a background in anthropology and recent experience as a research assistant with this group. After graduation, she and her husband relocated to another area where she taught science in middle school.

My own background as a historian, reading specialist, and public school teacher in rural, urban, and suburban settings well connected me to this group—as did my political commitment to educational change. Having just completed my own doctoral program in my early forties, I lived with my teenaged daughter in a multiethnic urban neighborhood. In our stories told below, we have opted to take credit for our contributions by using our real names. I am using my nickname—Sam.

Since reporting full conversations from even one year is not possible here, given space limitations, we will include excerpts from stories that *began* during our first year and illustrate the conversational or evolutionary nature



of the issues raised, their contextual roots, the common processes used to understand them as well as how they led us to understand and claim our own knowledge and experiences and learn to appreciate those of others. I'll begin with a story of my own learning about the group process.

### **A Story of Freeing Our Conversational Agenda**

When our group initially convened, I hoped that our after-dinner conversation would lead to specific talk about learning to teach reading. Since I had been a reading instructor in the teachers' preservice programs, I was interested in how they were applying what they had learned in their courses and how I could continue to offer support for their efforts. I soon found out that they were concerned with many things about schooling and teaching, but not specifically about reading instruction. As hard as I tried, I could not get the conversations to focus on *my* interest in their subject-matter knowledge. The group, in fact, had other goals in mind for our meetings. Lisa explained: "I like the idea of finding out how we're doing in our classrooms, if we could start with some larger problems, not necessarily reading. Reading doesn't necessarily jump into my mind."

Moving forward as a good teacher and researcher, and never forgetting my own goals, I tried encouraging them to allow reading and writing to jump into their minds: "Just keep reading in the back of your mind as you're talking. . . there [may be] some things that come up that you can link with [that topic]. Then we'll see what happens. If nothing comes up around it, then we'll go with what does come up." Nothing came up around reading during the first year of monthly meetings, not for the student teachers, nor the first-year teachers, nor even the second-year teachers. Forcing attention to curriculum, in fact, became a primary complaint about the content of their preservice education programs.

Lisa: When I was in the [teacher education] program, before I knew what teaching was about . . . they just bombard you with curriculum and how you're supposed to be doing everything. I was so nervous about teaching the curriculum. I was inundated, and that was my focus. Now I realize the curriculum is not as big an issue. The reality is getting [students] to a point where you can teach them.

Jennifer, a cohort member from Lisa's program, suggested a reason for the attention to curriculum: "Well, that was the focus of the program!" Free from evaluative pressure to value and learn about curriculum, the group now wanted to broaden their learning. Leslie, also a member of Jennifer and Lisa's cohort, tried to keep her attention on curriculum during her first year of teaching, only to become disillusioned. In her need to address other issues, she summarized the experiences of our conversational group:

### *Learning to Teach Through Collaborative Conversation*

For [several] years I have been involved in a teacher/researcher collaborative group. The focus topic for the group was to be reading instruction and often has been. The group's support and assistance in helping me explore and evaluate my way through language arts curriculum has been immeasurable. However, it was not infrequent that the teachers in the group could not begin by discussing reading. A wealth of "stuff" had to be unloaded, vented, cried about and shared before we could discuss "our main topic"—the reading curriculum. Dr. Hollingsworth, wisely, but with some frustration, listened and then tried to guide us back on track. I can picture many such evenings. (For more of Leslie's analysis, see Hollingsworth & Minarik, 1991.)

So—out of necessity rather than from a commitment to a more inclusive, critical, and feminist approach—I suspended my original goal. Because I sensed there was something important to be learned from the teachers, I changed my role as facilitator/researcher to one of participant in a conversation instead of the author of a dialogue. The relational merging of our stories stimulated my own transformation away from the ideological prison into which I had slipped when I inadvertently joined the positivist world of graduate school. Though it was unclear to me at the outset of our meetings, I was beginning a journey that would lead me to see, like Giroux (1988), that teacher education should be cast as a "political project, as a cultural politics, that defines [beginning] teachers as intellectuals who will establish public spaces where students can debate, appropriate, and learn the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve . . . individual freedom and social justice" (p. 167). We were moving toward that position by creating such a space for ourselves. I explained the revised approach to our group:

I'd like to tell you about the vision of this idea. I'm still interested in learning to teach reading. But I think we need to go further now. And what seems really appropriate to me now is to listen to you, just flat out listen without any other agenda in mind but to understand better from your own perspective and own ways of being together how you learn to teach. The one thing that seems to work [in learning to teach], here as everywhere, is [having an opportunity to talk] to each other. That's the most important vehicle.

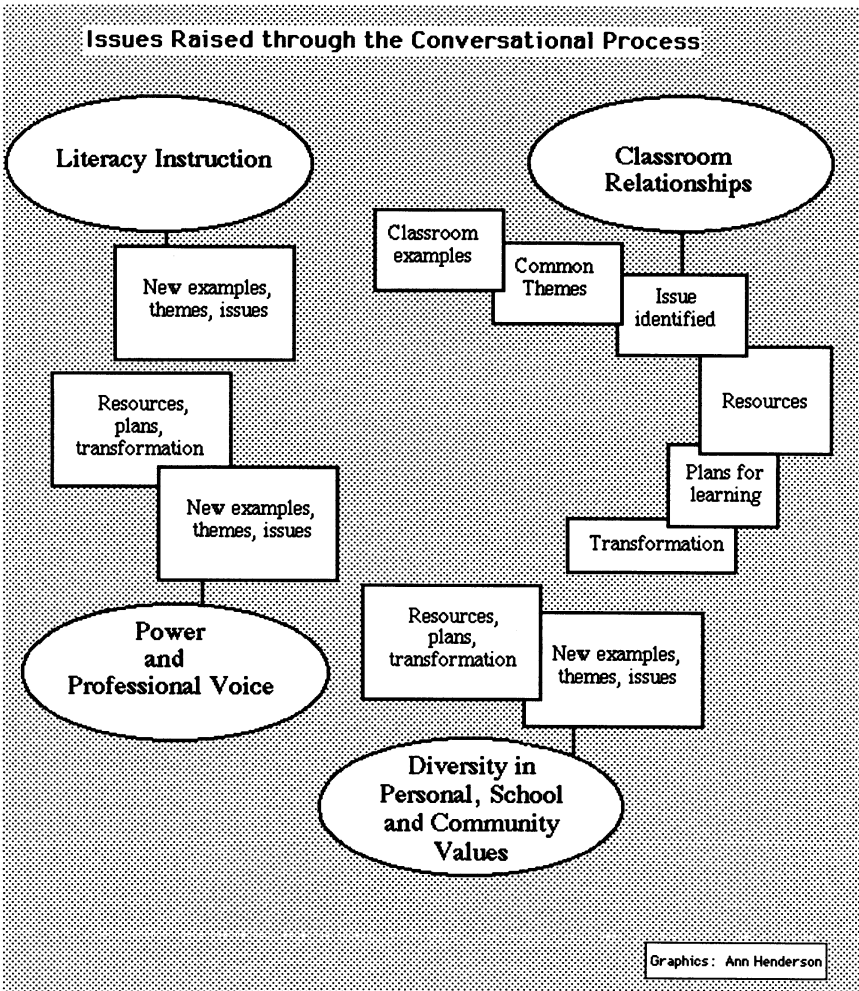
Initially, the shift created some confusion about our direction, particularly for Karen and Mary-Lynn who were not sure how we would "research" learning to teach within this ambiguous structure. The broadened agenda did help to establish a public space in which—eventually—every participant's current knowledge, needs, and roles were considered of equal value. In other words, because we continued to develop a social and professional relationship concurrently, we learned to articulate our positions, share our expertise, and give and receive constructive criticism. No longer denied the opportunity to learn from students as when I dominated discus-

sions with my disciplinary expertise and my research agenda, I found each teacher's attention to be focused on personal, interrelated, and practically driven issues. I learned that the complexity of those issues could be articulated even by the preservice members of our group. Marcia, for example, illustrated the tangled nature of practice-situated attention as she summarized the differences between her graduate program and the classroom setting:

In my master's program I could think about anything I wanted to at any time and I could build on my topic and theoretically could do anything I wanted. And practically, in the classroom, [I'm] confined to thinking about what's going on with the kids in the classroom and trying to find the issues that fifth and fourth graders are dealing with. And trying to tap back into my theoretical knowledge about how I want to run classrooms and make it happen in the classroom, is really hard. Like I've got to get this fractions lesson in to [a program instructor] and I've got to watch out for the principal and [Billy] just wrote a story talking about sex and how can I—well, I am the authority—he can't write about it. It's what comes up in your situation that guides your thinking. It's a lot harder that way, but I think it's ultimately what everything's all about. I mean, theory doesn't mean anything unless you can act on it.

It was from a willingness to listen to open-ended and complex verbalized analyses such as Marcia's that I came to learn that such conversational processes could provide the scaffolding to support all of our goals—the research team's need to study learning to teach and the beginning teachers' need for support to learn about complex classroom issues. I learned what teaching issues were raised, why they surfaced, how the teachers worked through and made sense of them—and the results of their sense-making. Consequently, I changed my beliefs about the content and process of supporting teachers' learning and my own pedagogical approach to teacher education course work (for more on my learning and resultant changes in my teaching, see Hollingsworth, 1990).

The issues that were raised in the first year of our conversation are shown in Figure 1. They are listed clockwise in temporal sequence. The first important issue (which dominated the conversation in our early meetings) was "classroom relationships." Although the issue of relationships continued to surface across all years of our conversation, about the middle of the first year that issue no longer directed our talk. In the spring, we shifted the bulk of our attention to issues of "diversity in personal, school, and community values," and then to "power and professional voice." At the end of the year, we finally took up the issue of "literacy instruction." Each issue was experiential background knowledge for the others and supported a deeper personally and politically relevant understanding of literacy instruction. Each issue also led to the emergence of a feminist consciousness about our work and wisdom as women teachers. None of these specific concerns had been featured in previous teacher education settings where



**Figure 1. Issues raised through the conversational process**

the focus was on subject-matter knowledge.

Figure 1 also roughly illustrates the conversational process of identifying and understanding the issues. Common themes initially surfaced as details or examples of real classroom problems, then were relocated within related but larger issues. Abstracting the practical example into theoretical or philosophical issues gave teachers a perspective from which to identify resources and formulate plans to learn more about the issues and finally to report their transformational understandings back to the group. The stories that follow elaborate both on the general conversational processes and the issues teachers felt were essential to their teaching in environmentally diverse settings. The stories will show that issues discussed were both those usually defined as women's concerns and those often omitted from

the empirical literature and, thus, teacher education curriculum. Yet—as the teachers in our group came to understand their own values, voices, and marginality as women—the issues became transformational for critical, personally relevant pedagogy.

### **Stories of Learning About Classroom Relationships**

Lori: Somebody, somewhere was talking about kids . . . oh, no that wasn't [the teacher education program]. That was in my [student teaching] classroom. A social worker came in and talked about a kid having really specific problems . . .

Regardless of the lack of emphasis on the child in their preservice teacher education programs, the members of our group all came into teaching because they cared about children. That sense was amplified as most teachers began to work in their classrooms with children from different backgrounds, cultures, and communities. Caring gave teachers the patience and interest needed to understand children's various interactional and communication styles. Yet human interactions based on care and compassion were not the subject of theoretical study in other teacher education settings. Rather, the programs gave value and focus to curricular and learning theories that were most efficiently transmitted in an expert-to-novice model. As a result, such "answers" for problems of learning to teach, given with limited attention to the new teachers' questions and experiences, were often more confusing than supportive:

For example, the group's teacher education programs had talked about the theoretical value of socially constructed knowledge, but the time restrictions within the program, the state-level subject competency requirements, and the need to practice regularly left little time to actually construct and critique their own experiential knowledge about teaching children. Similar limitations were also noted in some individual mentoring relationships intentionally arranged to be supportive:

Mary-Lynn: Jennifer, I missed what you said to Marcia about the difference between talking to people who are students and people who are teachers.

Jennifer: Well, I don't know. No matter how much my master teacher liked me I was still a student. I wasn't a peer.

Marcia: [And for me], it's not only that I feel like we're not peers, just I feel like there are only limited things that we talk about, just like what Mary said. It just started to come into my consciousness that we have the same conversations with each other every week. They don't go anywhere.

Marcia and others provided examples of the continued program emphasis on subject matter, disregarding the new teachers' interests in children and classroom relationships:

Marcia: The program doesn't teach us to pay attention to kids. A supervisor would come out and say, "Oh yeah, it's tough, but what are you going to teach in math?" And I'd say, "Well I can't teach math. It requires having things around and when they start having fun with the manipulatives. . . ." "Oh well, how about if you teach some reading then?" It was sort of like [my supervisor] was blind to [my concerns]. Plus she only saw me twice. . . .

Lisa: We were so caught up with the curriculum and analyzing details and theories and so on that I don't think I looked at a child. I think [Sam's assignment to do a case study] was the one and only example where we were ever asked to really look at a child [holistically]. But I didn't really look at the child. I was thinking of my problems with the child, the things he was doing wrong. . . .

Teachers reported that their learning in such attentionally complex situations tended to be more productive and survival-oriented than constructive and transformative.

Although there were variations in their examples, most of the teachers' earliest attentional themes in our conversational group had to do with the social nature of learning to teach. The problems of forming multiple relationships in diverse and difficult settings took precedence over my interest in reading instruction. Opening up our agenda brought forth stories about relationship development with students, parents, administrators, and peers. Even Anne, a first-year teacher whose sixth-grade suburban classroom closely matched her own educational background, was concerned with social interaction: "I've tried so many [managerial] things that these kids must just wonder what I'm going to try next. Because every month or so I'll try something new, it'll work for a short period of time, then. . . ."

The issue of classroom relationships gained identity as a common concern through multiple child-focused stories. In contrast with their teacher education experiences, teachers did not respond by giving each other concrete solutions or "answers" to their concerns, but by telling related stories. In that way they both validated the importance of the issue and heard varying practice-based dilemmas and resolutions to incorporate into their own experiential understanding of the issue. Mary, teaching in a school where vandalism was a regular occurrence, approximately one-quarter of her children's parents were jailed, and conflict was part of everyday life, took up the issue of relationships with this example:

I taught a class, 2 days last week, with my arms around a kid for the whole 40 minutes. Can you imagine holding a fairly big, active third grader in your arms so he won't ruin the math class? I'm try-

ing to be calm, “OK, next problem.” The kid is going nuts and the class is watching the kid trash around in your arms.

As the conversation progressed, teachers began to understand such classroom-specific concerns not through technical solutions, but by reflecting on common frames of reference that contained the concern. With the issue of social relationships, examples such as Anne’s and Mary’s—which may have been technically viewed by their teacher education supervisors simply as “problems with classroom management”—became personal, situational, and grew out of their common relational values. Our follow-up questions for each other grew out of our own experiences. Karen, not only a former teacher and research assistant but also a middle-class mother quite involved in her own children’s education, responded to Mary’s story of holding the disruptive child by asking, “Can you involve the parents [in the resolution of the problem]?” Mary replied, “I’ve never had any success [with that]. I’ve altered behavior because I developed a relationship with the child. The parents didn’t enter into it.”

More than generating specific solutions, teachers gained new insights from such interactions. Our conversations bore evidence of these women’s valuing of relationship development as a critical factor in learning to teach—knowledge not stressed in their teacher education program curriculum, nor in school-sponsored in-service workshops except by an occasional instructor or supervisor. (See Hollingsworth, Dybdahl, & Minarik, *in press*, for a discussion on relational knowing.)

Another feature of our process is worth mentioning here. The personal focus on relationship development in our group, and stories attesting to its difficulty and complexity, led the teachers to become patient with themselves during the process of internalizing the issue. Here’s an example of Lisa’s understanding of intimate relationships as a long-range goal in her classroom:

So many of my master teachers were so distant from the kids. There was no intimacy. I found myself in that role at times. Part of it is that there are so many things going on; I have so many responsibilities. I can’t wait till I get over that part. I know that there will come a time when I’ve got my planning down, my long range and my short range—till I know how to hand papers out so it doesn’t take a year, and kids aren’t shouting at me. But I know that will solve itself at some point.

Lisa’s story of intimate relationships also shows how the conversational process helped her construct her own knowledge as she articulated it and how she came to accept such knowledge as transitional. It also illustrates that she, as a novice, could be critical of an expert with regard to this issue. Her self-perception as both a learner and one who has learned from her own experience led Lisa to feel capable of supporting her own knowledge

production and analysis—an epistemological position that has eluded many women and teachers (see Belenky et. al, 1986).

In addition to valuing the opportunity for broad and relevant conversation about practice-based examples of attention to relationships, the teachers identified other resources for their learning through the conversation. All of them mentioned the value of observing, then talking with peer teachers as a resource for learning. Jennifer's response to another teacher's statement about observation is an example:

I think that I have learned a lot about relationships from talking with other people and watching other teachers interact with kids. I pick up things. It's not like looking at a teacher supply store for helpful hints. It's like "Oh! I never thought I could say that to a child!" and I see a new vision of a relationship with students. I see the possibilities.

Once conversation was identified as a resource, the group members made plans to extend it from our group into each other's classrooms. All but two teachers asked for such support the first year. Anne's extra time was filled with staff development programs and supportive conversations with another teacher in her school. Leslie was the only teacher not convinced, early in our first year, that attention to relationships was as important as getting a reading program in place. She felt that other emphases at that time would be overwhelming. Both Leslie and Anne, however, welcomed other visitors to their own rooms. So we secured some funding to pay for substitutes for the others, and asked all the teachers to talk and write about what they learned from each other on their visits.

The last step that surfaced in a conversational process round (see Figure 1) was revealed when teachers talked about the transformative "results" of their evolving understanding with the group. Unlike principled and objective findings resulting from traditional approaches to learning, our reports showed less cognitive or behavioral change than they showed personal and connective settling. I talked about my own transformation in understanding the relationship issue. Out of it had grown a new understanding and valuing of our common process in terms of story development—a connection of my personal preference for narrative voice and the professional need to show products from our conversational work. I came to accept our process of evolving stories as both method of supporting learning to teach—and result:

I . . . think about [relationships] in terms of working in a group in our research team and working in teacher education groups and working in the university and working with my daughter. The same things keep recurring. People make meaning together. I'm wondering if there's a way that we could somehow organize [the connections between] what we're doing and thinking about in terms of stories.



Whereas conversation in their teacher education and in-service programs led to stories about the development of successful classroom management routines, transformational stories brought to our conversations involved creating relationships within the difficult schools to which these beginning teachers were assigned. Jennifer reported how she had given up on suggestions from teacher education program and school curriculum supervisors for tight managerial control using preassigned groups for her African-American students. Instead, she trusted her intuition about learning structures that would better support her own race. She now encouraged a flexible form of self-selected grouping that seemed to promote cooperation and shared learning but looked much less orderly. Her story included reference to the anguish of nonsupport in both her teacher education program and her school for her culturally-diverse and relational approach. (See Hollingsworth, 1989b, for more of Jennifer's story.)

After hearing and seeing Jennifer's approach and participating in conversations on the value of relationships, Mary rethought her own approach to grouping. She talked to us and later wrote about researching the best way to group children so that their responses to literature would be personally appropriate. Abandoning the strategy of grouping high- and low-ability children as suggested by the teacher education program and her peers, she switched to "friendship groups," which lessened her management problems and supported on-going relationships, happier children, and personally appropriate responses to their academic work:

The planned pairs did not work. In general students were not attentive to their partners' reading; they were not helpful and all too frequently they were frustrated and angry. The results were not much better than my whole-class lessons. I went back to Michael and Ajay [a self-designated pair] as my models. What worked here was not necessarily the fact that they were correctly matched academically; more to the point was their choice to work together, a fact that I noticed but had not valued. The strength of the partnership was built on friendship, mutual interest, and trust. . . . Students are not encouraged to work with a partner or partners of their choice. Children's responses to the [free-choice partner structure] vary as much as before, but now the responses are more uniformly positive. (See Dybdahl, 1990, for further details on her approach.)

Many of the teachers' transformational narratives were not success stories. This one involved Marcia's relational failure in her student teaching classroom with sixth-grade students. Her new understanding took the form of an instructional critique of teaching responsively:

How terrible teaching is when it's egocentric, when it's all about me. The conflicts I'm having in behavior all come back to what I want [my students] to do. . . . I had this great assignment all set up—then each day they [were to] come back and share with the group. Well,

the students were all hesitant about it. And I thought they were all being jerks. I said, "Turn it in; it won't hurt you." And when I got the assignments I realized that they hadn't understood; the task wasn't clear. I just felt that I assume that I'm communicating clearly with them. I know what I want them to do. But that's not what's going to happen in teaching. That's all [the program] ever teaches: You be sure what you're doing, be sure you have a good reason and everything will be OK. But it's like, letting it go and letting the kids in is really more important. (See Cantrell, 1989, for more on this story.)

Some stories described how teachers better understood and were less reactive to a relationship issue, although much of the classroom-specific problem had not actually changed. For example, Lisa's stories about the relationship issue involved changes in her herself. She told our group about changes in her standard ideal of a managerial relationship in her culturally varied classroom: "I was stuck in my work with these children. Applying standard rules for good behavior didn't work. I had to look at changes in myself and my relationship with them before we could both relax enough to move forward in new ways." A clarified understanding of classrooms as people in multiple relations led Lisa to change her expectation for children with many participation styles to conform to a single managerial norm. She came to accept their differences, and they, in turn, responded to her acceptance with more empathetic behavior. (See Raffel, 1990, for the complete story.)

As the stories were told, we came to see that the development of relationships was not only important as a pedagogical tool, but its articulation also helped teachers come to value their talents as women in forming relationships. Instead of the praise for good classroom management skills she had earned as a student teacher, Mary now reported her pleasure when another teacher positively noted her personal interaction with students in a school not noted for easy student-teacher interaction:

The best compliments that I've gotten all year were from the teacher right next door to me. We were walking out to get a key to lock up. Nobody likes to walk out alone because you come around the corner and you see about 60 kids, and they're all shouting. You don't want to be by yourself when they're all yelling at you, so you always wait for a buddy. So as we were walking out, she kind of got close to me and said, "You know, I know you're going to be a good teacher because I saw you talking to your kids." She just saw me interacting with my kids and she liked it. It made her feel comfortable. She's a person I really admire, so it made me feel good.

Through our conversations, we learned that the art and skill of forming relationships was no longer commonplace, but became an important quality to nurture in learning to teach.

### **Diversity in Personal, School, and Community Values**

Having the opportunity to talk about and critique personal relationship development brought about broader examples of relationships between schools and communities. We talked about differences between acceptable values and behavior within the school community and contrasting out-of-school realities. We asked why particular children seemed to find themselves routinely in the principal's office for following the wrong rules:

Sam: Let's begin with those rules [just mentioned]: respect people and respect property. Those are school rules, but they are not "street" rules. So how do you deal with [the difference]? How does a teacher link those two worlds? Again we [find cases of] "student" separate from [out-of-school] "person."

Jennifer: Yeah, we had an incident at school the other day; the principal called two kids in for fighting and told them, even if the other person hits you, you don't hit back. And one of the kids said, "Well, my mom told me, if they hit you, you hit them back."

Sam: Whose rules do you follow? And what are your own rules?

As the teachers talked about conflicting rules, they also began to clarify their own personal rules, beliefs, and backgrounds that influenced their understanding of teaching and learning. Such biographical analyses supported their coming to accept different beliefs about school rules and relationships. Lori, a preservice teacher in Marcia's cohort who attended our group for part of the year, talked of her disengagement with her first student-teaching assignment. Her skill at adapting to others' rules for survival became clear:

I think I'm kind of a product of the [American] school system in that I always got the A and knew how to do it. But now I'm really struggling with learning how to live and be a person . . . Right now I'm in student teaching. My main goal is to get the credential. That's all I want. I just want the license, and then I'll start the real thing . . . Right now, I'm teaching in [a middle-class school]—very white bread; very much the way I went to school, very classy. And that doesn't really bother me, because I'm into long-term survival. I'm just playing this [student teaching] game because I want to be in teaching for a long time.

Lisa, now in her second year of teaching, worried about survival at her school because of personal differences instead of similarities. She told a story about finding resources to help preserve her own values:

I feel so uncomfortable at my school. I feel like the little young radical from Berkeley. I used to get razzed about my bumper stickers. There is this social camaraderie among [most of the other teachers there].

### *Learning to Teach Through Collaborative Conversation*

They talk about wallpaper and furniture stores and recipes, and they do all this joking around about teachers' short hours. I went to this conference with one of these teachers and had a great time talking with her. But it doesn't happen in the lunch room. Then when I think about it professionally it's even more depressing. There are no grade level meetings, no connection between other grade teachers. None. There's one woman who saves me. She's the resource teacher. She's brilliant and collaborative. She understands and validates who I am. I feel like she's saved me.

Lisa's confusion reflected her personal struggle to survive as a "Berkeley radical" without supportive relations with others inside a traditionally conservative school climate. Mary found personal support in her first year at school for the emotions that came with attempts to reconcile the diversity among school values, her own, and her students'—but she had to be selective:

I was talking about this child that—today was the day I gave her a report card. Two seconds later she had taken it out; she had her pencil out; she was changing every one of her grades. I mean, it became this horrible scene. It was awful. I was in tears; she was in tears. So I'm sitting here in the teacher's room crying a little and I'm talking to this person and I can see in her face: "Who the hell are you to be talking to me about this? We don't talk about that. We talk about P.E., the kids that were in my class last year, and . . ." I was inappropriate. It was really funny. So I just sort of picked myself up and found somebody who looked appropriate to talk to.

Mary also reflected on the discrepancy between standardized evaluation systems representing school values and alternative evaluation standards of students within that system. She told us about a conversation about standardized test scores with another child's African-American grandmother:

[The] grandmother brought the point home to me. She took righteous exception to the "failing marks" I reported for her granddaughter. She said, "What does this say about my child—that she's a moron, she's stupid and slow? Does it say that I read to her every night? Does it say that her mother's in jail and her daddy died just last year? Does it tell you that she's getting her life together, slowly? Does it say that she's learning songs for Sunday school? Does it say she wants to be a doctor? What does this piece of paper say about my baby? I don't want it near her. She needs good things. She's had enough in her life telling her that she's no good. She doesn't need this and I won't have it. I refuse to sign a piece of paper that says my child is no good."

Mary reflected on the grandmother's comments:

I wanted to give this wonderful loving grandmother a standing ovation. She spoke from her heart and her very sound mind. She ex-

pressed for me the misgiving I have about how we support the children in our schools.

Such reflective conversations eventually led Mary to understand parental involvement in schools from a new direction: accepting parents' alternative values instead of demanding compliance with those of the school. As a result, she let go of standard performance and grade expectations and began to develop more personally responsive strategies and measures. Locating caring and empathetic spaces to discuss and reflect upon competing values was important to her success in learning to teach in a school where diverse perspectives were common. (See Dybdahl and Hollingsworth, 1990, for more on this issue.)

When Lori moved from her "white bread" student-teaching classroom to another where she encountered many diverse values among poor and working-class children, the lack of empathy and personal care for her struggle to survive contributed to her decision not to teach. She talked to us and wrote about her feelings in failing to survive the dissonance and about learning from it:

I didn't teach because it doesn't pay well, because it is a woman's field, because it's like babysitting, because I felt I had nothing to give. . . . I didn't teach because problems like bad health and hunger and child abuse, and a classroom full of kids. . . . Miranda is in my class, and she's mean to the other kids, and lies a lot, and is horrible at schoolwork, and sometimes puts her head down and cries. Her mother beats her, (it's in the records) but for some reason they are still together. I watched her mother's jaw muscles clench during the parent conference, and I felt helpless. . . . My concern grows for the not average person in a society where intelligence is worshipped. . . . How can I realize that each person is a gem, and help them see their perfections, while society only mirrors their imperfections? How can I look at myself and deem myself worthy of telling anyone anything? How can I so love myself that I can give myself to the world?

My problem has been that everything I can impart has to be funnelled through me first. I feel plagued and inadequate to transfer knowledge effectively while my personal life is a shambles. If I feel community essential, where is my community? . . . How can I teach what I don't know, give what I don't have?

Children humble me by their raw youth and relentless energy, their blinding potential, their fierce desire to be part of the world. They fight fetters of boredom; they are intensely social and far more human than anything anywhere. They cry when they lose a friend (did I tell you about Lionel, about Pearl, about Jim?) and they hate with admirable zeal. They love art, and they hate the word-of-the-day. They are combustible and dangerous, but so tough, so durable, so incredibly fragile that to stay away from their fight is impossible; their fight is my fight. For the first time in my life, I am involved.

The loss of Lori from urban classrooms is a marked example of the need for care and personal support in learning to teach.

By spring, transformative stories about diverse values in self and others led us toward another issue and another level of discourse. Speaking about the overwhelming amount that new teachers have to learn about so many different kinds of children, Jennifer directly criticized the institutional norms that did not support her learning. Our emerging awareness of the complexity of learning to teach led us to redefine our social location and that of our children within a larger political system:

I just cannot live with [the failure of these children]. It's not my fault; it's not. It's the system. And I don't know about participating in a system that would send X number of resource kids to your room knowing that, no matter who the teacher is, you're going to have problems. The system is just not OK for the kids. And it's not OK for me.

### **Stories of Power and Professional Voice**

Evolving conversational patterns showed that developing understandings of classroom relationships and diversity in values also increased the teachers' critical awareness of power relationships inside and outside of school. Influenced by their experiences and my own political views of their life's work—which also evolved as I gained a better understanding of the barriers they faced in learning to teach—the teachers now wanted “to give those who live and move within [schools] a sense of affirmation and to provide the conditions for students and others to display an active voice and presence” (Giroux, 1988, p. 117). The teachers in our group initially questioned their personal power to teach from their own beliefs and experiences in a political climate that supported authoritative standards. Adopting a critical perspective about the social norms of that climate—and receiving the support to move through the emotional stress that accompanies such a perspective—was crucial to claiming their own professional voices within their schools and attaining the personal and political freedom to reconstruct classrooms that supported diverse values and ways of being instead of restricting them.

We have already seen that the conversational format that fostered evolutionary changes in thought and validated a critical perspective had not been provided through other teacher education experiences. The group's own power to critique and develop personally appropriate curriculum, measurement devices, and learning structures required an understanding of children, self, relationships, values, and their interaction within institutions. Instead of the messy conversations needed to construct such experientially based knowledge and critique other's expert knowledge, a reproductive mode of a priori knowledge seemed to prevail in tightly structured professional programs. In contrast, because of the freedom to raise and explore issues

through conversation, teachers in our group were supported for resisting such reproductive modes with their own students.

In this phase of our conversation (which began about three-quarters of the way through the first year and continued into the second), the experiential examples discussed were those imposed on the teachers—such as testing requirements. Leslie gave an example of the school's emphasis on testing: "The [standardized tests are] usually in April but [district officials] moved them [to May] because they're trying desperately to get the highest scores." Such issues quickly moved from surface level examples to thematic clashes between personal ideology and the institutional system of American education:

Lisa: I guess I'm back in the space where it's not the details [of how to improve tests scores] that matter. I'm just back to really questioning if what we're even doing works. It's partly because we're all just crunching what we didn't cover into their heads before there's a test. It's like, I don't *believe* in that, why am I doing it?

The issue became that of the struggle between power, personal beliefs, and professional voice. Teachers' plans to resolve that issue were both political and visionary in nature:

Lisa: Jennifer and I started talking about this, what would we do if we were given a blank check and an empty building and told to design a school, what would it be like? I'd like to do that. I'd like to really think about what kids need every day; if I could design a curriculum, what would I teach them? I think if we did that, then next year we can say, 'Ok, that's what you'd like it to look like; how can you make that as real as possible?'

Jennifer: I really want, especially with [African-American] kids, to teach them to have access to the system. I don't want to teach them ways to be non-functional.

Such broad, politically based plans required some structure. In order to facilitate that structure and ground the issue in reality, I pushed for written stories of their transformed understanding of the issue. Because writing to clarify my learning was a technique I valued and not all teachers initially shared that value, I did not always get the results I wanted. The results I did receive were surprising and impressive, often reaching beyond the boundaries of our group and their schools and capturing the spirit of transformation. The test of worthwhile knowledge for these critical/feminist teachers was not whether their understandings would be considered "true" by objective standards (or whether they could be verbalized and semipermanently attached to paper), but whether they led to progressive change (see Weiler, 1988). Lisa provided a common example of her personal political power, her freedom to evaluate her own progress in her working-class teaching

environment, and the emotion that often accompanied evaluation in relationships:

Many of my students are still at a fourth-grade level academically [when they should be on the fifth], but I *don't think I've failed*. They got to do things they've never done before. They had a good year, and they feel better about themselves because how they feel about themselves was important to me . . . Right now I feel like crying almost everyday because I'm going to have to say goodbye to my kids soon. They are some of the most important people in my life right now.

As we clarified and articulated our sense of power as teachers, our group decided to take professional action and reach out beyond the classroom to share our developing expertise with other audiences. Our action resulted in many transformational stories. For example, Leslie's story shows that her role and position as a teacher had changed, as had the boundaries of her teaching environment:

During my first year I stayed inside the classroom, so to speak . . . I was artificially obsessed with curriculum. I saw curriculum not only my primary role and responsibility, but as the only feature of my work I could really give voice to. [Now] I see it differently. I have to face some broader issues.

One of those issues involved a need to become politically connected. Leslie talked to our group about her new consciousness in relationship to an imposed change in district policy:

Our district instituted a new program [called the "system of choice"]. . . . Teachers were not consulted about whether we thought the program would work for our students. "Open forums," which we were asked to attend to discuss the new program, tended to discourage teachers from asking questions, making suggestions or presenting modifications. . . . Certainly, in theory, this "system of choice" would give every student access to all sorts of electives and would give each of them a balanced program. In reality, we have students who take P.E. classes twice a day and never sign up for a science class. We have students whose parents cannot read or understand the program and let their 8-year-olds fill out their own programs. . . . Teachers at my school grew increasingly uncomfortable knowing that the ideological appeal behind the plan was one thing (who could be against free choice?), but the reality was another. In actuality, there was discrimination against many children. They were not all getting the best education. So the primary teachers quietly met, on their own time, to devise a system that would insure that each child got science, computer classes, etc. We also were uncomfortable with the fact that there were no reading and writing classes offered and less core time to help students who needed extra work. . . . After many hours, the teachers devised a program. Volunteers



were to teach classes that we agreed were best for the students. Several teachers even put together programs in basic math and phonics because many of their children “needed” such instruction. There was a great feeling that we would really be able to help the children. It was done quietly and discreetly, with the approval of an administrator who was willing to look the other way sometimes. Unfortunately, a number of circumstances changed at the district level (including having to relocate to another earthquake-safe school site) and the program was never realized, but we haven’t given up. We are trying again, working with (and around the district if necessary) to do the best for the children.

In Weiler’s (1988) terms, Leslie was developing a feminist consciousness:

Women’s consciousness includes both [socially acceptable] ideas from the male tradition and the possibilities of critical consciousness of what Gramsci (1971) called “good sense.” . . . We must interrogate our own consciousness, language, and ways of knowing in order to come to see the realities of our own relationships. In this way, feminism asks for a radical reappraisal not only of our practices, but of consciousness itself. (p. 59)

For Leslie, the development of consciousness, power, and professional voice occurred concurrently with the realization that she had something to say in writing. Leslie has now written and coauthored several stories about her transformation: she has presented three at national conferences (see Hollingsworth & Minarik, 1991; Hollingsworth, Minarik, & Teel, in press; Teel & Minarik, 1990). Mary has also written papers for three conference presentations about her learning to teach (see Dybdahl, 1990; Dybdahl & Hollingsworth, 1989; Hollingsworth, Dybdahl, & Minarik, in press) and is joining a collaborative conversational group in her school to research alternative assessment methods for children at risk of school failure. Mary-Lynn organized a beginning teacher support group in a school where she served as a school psychology intern. Karen has returned to part-time teaching at an inner-city middle school and has organized a collaborative group there. Mary-Lynn, Marcia, Karen, Anne and Lisa have also written stories of learning to teach for national conferences, joining the conversation traditionally reserved for university researchers. As we talked through preparations for these efforts, we not only clarified our learning for each other but supported each other’s struggle to learn as well.

Some teachers’ transformations also included changing classrooms in subsequent years. After a long history of unvalued efforts to change the structure of her school from the inside, Jennifer resigned her public school position. She is now hoping to teach in a private setting with middle school dropouts. Lisa switched classrooms to take a job in New York as a college instructor working in peace studies. I changed classrooms (and universities) to work in a setting where applied research with teachers is taken serious-

ly. Anne, like Marcia, moved with her family out of state. In her last meeting with us, Anne summarized the core of our varied transformational experiences: "It's almost like we have to redefine success for ourselves as teachers."

### **Moving On: A Brief Note on the Curricular Issue of Reading and Literacy Instruction**

At the end of our first year, while we were still together and feeling successful about our broadened understanding of the complex concerns and issues we had raised, we were ready to take up the issue of personally relevant curriculum and reading and writing instruction. As with other issues, our conversational redirection was grounded in practice. In the spring, most urban schools mandated a switch from literature-based reading programs back to basal programs (which contained graded literature-based text selections). Teachers' attention to reading was thus influenced by school requirements to attend in-service workshops on the new reading program. Anne's school did not adopt a basal series, but remained with individual literature texts. However, the shift in the other teachers' attention to curriculum gave all of us a common instructional focus. As a group, the teachers felt that issues of diverse values, interpersonal relationships, and personal power were at stake in complying with the new mandate. Mary talked to our group about her concerns:

Who is the audience for this reading series? I have heard that over 75% of the school districts statewide have adopted this popular text. I can't believe that the state population is that homogeneous. Take my class for example: 72% of my students are black, 24% are Filipino and 4% are white. This is a very different population from my student-teaching experience in Berkeley. It is a very different population than some other parts of Vallejo. Given this diversity, it is hard to believe that 75% of the elementary school children could be well-served by the same reading series.

The teachers thus chose to spend our second (and eventually our third) year working on the issue of personally and contextually appropriate reading and writing instruction. As Marcia and Lori graduated and left our group, two other teachers from the original cohorts—Anthony Cody, an urban middle school biology teacher, and Katy Briber, an urban fourth-grade teacher—joined us. Each teacher took areas of literacy instruction that were working well in their classrooms and shared what they were learning, how the students were changing, and how they were changing as teachers. Their reports took the form of showcasing their knowledge and serving as peer instruction to the group. The others asked questions and took back new ideas for their own classrooms. The ongoing group conversation allowed them to get specific support from the teacher with specialized knowledge, support that was not available from me alone as a reading course teacher,

from reading research, from many of their field supervisors who knew little about reading, or from generic in-service programs. Details of our conversation about our resultant understanding of literacy instruction are given in other papers (e.g., Hollingsworth, Dybdahl, Lidstone, Minarik, Teel, Smallwood, & Weldon, 1991; Lidstone & Weldon, 1990).

### **Concluding Reflections**

Collaborative conversation seemed to provide scaffolded support for beginning elementary teachers as they came to understand the relational, personal, and political issues necessary to teach reading and writing to all students. At the beginning of our conversation, even though they had just completed reading methods course work, the teachers could not attend to reading instruction because they did not have the appropriate foundation (in terms of valuing and understanding underlying issues) nor a sense of their own critical expertise. Both were required to situate or contextualize reading instruction and give it meaning, particularly for their work in lower-class schools. Once such issues were settled (i.e., identified, validated, and clarified), teachers' attention did turn to reading instruction on a much deeper level.

The feminist perspective we developed through our conversational method took on a perspective of praxis. In other words, the continuous cycles of critique, knowledge construction, and social action were both method and result. Lather (1991) advises us that the courage to think and act within an uncertain framework (when authoritarian foundations of knowledge are in question) is the hallmark of liberatory praxis. In that way, our work was also similar to the theories of critical pedagogy outlined by Freire and Giroux (1988), particularly regarding the notion of praxis and teacher education reform. Giroux wrote:

Whatever new developments these [rhetorical] discourses generate, they must continue to speak to the central problems of power and politics, particularly as these are expressed in the domination and subordination of peoples within society . . . . Reform cannot exist as a practical possibility outside the lived dynamics of social movements. Discourse alone cannot bring about social change. It is with this understanding in mind that teacher education programs commit themselves uncompromisingly to issues of both empowerment and transformation, issues which combine knowledge and critique with a call to transform reality in the interest of democratic communities. (p. 166)

As teachers became better able to articulate their practice-based concerns in terms of action and equity, they could more easily locate resources and develop personal support systems to learn more about particular classroom issues. More than giving teachers specific guidance for immediate concerns, the conversations seemed to provide the intellectual stimulation and

social interaction needed to create and analyze their own broader knowledge about teaching. Understanding their own gender-based values in their political worlds of teacher education, school, and life helped them identify with children's unsupported differences in learning to read and write in school. Their transformational stories presented a feminist challenge to traditional conceptions of learning to teach.

### **Structural Features That Supported Teachers' Learning Within Collaborative Conversations**

Particular features of our process seemed important to the development of collaborative conversations as epistemic support for beginning teachers as they learned to teach. The features encompass problematically labeled "women's" values that were not often found in either school- or university-based support structures for learning to teach.

*A commitment to a relational process.* Lisa: "I think what's important is that we're meeting, listening, and understanding each other. That's more valuable than important tips." More than a commitment to a structured program, it seemed important that the group meet regularly and maintain a stable core membership. The development of on-going relationships and the establishment of trust was important to the development of our own voices and our learning about the issues.

*Focusing our learning on common practice-based concerns.* The issues that dominated our conversation came out of teachers' common experiences rather than external theory. This type of natural focus encouraged a depth of understanding and prevented these beginning teachers from being overwhelmed by new information that was irrelevant to their current needs. Experiential examples were then abstracted into theoretical frameworks.

*Opportunities to ask and reflect upon feedback from broad and welcoming questions.* Our conversation in the group meetings and in visiting each other's classrooms seemed to afford more opportunities to explore broad questions than did other environments for teacher learning where standard rules of discourse prevailed and personal critique was discouraged. Teacher education supervision was too curriculum-oriented. Conversation in the faculty lounge seemed to be focused on negative and limited discussions of students or teaching conditions. In-service conversations were directed toward academic and/or administratively determined concerns.

*Valuing our experiences and emotions as knowledge.* Because of this feature, we were able to work together equitably as knowledge specialists and to share our evolving knowledge with other teachers and teacher educators at research conferences. Understanding and accepting our emerging feminist assumptions, we could be learners of personal, emotional, relational, and political as well as academic knowledge. Because of the nonevaluative and trusting atmosphere of this setting, we could take risks, expose our mistakes, and learn from the emotion and confusion of facing

difficult issues. Such opportunities—traditionally associated with women's learning and discouraged as curriculum for learning to teach—were important to our process. In other words, the process allowed teachers to raise contextual and theoretical concerns to a level of publicly validated knowledge, which, in turn, helped teachers to see themselves as knowledgeable.

*Valuing our biographical differences.* As we talked together, we began to understand not only our common concerns, but also how our different life experiences, similar goals and values as teachers, and particular teaching settings informed our current perspectives. We learned to understand, appreciate, and even celebrate both our connections and our differences. The implications of this understanding for teachers' work with increasingly diverse student populations are powerful.

*Developing a supported critical perspective.* By the time the topic of reading instruction was raised as an issue, the teachers had learned to trust the group and to accept my loose, self-critical facilitation. Able to distance themselves from the immediacy of the classroom, they could explore the passion and promise of their work as change agents. They had moved through the conversational process to clarify their own beliefs and to recognize they were not wrong for holding other than standard school beliefs. Coming to see themselves as knowledgeable was valuable for critiquing structures and content that were inappropriate as support for their own learning and that of their students. Such a process was not possible in apprenticeship-type teacher education settings where beginning teachers were viewed as novices by definition, but this process would be supported in more political configurations of teacher education (see Liston & Zeichner, 1991).

*Reinforcing learning to teach as a process.* The evolutionary nature of the conversation led to an awareness that learning to teach is a process. These beginning teachers did not hold an expectation of immediate expertise that their schools and programs seemed to demand. The personal acceptance that came from that knowledge seemed vitally important to their success:

Anne: I don't think there is any university program that could teach you all you need to know to teach a child how to read. I mean, just think how much you learn while you're dealing with your students. And in any university situation, if you're student teaching, those are not your own students. You can't learn as much that way. You learn a lot just from each individual situation. My latest philosophy is that, even though this has been such a hellish year, there have been some things that have worked—certain reading lessons or certain interactions I've had with the kids. So I think, well, my first year is done. Imagine how it could be in 5 years when I keep progressively learning these things. That's just been helping me out lately.

A process view of learning to teach is important to a feminist epistemology. Asking teachers to conform to a more competitive and product-oriented model, restricted to academic knowledge, not only denies them the full range of connections and possibilities of a more collaborative process, but also sets them up for failure (see Weiler, 1988).

*Articulating a feminist voice in narrative form.* As newcomers into the world of teaching and feminist thought, we had to raise our consciousness about our undervalued knowledge and then act upon and revise it as we critically incorporated our experiential theories into the established systems where we were employed as teachers and where traditional women's concerns were devalued. As we became more aware of our position and the enormous challenge and responsibility of learning to teach, a new transformational goal of our learning emerged: to effect personal, political, and social changes in school.

Transformations stimulated by and identified through collaborative conversations have shown us that a knowing voice does not need to be loud—just clear, narratively structured, and action-oriented. Tracing the teachers' transformations from first notions of self during their teacher education programs through the end of our first year of conversations, we found the development of voice from a perspective of feminist epistemology. During this time together, teachers moved from a compliant position of received knowledge (applying others' knowledge uncritically to survive) to another position of self-constructed knowledge (Belenky et al., 1986). My own evolving sense of self as a teacher education scholar developed dialectically in response to their emerging consciousness and undoubtedly influenced the shape of their epistemic movement. Our collaborative work (initially in our conversational group, then through visits to other teachers' classrooms, and finally with professional colleagues in other settings) gave us the connected and sustaining relationships necessary for such epistemological change.

Leslie's focal change from program development to critiquing and collaboratively creating new programs is a good example. As a result of her refocusing, she not only changed beliefs about the place of curricular knowledge in learning to teach reading, but also changed her understanding of what it means to be knowledgeable. Drawing upon, but not dependent on, outside knowledge, these teachers have now moved past the point of recognizing the discrepancy between their own experiences and what others say those experiences should be, the point of claiming their own considered experience as knowledge and acting upon it. They have reached a point of self-actualization in voice from a feminist perspective of care. Such a voice may be necessary if teachers are to participate in the restructuring of all school institutions to honor and support relationships, particularly in poor and working-class schools:

It is this striving for the best in ourselves and in those with whom we interact that marks self-actualization, and a community that em-

braces this view of fidelity has a strong rationale for socialization, for it is not asking for fidelity to institutions as they are but as they might realistically be at their best. Further, fidelity is never given first to either self as individual or to institution, but to the others with whom we are in relation and to the relations by which we are defined. (Noddings, 1986, p. 501)

The challenge for institutions of schooling and teacher education is clear. Given the increasing awareness of the need to address contextually relevant pedagogy and women's experiences in school and society, it may be time for entertaining different conversations about supporting learning to teach.

### Notes

Departure from APA style in using first names in the "Reference" list reflects current practice in feminist research.

<sup>1</sup>It is important to point out that one of the teacher education programs referred to here currently provides a similar form of conversational support for its graduates.

### References

- Belenky, Mary F., Clinchy, Betty M., Goldberger, Nancy R., & Tarule, Jill M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- Buchmann, Margaret. (in press). Reason and romance in argument and conversation. In M. Buchmann and R. Floden (eds.) *Detachment and concern; Topics in the philosophy of teaching and teacher evaluation*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cantrell, Marcia. (1989). *Jason and I*. Unpublished manuscript, Michigan State University.
- Cocks, Joan. (1989). *The oppositional imagination: Feminism, critique and political theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Connelly, F. Michael, & Clandinin, D. Jean. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(4), 2-13.
- Dybdahl, Mary. (1990, December). *Watching Mike and A.J.: A case study of this Filipino pair's responses to literature*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, Miami.
- Dybdahl, Mary, & Hollingsworth, Sandra. (1989, November). *Learning to teach literature to the culturally diverse: A conversation Between Mary and Sam*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the California Reading Conference, San Jose.
- Freire, Paulo. (1988). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gilman, Carol P. (1988). The home (1903). In J. Donovan (Ed.), *Feminist theory: The intellectual traditions of American feminism* (pp. 45-48). New York: Continuum.
- Giroux, Henry A. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals*. Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Glaser, Barney G., & Strauss, Anselm L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Gramsci, Antonio. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Q. Hoare & G. Smith, Eds. and Trans.). New York: International Publishers.
- Harding, Sandra. (1987). *Feminism and methodology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

### *Learning to Teach Through Collaborative Conversation*

- Hollingsworth, Sandra. (1988, July). *Beyond socialization: Tri-level expectations in teacher education*. Paper presented at the world conference of the International Reading Conference, Sydney.
- Hollingsworth, Sandra. (1989a). Prior beliefs and cognitive change in learning to teach. *American Educational Research Journal*, 26(2), 160-189.
- Hollingsworth, Sandra. (1989b, September). *The role of personal theory in culturally diverse classrooms: "Smartenin' up the standard culture of school"*. Paper presented to Phi Delta Kappa, University of San Francisco.
- Hollingsworth, Sandra. (1990). *Narrative analysis in literacy education: A story of changing practices* (Research Report No. 200). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, Institute for Research on Teaching.
- Hollingsworth, Sandra, & Dybdahl, Mary. (1990). *Structuring conversations to free children's responses to text* (Research Report No. 203). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, Institute for Research on Teaching.
- Hollingsworth, Sandra; Dybdahl, Mary; Lidstone, Mary-Lynn; Minarik, Leslie; Teel Karen; Smallwood, Jennifer; & Weldon, Anne. (1991). *Learning to teach literature in California: Challenging the rules for standardized instruction* (Institute for Research on Teaching Research Series No. 200). East Lansing: Michigan State University, Institute for Research on Teaching.
- Hollingsworth, Sandra; Dybdahl, Mary; & Minarik, Leslie. (1992). *By chart and chance and passion: Two women's stories of learning to teach literacy through relational knowing* (Elementary Subjects Center Research Report No. 57). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University, Institute for Research on Teaching.
- Hollingsworth, Sandra, & Minarik, Leslie. (1991). *Choice, risk and teacher voice: Closing the distance between public perceptions and private realities of schooling* (Institute for Research on Teaching Occasional Paper No. 134). East Lansing: Michigan State University, Institute for Research on Teaching.
- Hollingsworth, Sandra; Minarik, Leslie; & Teel, Karen. (in press). Learning to teach Aaron. A beginning teacher's story about urban reading instruction. *Journal of Teacher Education*.
- Howey, Kenneth R., & Zimpher, Nancy L. (1989). Preservice teacher educators' role in programs for beginning teachers. *Elementary School Journal*, 89(4), 451-470.
- Jaggard, Alison M. (1989). Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology. In A. Garry & M. Pearsall (Eds.), *Women, knowledge and reality: Explorations in feminist philosophy* (pp. 129-158) Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Laird, Susan. (1988). Reforming "women's true profession": A case for "feminist pedagogy" in teacher education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 58(4), 449-463.
- Lather, Patti (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lidstone, Mary-Lynn, & Weldon, Anne. (1990, May). *Learning to teach literacy: A beginning teacher's process*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the International Reading Association, Atlanta.
- Liston, Daniel P., & Zeichner, Kenneth, M. (1991). *Teacher education and the social conditions of schooling*. New York: Routledge.
- Lorde, Audre. (1984). *Sister outsider*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press.
- Miller, Janet. (1990). *Creating spaces and finding voices: Teachers collaborating for empowerment*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Nielsen, Joyce Mc. (1990). *Feminist research methods: Exemplary readings in the social sciences*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Noddings, Nell. (1986). Fidelity in teaching, teacher education, and research for teaching. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(4), 496-509.



- Raffel, Lisa (1990, April). *Changing focus: A story of learning to teach*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston.
- Schaeff, Anne W. (1981). *Women's reality: An emerging female system in a white male society*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Schultz, Alfred. (1967). *The phenomenology of the social world* (G. Walsh & F. Lehnert, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Teel, Karen, & Minarik, Leslie. (1990, April). *Learning to teach literacy to culturally diverse children: A longitudinal collaborative study*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston.
- Vygotsky, Leo. (1978). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Weiler, Kathleen. (1988). *Women teaching for change: Gender, class and power*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Westkott, Marcia. (1979). Feminist criticism of the social sciences. *Harvard Educational Review*, 49(4), 422-430.
- Zeichner, Kenneth, & Gore, Jennifer. (1989). Teacher socialization. In W.R. Houston, M. Haberman, & J. Sikula (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 329-348). New York: Macmillan.