Robyn's Story:
Out of the Silence

By Andrew Gitlin and Robyn Russell

The writing of personal narratives is a form of story telling. In this paper we would like to tell several stories. The first is about the making of a personal narrative. The construction of stories, the method used to produce personal narratives, is not innocent and needs to be included as part of the story told. In our case, the method that structures the story telling process is **Educative Research**. The underlying practices and assumptions of this alternative method, an approach we have been developing for several years, is the central focus of the first story. The second story is about Robyn, a second grade teacher, who as a participant in the Educative Research process, raises questions about teaching and schooling and acts on them. Her story is both an account of how self and context informs question posing and how she acted on the questions posed. The third story we would like to tell is a reflection on Robyn's experience. We tell this story to raise questions about the way the story was constructed, the actual story itself, and what the story suggests about the power and limits of personal narratives.

Before describing how Educative Research structured Robyn's story, it may be helpful to say a few words about the context in which Robyn and others gathered to participate in what came to be known as the Educative Research Project (ERP). The University of Utah has a masters program that is unique in several ways: first, those entering are all teachers

Andrew Gitlin and Robyn Russell are professors at the College of Education, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.

from a particular district; second, the program has a very flexible curriculum; and third, the classes are held at the schools at times convenient for teachers. Because this program is flexible and allows a group of teachers to stay together for an extended period of time, two years, it provides an ideal context for a university instructor and teachers to work on a long-term project to raise questions about their work, act on their questions, and write up their experiences. It is within the structure of this masters program that Robyn articulates her story as part of the Educative Research process.

Educative Research

Assumptions

Researcher/"Subject" Relationships: Educative Research attempts to restructure the traditional relationship between researcher and "subject." Instead of a one-way process where researchers extract data from "subjects," Educative Research encourages a dialogical process where participants negotiate meanings at the level of question posing, data collection, and data analysis. This dialogical relation allows both participants to become the "changer and the changed" (Williamson, in Lather, 1988, p. 570). It also encourages participants to work together on an equal basis to reach a mutual understanding. Neither stands apart in an aloof or judgmental manner; neither is silenced (Bernstein, 1983). Instead, both participants are united by the quest to examine the topic at hand as well as reveal contradictions and constraints within the educative process itself. The intent of this dialogue is not to discover absolutes, or **the truth**, but to scrutinize normative "truths" that are embedded in a specific historical and cultural context. In this way, taken-for-granted notions can be challenged as educators work to better understand schooling.

Voice: The central motivation for encouraging a dialogical approach is that it can further the aim of developing voice among those who have been historically silenced. The opportunity to speak, to question, and to explore issues is an important aspect of this process. But the notion of voice can go far beyond the opportunity to speak; it can be about protest. Understood in this way, voice is inherently political; its aim is to question what is taken for granted, to act on what is seen to be unjust in an attempt to shape and guide future educational directions. Injustice or oppression cannot be defined outside of a historical context; however, members of the educational community are encouraged to scrutinize relations where one group has power **over** another. Included in this analysis should be the structures that unnecessarily elevate particular groups, while stereotyping and constraining others. Voice as a form of protest is directed both outward at the social construction of meaning making and the structures that reinforce those meanings, and inward at the way the individual takes part in the production of certain constrained beliefs, roles,

and practices.

Understanding and Practice: For this type of protest to make a difference, these insights and practice are linked. Educative Research attempts to do so by shifting the primary responsibility of doing research from the university faculty member to the practitioner. While the university member still has a role, the focus on the practitioner allows those who are acting at the level of practice to also gain understanding through the inquiry process. There is no need for the understanding to "trickle down," because those who do conceptual work and those who practice teaching are one in the same person.

Making it possible for practitioners to be involved in the research process goes a long way toward linking understanding and practice; however, there are still potential threats to this linkage. One such threat is the traditional view that research is a product. When research is approached in this manner, even if conducted by a person acting at the level of practice, understanding is still separated from practice within a temporal frame such that understanding occurs and then is applied to practice as an "answer." Furthermore, this separation of understanding and practice makes it difficult for the research to act back on the research question.

To confront this threat to the linkage of understanding and practice, Educative Research is viewed primarily as a process with turning points that redirect inquiry, rather than being seen as a product. This allows the research process to alter the questions asked and influence practice as insights are gained.

Authenticity: Most educational research leaves the author out of the text; the researcher's judgments, biases, and evolving views are not included as part of the report. This omission is not the result of forgetfulness, but rather reflects the assumption that to present data that will be convincing and deemed legitimate, attempts must be made to bracket out the subjective. The illusion created by this bracketing can be very convincing. However, the author is part of the research not only because the questions posed reflect a focus on one set of concerns rather than another, but also because the constructs developed (i.e., the organization of the data) and even the form and style of the communication all are linked to the perspective and orientation that the author brings to the research project. For research to be authentic, the relationship between what is said and the person(s) doing the talking must be made apparent. Put simply, the author must be included in the story being told.

Validity and Reliability: Validity and reliability are the criteria that set the standards on which research is judged. Because Educative Research attempts to alter the meaning of research and its purposes, traditional definitions of reliability and validity must be altered. The validity, or "truthfulness" of the data, can no longer be understood as something extracted by an individual armed with a set of research procedures, but rather as a mutual process, pursued by researcher and those

studied, that recognizes the value of practical knowledge, theoretical inquiry, and systematic examinations. The researcher's knowledge is not assumed to be more legitimate than the "subjects'," nor is his/her role one of helping the needy other. Rather, the researcher and subject attempt to come to a mutual understanding based on their own strongly articulated positions.

Questions of validity, however, must go beyond the truthfulness of the data. The influence of the research process on who produces knowledge, who is seen as expert, and the resulting changes at the level of school practice are also part of an expanded and political view of validity. For example, one criteria of validity would be the degree to which the research process enables disenfranchised groups to fully participate in the decision-making process, examine their beliefs, and make changes based on this understanding. Research that establishes authoritarian relationships and silences particular groups would be criticized based on this notion of validity.

Traditional notions of reliability are also altered when the central aim of the research process is to develop voice. Within traditional methods, reliability is understood in terms of the ability of independent researchers to come to the same conclusions when the same procedures are used. In contrast, when the aim is the development of voice, it is not expected and undesirable that independent researcher-subject teams would come to the same conclusions. It is also undesirable for the procedures to remain unchanged from context to context. Procedures should not only be allowed to evolve within a specific research study, but also to change given the needs and priorities of a particular population. Reliability, therefore, cannot be based on duplicating procedures, but rather must center on attempts to satisfy the underlying principle of voice and its relation to a desired type of school change.

Practices

While most research involves question posing, data collection, and analysis, our approach differs from others in that the data collection and analysis stages, as well as the actions taken, act back on the questions posed. Furthermore, attempts are then made to act on these revised questions. Put simply, we do not follow a linear approach to research, but instead try to foster a process orientation. Educative Research also differs from other approaches by emphasizing the question-posing process. This process involves the production of "texts" that focus attention on self, context, and the connections between understanding and practice. By examining these "texts" and their relationship, the basis for a research question emerges. To clarify this important aspect of Educative Research, it is necessary to describe more fully the production of these "texts."

Self and Context: Educative Research begins with the creation of two texts, a personal history and a school history. Personal histories, as one might imagine,

focus on the individual, revealing how past experiences, circumstances, and significant events may be related to the perspectives teachers bring to the classroom, the way they act in particular situations, and what they see as problems or questions to be asked about their work and the functioning of schooling. School histories, on the other hand, center more directly on context, illuminating both the structures and norms of a local school as well as widely held beliefs about schooling.

The intent of the first draft, for both school and personal histories, is to describe, as opposed to analyze, aspects of self and context. Although all descriptions embody the roots of analysis because they reflect a particular slant on the events told, this form of analysis is not emphasized in the beginning. These descriptions direct participants to ask educational questions, reflect on their behavior in the classroom, and examine the ethos of the school.

Once these descriptions of self and context are drafted, participants engage in a reflective process where the intent is to rework the descriptions by considering what is left out, as well as to clarify the events and circumstances explained in the text. To facilitate this type of reflectivity, texts can be shared with other members of the project. When the participants feel it is appropriate, they end this phase of the process and switch their focus from description to analysis. To do so, they look for recurring themes or categories that capture their stories.

To further this process, texts written by "others" are examined. In part, the purpose is to make it possible for participants to look at the relationship between their own understanding of teaching and schooling and that of others, while centering their specific histories within the broader frame of the history of schooling. It would be quite a deception, however, to suggest that the sole purpose of utilizing texts written by others is to compare one point of view with another. Instead, these texts are seen as a way to expose the political. While it would be antithetical to our position to argue that all personal and school histories must use a particular set of "political" readings, if voice as a form of protest is the aim of the research process, one criteria for selection should be the potential of readings to clarify and disclose oppressive formations.

With readings of this type in mind, the analysis proceeds in a free flowing way with participants using the three sets of texts, (personal history, school history, and those written by others) to create a "plot" that imposes meaning on a set of events. In some cases, the analysis of context helps participants rethink their personal histories. For others, the outside readings help them rethink their understanding of context and vice versa. In either case, the outside readings do not obtain a privileged status; it is not assumed that this form of knowing is more valuable, worthwhile, or legitimate than the knowledge produced in the personal and school histories. Instead, different ways of knowing are valued in ways that are likely to illuminate angles and shades of the question or issue not initially considered.

Once these analyses reach a point where the participants feel satisfied about their authenticity and power, the final stage of the process is to look across school

and personal histories to identify common themes and differences. This comparative process enhances the possibility of identifying constraints and limitations held in common, while raising questions about what is still taken-for-granted or deemed impossible to change at the school level.[1]

Linking Theory and Practice: To link insights associated with self and context with practice, participants in the Educative Research process used **Horizontal Evaluation**. Horizontal Evaluation is a process in which teachers collaboratively analyze the relationship between their teaching intentions and their practices in ways that point to "living contradictions" (Whitehead & Lomax, 1987). This is another way of saying that they are searching for the gap between what they desire to do in their teaching and what they actually end up doing. Where there is not this mismatch between intention and practice, teachers think through why they want to achieve the particular ends they have identified, as opposed to unquestioningly accepting them. Intentions can be stated in advance or can emerge from discussion. When stated in advance, they become a text for analysis. A teacher, for example, might hold the intention of covering the major issues outlined in the social studies text. Instead of simply observing the extent to which her/his practice reflects this intent, it is important that participants discuss why these issues should be covered, what is left out, and how the textbook acts to further a particular ideology. Once issues like these are clarified, their desirability can be examined and debated in relation to a normative framework.[2]

Typically, at the point that Horizontal Evaluation is introduced, several aspects of a research question have already been developed. First, understanding how questions are related to a series of beliefs and events embedded in personal histories has been addressed. Second, the way questions are related to the school culture and context also is apparent. One aspect of the question posing process that is still missing, however, is the way questions arise from our understanding of the limits and tensions embedded in our everyday practices and between our practices and aims. Horizontal Evaluation is used, in part, to encourage this type of reflection and, in certain cases, to enable research participants to work together to pose questions and examine data. It can become an important key to linking the literature and personal and school history to everyday classroom experience in the formulation and development of a research focus.

In summary, these practices and assumptions that are part of Educative Research suggest some significant changes in the way we think about and conduct research. Included in these changes is a shift to a process approach to research where questions, analyses, and actions become moments in a continuous endeavor. This give and take between questions, analyses, and actions differs from traditional methods by taking an activist stance toward research and giving more weight to the process of question posing. For it is not only the results that count, but the relation between results, analyses, actions, and questions that is of concern. To facilitate this

process of question posing, Educative Research encourages those participating to create texts (personal and school histories) that expose aspects of self, context, and wider cultural norms. Horizontal Evaluation is then used to see the relationship between these texts and to enable all research participants to have a say in the questions addressed and the analysis of those questions. When successful, this sort of dialogical process makes it possible for those traditionally silenced to have a voice in educational matters. It can also encourage protests about one's actions and the school context.

Robyn's Story

[As noted in the introduction, Robyn's story is both an account of how self and context informs question posing and how she acted on the questions posed.]

The struggle between silence and voice has been lifelong for me. The ramifications of swinging back and forth between the act of speaking out and reticence are markers along a path that defines who I am. Society told me to be seen and not heard, like some naughty child, while an inside whisper begged for a listening ear. I was in this state of frustration when I began a journey into further study of the educational system. This story is about my chosen project of developing teacher voice, but more than this, it is about my own travels in a previously uncharted terrain; to speak and to be heard.

When I entered teaching, little did I realize how suited to silence was my occupational choice. My mother promoted it as the "ideal woman's profession." It wasn't until much later that I discovered that teachers have historically held a passive voice in the whirlwind of educational research and theory. This passivity, in my case, was often coupled with strategies to falsify my behavior to please others. As I note in my personal history:

> My "falsifying" or "cheating" took on three main behaviors, recognizable even in my personal relationships. These are described by Jackson (1968) as common to most schools' implicit curriculum ... "(1) to behave in such a way as to enhance the likelihood of praise and reduce the likelihood of punishment... (2) publicize positive evaluations and conceal negative ones... (3) behave in ways that disguise the failure to comply" (p. 26).

I am still living the imprint of these lessons as I cope with the balancing act of being as others wish me to be and gaining an acceptance of self. Professionally, I face this quandary each time my principal enters my classroom to do a teaching evaluation.

The writing of my school history furthered my understanding of voice and silence by pointing to the way school structures silence teachers. I found the mandated curriculum and required texts used at the school played a role in silencing my educational beliefs and aims. My analysis of a teacher survey, conducted as part of my school history, suggests that other teachers felt constrained as well.

> There is so much already determined by the state core and the district, that many

> of us limit our involvement to how and in what order the material will be presented. Some don't even do that. This causes one to suspect that teachers have almost completely withdrawn from the professional aspects of curriculum planning and development. But not without hard feelings.

Much of my growing awareness about educational voice and silence was also enhanced when I explored a vast array of literature as part of the ERP. These readings released me from the guilt of what I could not change, and gave me permission to change all I could. I gained confidence in my teaching. I began to speak out and not hide behind my "closed classroom door." This signified a major shift in my relationship to the system. I had learned to conceal what I was doing to survive in teaching. I recognized how my own hidden curriculum was perpetuating a profession of silent subversion; a political act that continued the hierarchy and status quo. I realized that I had been a guard in a prison of my own making.

Horizontal Evaluation furthered my desire to understand the issue of voice and silence by providing the first glimpse of what could be done to confront my silence and the silence of teachers generally. I found that when I used this dialogical process, I was increasingly willing to examine and change my old teaching patterns. The benefits of this form of evaluation were numerous, as I note in one of my Horizontal Evaluation conferences:

> The benefits are spreading as I develop a stronger voice about my values with regard to school issues. Newly found confidence in my teaching and its underlying values enables me to express my views to colleagues, parents, administrators, and the school board. I'm more willing to risk exposing my opinions about our school structures and issues. This benefit has come directly from Horizontal Evaluation as I reflect on my values and express them in the clearest terms to Kathy, my partner.

It was for these reasons that I decided to reach out to my peers, through dialogue, to share in this adventure of the development of teacher voice.

The Initial Development of a Question

As I participated in each of these practices of the ERP, a common theme began to emerge; teachers, in general, do not have a voice in educational reform. Further investigation led to the realization that school structures, such as teacher isolation, job intensification, and the schedule of the teaching day, as well as the historical feminization of teaching, contributed to this result.

The simple act of talking about these issues began to change my professional life. The empowerment for which I so longed in my profession and my life was within me. This is not to say there were and are no structural barriers, but as I addressed the self-imposed restrictions, the other barriers were more clearly defined and understood.

These changes in my perception of the teacher role caused me to look at how

others could also benefit from dialogue. A recurrent question began to appear in my thoughts and writing: How might our school, or even our profession, change if discussion and reflection were made available and encouraged in a wider audience of teachers? As this possibility was discussed at length with Kathy, my Horizontal Evaluation partner, I began to look for a way to answer that question.

Toward this end, I decided to: 1. determine teachers' attitudes about professional dialogue, defined as "a discussion among two or more colleagues about issues related to the profession", [3] (see Appendix A); 2. organize a method for the development of teacher voice through dialogue; and 3. evaluate and analyze the dialogue sessions to better understand their import. I analyzed the results of the teacher attitude survey in combination with the themes and patterns found consistently within the teacher dialogue sessions.

During the week following each of the first four teacher discussion sessions, and twice during the 1989-90 school year, Kathy and I met to review and compare notes. These comprised a second area of data collection. We used Horizontal Evaluation to compare the intentions for the meeting with the realities of what transpired. Transcripts of my dialogue with Kathy provided an additional text to determine how the process was influencing each dialogue session.

As I trace here my two-year study, I start with the question of professional dialogue and consider how this concern changed over time. I then discuss recurrent themes found in the survey, (teacher interest, perceived administrative support, and constraints on dialogue). My reflection on the meetings, possibilities for change among the participants, and future directions will follow.

Revisiting the Question

When I began this project, I assumed everyone knew what I meant by dialogue. I soon discovered that the definition of dialogue was deceptively broad with many implications. I was warned by several people that this could become an exercise in futility, with teachers merely using the dialogue forum as a gripe session. While I wasn't sure that allowing teachers to gripe was all bad (as a peer pointed out, some might call this "problem-posing" if mentioned in reference to, say, businessmen), I did look upon a more formal dialogue about broader educational issues as preferable to the common presentist talk about "what happened to Johnny today" (Bullough, 1987). I have, however, since rediscovered the value inherent in informal conversations among teachers.

These informal discussions were a foundation for teachers to break through their isolation and build confidence. It is only where trust and openness are encouraged that a more formal sense of dialogue is likely to take place. Since the more common, informal talk of teachers provides a starting point for more formal dialogue, any combination of the two was acceptable for the purposes of the survey. With this developing sense of dialogue in mind, I turned my attention to the question of why, as a group, teachers' voices are not heard.

In Search of an Audience

It appears that silence and its seeming flip side of talking has a lot to do with the question of audience. At times, silence can be more a lack of acceptable voice, not an absence of voice. Teachers do discuss educational issues, but these issues tend to be skewed toward classroom concerns, (what to do about Suzy's behavior, how to deal with yet another district mandate, etc.). Teachers' tendencies to focus on these sorts of issues has much to do with the expectation that no one of importance will listen or consider their views. They have grown to anticipate the continuance of school structures and mandates, instigated without their input and often in the face of their objections. The challenge for teachers, as well as other silenced groups such as Black women, is not to "emerge from silence to speech, but to change the nature and direction of our speech. To make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard" (Hooks, 1989, as quoted in Ellsworth, 1989, p. 313). There is much that people traditionally silenced share and the shift of voice to "one that is heard" is exactly what teachers must do if we hope to have an impact on current educational structures, theories, and aims.

One way to move the dialogue from perceived futile griping to one that "compels listeners" might be to incorporate research as a way to cultivate ourselves and validate our views. I found a growing audience as I learned to incorporate research into my expressions. Surprisingly, I discovered a maturing acceptance of my expertise as a practitioner through reading the works of those considered educational experts.

Teachers typically have very little awareness of or access to current research which could contribute to teacher dialogue. I had been hesitant to read journals that continuously blame the classroom teacher for our educational ills while promoting strategies that are out of touch with the realities of class size, minimal pay, and intensified scheduling. I have also seen how this absence of outside input has limited the expression of my educational views, thus contributing to my frustration and aura of silence. While recognizing the value of practical knowledge, my own as well as others', I have grown to accept and respect the place research can hold in informing practice. If research is to be made more available to classroom teachers, the assumptions of the process need to be examined. Research cannot be accepted as "truth," but rather as a focus for discussion and comparison to the practical concerns of teachers.

A vital connection in this access to research is time to share this material among peers, whether such discussion entails their own or others' research. It has proven important to my development to discuss research and educational theory with others as I find it applies to my classroom and teaching. With these developing assumptions regarding the cultivation of an audience shaping my perspective, I now turn to the analysis of my survey and the recurrent themes that I found.

The Survey's Findings

The survey addressed three major areas of concern in relation to dialogue: teacher interest, administrative support as seen from the teachers' point of view, and possible constraints on teacher dialogue. The results of the questions regarding teacher interest seemed to confirm what I had believed from the inception of my project: teachers **are** interested in dialogue and that the teachers' level of involvement in the discussion of educational issues would deepen if they were given the opportunity. These positive results gave me the encouragement I needed to proceed with my project. I was ready to joust with windmills in the face of structural barriers, questions of power, and conflicting teacher priorities. With the armor of teacher interest securely in place, I turned to the issue of administrative support, as viewed by teachers.

Administrative Support: The majority of teachers responded negatively to questions regarding administrative support, listing examples that gave credence to their perceptions. Comments addressed a range of topics from the fact that salaried time was not allotted to teachers for collegial exchange, to the observation that when time was provided, the discussion had to be on the administration's terms. The dialogue usually allowed was defined as "controlled" by one teacher, who summarized the process as, "outcome before dialogue." Another teacher went so far as to say the district was not supportive of dialogue because that lack of support was a way to "divide and conquer."

This lack of administrative support compounds the structural constraints to dialogue inherent in the educational system. One predominant concern of the surveyed teachers was that of time. Many expressed concern about the time constraints under which they had to work. Even those teachers who stated interest in and commitment to attending dialogue sessions outside regular school hours qualified their answers with disclaimers about subject matter and time limitations. Other scheduled responsibilities had to be taken into consideration, at the expense of dialogue.

Constraints: As this project developed, I began to see time as my biggest obstacle. No matter when the dialogue sessions were scheduled, conflicts arose. I believed if time could be officially designated, my problems in establishing dialogue with my peers would be solved. I found much support for this belief in my readings. Traditionally, teachers' work has been defined solely in terms of student contact. Time away from students to plan or discuss educational concerns has been scarce. Hargreaves (1990) furthered my understanding of time by arguing that it was directly tied to power relations (p. 6). Since most elementary school teachers are women, while men are more often found in teaching situations in the secondary schools, university levels, and administration, notions of gender and power relations are implicated in the uneven distribution of time for professional pursuits

outside of student contact. This realization fueled my anger and frustration at the lack of time for dialogue with my peers.

As my understanding of the issue of time grew, I began to recognize another factor that complicated the question. In addition to the absence of time for teachers to engage in dialogue, the question of how important this process is in relation to other teaching responsibilities emerged as a central concern. When I was first asked by the instructor of the ERP to get together with a peer to discuss educational issues, I was willing to do it because it was required, not because I felt a burning desire to enter into such an arrangement. It wasn't until well into the process that I began to see the import of what we were doing. I innocently expected my peers to make such a leap in the redefinition of their role without similar motivation. The traditional training of teachers includes the perception that their domain of influence is solely concerned with practical issues. The determination of educational aims is left for experts. If that is the case, why waste limited time on dialogue that is outside the range of traditional concerns? Part of the difficulty I faced and continue to address is this constructed role boundary.

Along with this limit, the dichotomy of teacher isolation/autonomy posed another major obstacle. This double-edged sword is often seen as the last refuge of teacher control and there is great reluctance to surrender it for the uncertain results of professional exchange (Goodlad & Klein, 1974; Tye & Tye, 1984; Freedman, Jackson, & Boles, 1986). As Flinders (1988) notes, isolation is often used as an adaptive strategy to protect time and energy for the more immediate demands of instruction. This preference must be seen in the context of the pressures and demands of a complex occupation. If some of the other pressures of teaching are not relieved, dialogue will rarely appear at the top of a teachers' list of priorities. Until these multiple constraints are addressed, along with the lack of administrative support, there will be limits on the quality and quantity of dialogue pursued. In addition, these constraints have had definite effects on the actual sessions promoted through this study.

Reflections on the Dialogue Sessions

Twenty-five teachers attended the first session in April of 1989. Teachers were eager to talk to each other, and I felt exhilarated at this successful beginning. Some objected to my request to audio-tape the session, even though I assured them I would be the only person to hear it, and it would be used only for the purposes of my research. Promises of anonymity were rejected, so we went on to the topic of "teacher isolation" completely dependent on my marginal note-taking skills. Several teachers continued animated conversation after the meeting had ended, and one teacher enthusiastically commented during recess duty, "Congratulations! You've gotten teachers talking to each other!" I was feeling quite pleased and believed this dialogue session idea was going to work.

As I later reflected on the four dialogue sessions instigated in the 1988-89

school year, I realized I had certain naive expectations about how they would transpire based, in part, on this initial success. I thought that given the chance to discuss educational issues with their peers, many teachers of diverse philosophies would attend often. I expected to establish a core group, at the very least. This was not the case. Attendance had become so erratic by the end of the fourth session that this "core group" was composed of Kathy, who had to attend for our Horizontal Evaluation conference, and myself. Somehow, these dialogue sessions were not meeting teachers' needs. Otherwise, it seemed to me, attendance would be a priority.

A common fear I faced, and with which I continue to deal, concerns my own abilities and qualifications in conducting these sessions. I had never attended a teacher dialogue meeting before I introduced them to my peers. My experience was comprised of faculty meetings. I knew I did not want to duplicate those, but what type of session would be an appropriate model? When few teachers attended or participated, I was certain it was due to my inability to discern their needs and desires. Surely, another teacher with better skills and knowledge could do justice to this cause, yet who was this person?

Other structures and issues besides my feelings of incompetence affected attendance. The lack of trust among teachers as well as between the teachers and administration was obvious. The refusal to participate if the first session was audio-taped is one example of such lack of trust. The interference of other scheduled meetings also limited attendance. The absence of administrative support, although not altogether unexpected, did surprise me in its intensity. Perhaps inadequate teacher input on the topics for dialogue was an inhibiting factor. Questions about my level of influence in the sessions continued to be raised in my mind. I wrote about my concerns in a reflection about my project:

> Teachers complained of attending meetings where the agenda is determined and manipulated by the administration. How different is it if the agenda is determined and manipulated by me? Probably a minimal difference. The intention of this project is to give teachers a forum to develop their voices, in whatever direction that might be. How can that happen if they cannot have a voice in how the meeting is organized? If I perceive my position as one who is more knowledgeable because I have experienced or read more, am I any different from those in administration? No.

It was within the storm of these previously unforeseen obstructions, priorities, and questions that the 1989-90 teacher discussion sessions were approached.

At this time, the notion of dialogue was maturing within my mind. I was hoping that as teachers discussed educational issues among themselves, dialogue could begin with administrators, some level of agreement could be achieved, and we could move forward toward new educational horizons. Unfortunately, this goal was still limited by a number of problems in simply getting the dialogue sessions off the ground; many of which were experienced the year before: inconsistent attendance,

time constraints, lack of recognition by the administration, and a lack of ownership.

When one teacher summed up her inconsistent involvement in the sessions as "supporting (me) in (my) little deal." I became especially discouraged. How could I make it her "little deal" too? Questions I started asking myself included:

> Why would I, as a teacher, get involved in the group?
>
> How can I get the teachers past the stage of thinking this is what they do for me and toward doing it for themselves? They picked the schedule and the topics, yet still the meetings are my "little deal."

This question of ownership seemed to further point to the possibility that the professional dialogue sessions were not yet meeting teachers' needs. I decided to take the issue right to the teachers and ask them what they wanted to spend time working on.

During our December meeting, it was decided we would develop a proposal for a computer lab for the school. An earlier request for a lab had been refused. This push for what teachers wanted in the face of the administration's refusal was an aspect of empowerment previously unseen. The organizational power of the group, in contrast to individual effort, had begun to be realized. Suggestions for researching benefits and detriments found in other schools with labs was pursued, as well as exploring costs and potential funding. One of our teachers had studied the philosophical implications of computer technology with regard to gender and class and was asked to present her findings. With this topic as a focus, and the possibility of change within the reach of teachers, a core group of seven began to formalize.

The developing sense of full participation greatly affected the nature of our next dialogue session; the last one of the 1989-90 school year was attended by the district superintendent. He had previously indicated an interest in our meetings and accepted our invitation. Our discussion involved the district's recommendation of the use of only **one** kindergarten through sixth grade science program. We discussed possibilities such as funding science equipment and materials instead of classroom sets of textbooks that, for many of us, most likely would sit, unused, on the shelves. Ideas were explored as we worked around the previously perceived impenetrable structures and mandates of the administration. Many teachers, myself included, were unaware of this potential flexibility on the part of the administration. This was also a significant shift in the teachers' willingness to discuss issues of concern with those in power. The alternatives we explored were taken to the faculty and discussed further. Many intended to follow the alternate path and order equipment, not textbooks. Empowerment through dialogue and our ability to make more substantive choices was beginning to be experienced.

Whispers of Change

At the beginning of this journey, I asked a question: How might our school, or even our profession, change if discussion and reflection were made available and

encouraged in a wider audience of teachers? Change is an elusive perception, hard to document and prove. Nevertheless, I believe change has occurred for teachers and administrators. While recognizing that changes within me were motivating factors for this project, I, too have continued to change.

Teachers discussed some perceived changes during our last dialogue session of the 1989-90 school year. In general, it was enthusiastically agreed that isolation was decreased and trust was growing between members of the group. Often the topics we discussed were continued among a wider audience during lunch, and comments about more sharing between grade levels were made. Barriers of isolation were beginning to break down.

The heightened sense of power a group can hold, as opposed to individual teachers attempting to initiate change, was acknowledged. The speed with which those changes can take place when a group of teachers are supporting them, was also explored. This growing sense of empowerment to address and change structures through dialogue, in an environment of trust, is in direct contrast to the traditional isolation and acceptance of the hierarchy. As more and more educational issues are addressed, these teachers are redefining and recreating their own sense of professionalism to include the investigation of the aims, as well as means, of education.

While changing the administration was not a goal, it was an unforeseen side benefit that occurred as teachers began speaking of their views and concerns. Administrators began to listen. One change transpired at the beginning of the 1989-90 school year. The principal announced that our faculty meetings would have scheduled time for sharing ideas and discussions of professional issues generated by the faculty. Only a small portion of time would be taken for business and administrator-generated items. This had not been addressed before, and our principal admitted that this was her response to the interest displayed in our dialogue gatherings.

Our superintendent has spoken highly of our attempts to generate dialogue among the teachers in our school. In a recent letter, he wrote:

> I enjoyed the discussion...and was impressed with the importance of the issues you dealt with and the thoughtfulness with which those issues were discussed. I think that you have launched something very important and worthwhile. I would like to see similar groups develop all over the district. I think if teachers had the opportunity to participate in discussions such as [these], they would find their professional work much more stimulating and growth promoting. Moreover, there would be, over time, an increase in the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning.

It appears our superintendent was redefining traditional notions of professionalism in favor of the idea that dialogue is conducive to growth. This bodes well for future possibilities for this forum.

The dialogue between the teachers and our superintendent extends the range of this project. As I wrote in a letter to the superintendent after his visit: "It is important

for me and others at my school to see your interest in what we are doing. I'm sure I can no longer speak of 'the administration' as a...faceless power structure, as I have been known to do in the past."

Personal Changes: As I have discovered over the past two years, this study is about process. It has no final product, no end result. In my initial efforts to write this story, I learned yet another way of denying voice and my experiences by molding them into a more traditional research format, into the voice of the disembodied researcher. Part of my training when I entered the masters program included learning to write up my research in the **acceptable** manner: as an unidentifiable and unapproachable expert. At first, I adopted this form and began to write as a disguised colleague. As the ERP explored what it might mean to write in our own voices, I resisted moving away from this form because I was sure it would make me silent; researchers would reject my practitioner voice as unimportant, illiterate, and inexpert. I had worked too hard at developing this expertise to have my words not heard by the theorists. Beneath the surface of this position was a rejection of myself as important or integral to what I might have to say. After all that I had written or studied about voice, I still looked for ways to mute my story or costume it in more agreeable ways to suit my audience. Over time, I realized a new level of acceptance of my experience as text. It has taken me a long time to come to a place where I could accept my views as legitimate and allow my voice to be heard.

Learning to be silent can entail a lifelong training. To unlearn it, and begin to speak, can also require education. The issue of voice and silence has been representative of more than the mere production of sound; it has ramifications for my sense of being, of becoming a person, that resembles the metaphor repeated in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986): "We found that...the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined" (p. 18).

Through the past year, I have begun to reassess the assumptions with which I began this journey. I had hoped to lead teachers out of the tyranny of their prison of silence. As the dialogue sessions developed, I realized they would lead themselves to the level of articulation for which they were ready. I found I could not force change in a pre-determined way. I could only offer a forum and encouragement, then let teachers choose among a range of self-determined options and proceed from there.

When I analyzed my school history, the established school structures seemed impenetrable and unchanging. Time constraints and district mandates in particular seemed to be the walls within which I had to make myself comfortable. I can now see they have doors, and some are only made of paper. As dialogue continues within our school, we see more and more structures dissolve as we ask questions and seek answers. I am learning to accept less on face value, as I dialogue with my peers in a "language of possibility" (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985). I am continually

learning to trust my peers to know what they want in a discussion format. They are helping me to define my role as the person who sets up the sessions and then sits back and participates in what next transpires. It is essentially what I had originally hoped would occur. My goals are changing and now correspond more with Rorty (1980) in his stressing that "the conversation should be kept going rather than to find objective truth" (p. 377).

It is important that more dialogue be cultivated between teachers and administrators as the usual questions of method grow to include educational aims and the traditionally unseen parameters of teaching. Parents and students have been even more discouraged from speaking than teachers. Eventually, I must find ways to include their voices as well. My personal journey to develop my teacher voice has taken me further down the path to the doors of more partners in silence than I imagined to be possible.

Ultimately, for me and for my profession there is much unfinished work to be done in the area of developing teacher voice. Encouraging or ignoring the silence has not produced the hoped for educational result. For, as Adrienne Rich (1978) acknowledges in *Cartographies of Silence*, there is more behind this silence than at first appears:

> It is a presence
> it has a history, a form
>
> Do not confuse it
> with any kind of absence (p. 17)

Revisiting the Text

Close scrutiny of Robyn's story and its construction suggests a number of questions about personal narratives. The first query we will address concerns the relationship between personal narratives and voice; the second centers on the import of personal narratives, and the third considers the politics of personal narratives.

Personal Narratives and Voice

At first glance, it would appear that one of the benefits of personal narratives is that they provide a forum for those who have been silenced to speak out and enter into educational discourses in ways that historically have not been possible. Clearly, for Robyn, the writing of her personal narrative enabled her to act in this way. However, it is also the case that in speaking out, Robyn, at times, silenced others. Not only did she note this in her reflections on the dialogue sessions but when referring to others in her personal narrative, the writing often slips into a passive voice suggesting that "these others" are objects more so than critical subjects.

What this tension suggests is that personal narratives are not simply individualistic endeavors. While they may be produced by an individual, they have links to

others in the sense that speaking out and audience are in many ways two sides of a connected whole. When we reflect on Robyn's personal history, it is apparent that the focus is on the person speaking, deemphasizing what the speaking out does to others. To address the question of what speaking out does to others, we would have needed to shift our orientation so that consideration could have been given to issues of power between those speaking and the audience.

Related to the above concern is the question of whose stories get to be told in the first place. Traditionally, there can be little doubt that teachers have been silenced and ignored in substantive policy debates and decisions. However, they are only one of several significant groups who have been denied an opportunity to speak. Parents and students, especially those from working class and minority backgrounds, continue to be denied access to educational decisions (Connell, 1982). Furthermore, Robyn's opportunity to write her story came about primarily because she was participating in a university program. One could claim without too much exaggeration, therefore, that those who write personal narratives represent a privileged segment of a group, even if that group is generally disenfranchised in terms of their opportunity to participate in policy debates.

If the writing of personal narratives is in one sense a privilege, than it is important to consider what this privilege means for the formation of particular groups and how this privilege is distributed across groups. One possible way to examine this issue is to focus on the context or material conditions that shape the terrain on which personal narratives take place. When one does so, it is evident that personal narratives are not distributed into an innocent world, but rather a world saturated by power relations. They are dispersed into a context that is inherently structured by hierarchical power relations. Leaving these relations of power in place enables those who work and live within a set of material conditions that provide flexibility, time, and the development of communicative skills, to have their voices heard. On the other hand, those who do not have the opportunity to enter into a long-term reflective process and work in intensified work environments, are likely to remain silent (Apple, 1986). If personal histories are to enable those historically silenced to speak out then efforts must be made to alter the wide disparities in material conditions that allow certain groups, or segments of groups, to engage in this process.

In this regard, the construction of Robyn's story suggests that efforts need to take place on several fronts. First, the question should be raised about why one should start with teachers and how, if at all, the process should be expanded to include others. Second, if the beginning point is teachers, efforts need to be directed at altering their isolated, intensified work environment. It is not enough, as was the case with Robyn, to temporarily alter work conditions for a few. Instead, part of the challenge of personal narratives is to provide an altered context so that the insights and development inherent in this form of story telling do not become the province of an advantaged few.

Why Personal Narratives?

Besides these general concerns about "others" and context, the import of the stories themselves needs to be scrutinized. One way to understand these narratives is as a challenge to traditional notions of legitimate knowledge, especially within a research context. Viewed from this perspective, the import of these stories is that they further multiply ways of knowing and provide opportunities, especially for those working at the level of practice to use their experience as a form of knowledge to play a more central role in policy making. Because most research is an attempt to codify experience such that it produces insights unlikely to be garnered by simply having a particular set of experiences, personal narratives challenge this view by creating a form of knowledge that is directly linked to experience. The quest, in the writing of personal narratives, is not to create laboratory situations which produce generalized insights, or to explicate the main orientations, themes and patterns of a culture, but rather to describe and expose experience. In this way, legitimate knowledge is expanded such that the articulation of experience is seen as having value.

Viewing experience as a legitimate form of knowledge, however, does not suggest that this form is beyond reproach. As is true of the powerful criticisms leveled against positivist research, scientism and even more qualitative approaches, (Lather, 1986; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Gitlin, Siegel, & Boru, 1989), the knowledge produced from personal narratives is open to systematic distortions and oversights. In assessing the import of these narratives, therefore, it is important to ask what mechanisms are in place that provide a critical account of the stories told.

One such mechanism found in many personal narratives is to have an outsider encourage the author of the narrative to rethink the content, form and style of the story. Another mechanism found in Robyn's story is to examine the relation between texts to develop a critical look at the story being told. Although both structures provide a forum for criticism, this criticism can be skewed and distorted in systematic ways by hierarchical power relations. In the case of the outsider, because the process of criticism is one way (from the outsider to the author), a game-like atmosphere may be furthered such that changes are made to please the outsider. On the other hand, if the critique of knowledge results from looking across texts, then the criticism may be systematically altered if someone other than the author determines the structure of the texts. Robyn's story is a case in point. In her story, criticism was furthered by producing a text that focused on self and context and then by comparing this relation with other accounts of a similar nature produced by peers. This process enabled her to challenge her initial assumption about what is dialogue and importantly her interpretation of why there was such a struggle within the dialogue sessions themselves. Her story was not a seamless account that traced a series of events, but rather a fluid process of articulation that shifted back and forth between telling the story and reconsidering it. It is also the case, however, that

Robyn structured these texts according to guidelines imposed by Andrew, the instructor of the course. Although criticism was part of the process of story telling, this criticism was in some ways focused by the structure imposed on the author.

And so the question arises, how do readers, researchers, the author, and others interact critically with a personal narrative? Letting the story stand without comment allows inevitable distortions within the knowledge form to go unchallenged. Conversely, there is no easy way to challenge the authenticity and power of the story without reverting to hierarchical power relations.

The politics of personal narratives and the set of values these narratives further also needs to be debated. One way to think about the politics of this form of inquiry is as an attempt to strengthen a type of understanding which can challenge what are seen to be oppressive relations. Can such a claim be made about these personal accounts? We suggest that one way to do so is to argue that personal narratives confront traditional and narrow notions of legitimate knowledge and play a role, although a small one, in paving the way for silenced groups to speak out and enter into policy debates. For example, when Fine (1991) includes autobiographical sketches in her book on drop-outs, she allows students of color who have never been given an opportunity to speak out, to provide insights about racism and schooling. When Tierney (1991) uses the personal narrative of a Native American gay student to frame arguments about prejudice in higher education, the reader sees first hand what assumptions about sexuality and race mean for those who operate on the margins. In these examples, personal narratives clearly play a political role, both by enabling disenfranchised groups to speak out and importantly by furthering an understanding of common forms of oppression.

There are, however, possible tensions within this view of personal narratives. One such tension occurs when an academic authors the story of a disenfranchised actor. In this instance, not only has the academic used the personal narrative of the other to speak out, but often the story told is framed by a set of assumptions, priorities, and constraints which silence in subtle ways the personal narrative embedded within the manuscript. Another tension in this view of personal narratives is that the story written centers on past experiences. As a consequence, the story may help the reader understand the complex and violent ways that prejudice weaves itself through the lives of those at the bottom rungs of our society without providing much insight about what can be done or the difficulties in making changes which confront one's location in our hierarchical society.

In sum, there are many questions left to be raised about this new and powerful form of inquiry. What Robyn's story suggests is that we need to look more closely at the construction of the story. Further, questions need to be raised about the relation between the story teller and other. And finally, the relationship between the story and the material conditions that enable some to tell their story needs to scrutinized.

Notes

[1] For example, in one school history conducted by three members of the ERP, the teachers had almost absolute autonomy over curriculum matters. Others in the group not only had very different stories to tell, but, importantly, did not think that sort of autonomy was possible within their district.

[2] For a more complete description of Horizontal Evaluation, see Gitlin and Smyth (1987) *Teacher Evaluation: Educative Alternatives*.

[3] Twenty-one of the 34 distributed surveys were returned, representing about 62 per cent of the teachers. Their teaching experiences ranged from three to 29 years, with grade level assignments from kindergarten through sixth grade, one media specialist, and seven teachers from special programs, ie., resource, self-contained learning disabled, severely intellectually handicapped, speech, and gifted and talented. Eleven had graduate degrees, while three indicated that getting a graduate degree was a career goal. Two teachers were working on a "Master's Equivalency" offered through the district. Sixteen teachers indicated "Career Ladder" status, a district program devised to determine outstanding teachers for leadership positions.

References

Apple, M. (1986). *Teachers and text: A political economy of class and gender relations in education*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Aronowitz, S., & Giroux, H. (1985). *Education under siege: The conservative, liberal and radical debate over schooling*. South Hadley, MA.: Bergin and Garvey.

Belenky, M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic Books.

Bernstein, R. (1983). *Beyond objectivism and relativism: Science, hermeneutics and praxis*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Bullough, R. (1987). Accommodation and tension: Teachers, teacher role, and the culture of teaching. In J. Smyth (Ed.), *Educating teachers: Changing the nature of pedagogical knowledge*. (pp. 83-94). New York: The Falmer Press.

Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research*. London: Falmer Press.

Connell, R. W. (1982). *Making the difference: Schools, families and social division*. Berne Convention.

Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59, 297-324.

Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Flinders, D. (1988). Teacher isolation and the new reform. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 4 (1), 17-29.

Freedman, S., Jackson, J., & Boles, K. (1986). *The effect of teaching on teachers*. Boston, MA.: Boston Women's Teachers' Group. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. Ed 85 63735).

Gitlin, A., Siegel, M., & Boru, K. (1989). The politics of method: From leftist ethnography

to educative research. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 2 (3), 237-253.
Goodlad, J., & Klein, F. (1974). *Looking behind the classroom door*. Worthington, OH: Jones and Co.
Hargreaves, A. (1990). Cultures of teaching. Unpublished paper, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
Hooks, B. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
Jackson, P. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
Lather, P. (1988). Feminist perspectives on empowering research methodologies. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 2, (6) p. 569-581.
Lather, P. (1986). Research as praxis. *Harvard Educational Review*, 52 (3), 255-277.
Rich, A. (1978). Cartographies of silence. In *The dream of a common language*. New York: W. W. Norton.
Rorty, R. (1980). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Tierney, W. (1991). Self and identity in a post modern world: A life story. A paper presented at the annual American Anthropology of Education Conference, Chicago.
Tye, K., & Tye, B. (1984). Teacher isolation and school reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, January, 1984, 319-322.
Whitehead, J., & Lomax, P. (1987). Action research and the politics of educational knowledge. *British Educational Research Journal*. 13,(2), 175-190.

Appendix A

A Survey of Teacher Attitudes on Professional Dialogue

Individual responses to this survey will be kept confidential. Participation is voluntary. The data from this survey will be reported to those in the Educative Research Project and will be available to participants upon request. Thank you for your candor and participation in this project.

Present school assignment ________________________________
Number of years teaching_______________
Career Ladder Status?_________________

Definition of "professional dialogue"—a discussion among two or more colleagues about issues of, related to, or suitable to the profession.

1. How often is time for professional dialogue provided by the administration?
   a. once a week or more _____
   b. once a month or more _____
   c. once a term or more _____
   d. once a year or more _____
   e. never _____

2. How often do you seek out professional dialogue, on average?
   a. once a week or more _____
   b. once a month or more _____
   c. once a term or more _____
   d. once a year or more _____
   e. never _____

3. Please indicate the topics most often addressed during the time, if any, you spend in professional dialogue: (check off one or more)
   a. complaints _____
   b. classroom ideas _____
   c. educational philosophy _____
   d. curriculum development _____
   e. student issues _____
   f. current research _____
   other, (please specify): ____

4. How would you characterize the professional dialogue in which you participate most of the time?
   a. not very productive _____
   b. somewhat productive _____
   c. productive _____
   d. very productive _____

5. Do you feel a need for more time spent in professional dialogue?
   Yes _____ No _____
   Please explain: ____

6. Do you feel your principal is supportive of professional dialogue?
   Yes _____ No _____
   Please explain: ____

7. Do you feel the district is supportive of professional dialogue?
   Yes ____ No _____
   Please explain: ____

8. If a schedule for professional dialogue was arranged at times outside of your regular, salaried time, would you attend?
   Yes _____ No _____
   Please explain: ____

9. If a schedule for professional dialogue was arranged during regular school hours, would you attend?
   Yes _____ No _____
   Please explain: ____

10. Of the following ideas, which do you believe reflect benefits to be gained from participation in professional dialogue? (Prioritize from #1- most important, #2 next, etc.)

a. to ease teacher isolation _____
b. to develop a support group _____
c. to share ideas _____
d. to explore alternatives _____
e. to discuss educational issues _____
f. to expand my knowledge base _____
g. to learn what others feel and think _____
h. very little or no benefit, that I can see _____
i. other, (please specify): ____________________________________

Thank you for your cooperation in this project. Feel free to add comments on the back. Please return your completed survey to Robyn Russell.