

Teachers: The missing voice in educational research

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Paper presented at the annual conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Fremantle, Western Australia, November, 1993.

The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all part of this struggle. While tone, accent, meaning and style qualify meaning, meaning is never realised by the individual alone. The struggle originates with the individual, is shaped through social interaction and mediated by language.
(Britzman, 1991:23)

There is growing concern that the voices of classroom teachers are absent from published accounts of educational research. Currently, most educational research is generated by university-based researchers, and as a result, classroom teachers are viewed as the researched, rather than the researcher. As subjects of research, teachers are also expected to be the eventual recipients of knowledge generated by professional researchers. Consequently, teachers are expected to learn about their profession not by studying their own experiences, but by studying the findings of those who are not directly connected with their professional lives (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993).

This paper questions the conventional relationship of teachers and research, and argues for the acknowledgement of the significant contribution of classroom teachers as the primary source of knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning. In their daily professional experiences, teachers generate their own personally constructed, pedagogical knowledge base.

Teachers who are researchers within their own classroom contexts, can ask their own questions and reach a personal understanding of their professional knowledge and practice. 'There is little disagreement that teachers who engage in self-directed inquiry about their own work in classroom find the process intellectually satisfying, and they testify to the power of their own research to help them understand and transform their teaching' (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1990:6). Teacher research has the potential to

present the voices of the teachers by exploring the ways teachers use writing and intentional talk in their professional lives to improve their own classroom practices.

Research on teaching

Research studies examining the professional knowledge held by teachers has been dominated by process-product studies (Shulman, 1986). These studies use standard research methodologies to correlate particular processes or teacher behaviours, with particular products, usually defined as student achievements as measured by standardised tests (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993:6). Researchers involved in this process-product approach include Berliner, 1986; Brophy and Good, 1986; Shulman, 1984; and Rosenshine, 1986. Underlying this research is a view of teaching that describes teacher behaviours as 'causes' and student learnings as 'effects'. This type of research emphasises the actions of teachers rather than their professional judgements,

and attempts to capture the activity of teaching by identifying sets of discrete behaviours reproducible from one teacher and one classroom to the next.

Although these studies challenged the accepted understanding of teaching and learning processes during the 1980s, it has been argued that there are limitations to the process-product style of research. One concern is with the dependence on standardised testing to measure student outcomes, especially as there is increasing awareness of the limitations of standardised tests. A second concern is with the concept of generalisable teaching skills that can not be translated into the world of highly complex, context-specific classroom teaching (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1990; Brandt 1992).

As a result of growing disillusionment with process-product research, qualitative approaches have gained credence as more effective methodologies to explore teacher knowledge. There are increasing numbers of detailed case studies of teaching that acknowledge the difference across classrooms and schools by providing rich, descriptive accounts of everyday events (Elbaz, 1983; Yonemura, 1986; Clandinin, 1986; McLean, 1991; Britzman, 1991; Cohn and Kottkamp, 1993). Most of these accounts however, are published by university researchers and as with traditional research methods, the researchers often frame and mediate the teachers' perspectives.

Teachers as researchers

A more powerful alternative is a mutual collaborative partnership of classroom teachers and university teachers (Miller, 1990; Clandinin, Davies, Hogan, and Kernard, 1993). Collaborative research '. . . has the potential to go beyond that of merely

including practitioners in the attempt to refine and install the research community's "good ideas" ' (Oakes, Hare, and Sirotnik, 1986: 546).

Too often, however, '. . . notions of teacher-researcher collaboration reinforce the 'expert' status of those who enter classrooms to determine as well as to guide teachers' research activities. Much of this work appears to serve the primary researchers' interests or to focus upon the teachers' sense of efficacy in terms of students' raised achievement scores . . . much of this research still excludes teachers from participation in determining the research focus or interpretation' (Miller, 1990: 16-17). Simply adding the participation of practitioners without questioning traditional assumptions and research methodologies leaves teachers' voices unheard and their knowledge and perceptions unacknowledged.

The inclusion of practitioners in a creative, interactive research relationship makes possible more a fundamental change (Oakes, Hare, and Sirotnik, 1986). In collaborative relationships, teachers come together to engage in conversation and inquiry (Hollingsworth, 1992). All participants are viewed as teachers, and all participants are researchers into their own practices. This style of collaborative relationship has the potential for significant professional growth through shared interpretations of teaching and learning.

Collaborative inquiry

The research project described in this paper is grounded in the work of a collaborative group of five classroom teachers, and two university teachers. All members of the group describe themselves as teachers, although some work with children and others work with adults. From the outset, it was established that the classroom teachers were not the subjects of research for the

university teachers, rather all participants were to be involved in systematic and intentional self-directed inquiry.

Group members are employed in various situations related to early childhood education. Dawn and Catherine are university teachers working in an early childhood teacher education program. Joan is an experienced early childhood teacher and is now employed as an adviser for early childhood centres. Barbara is a part-time casual teacher in early childhood settings, including day care centres, preschools and primary schools, and she also works in young adult educational programs. Linda is a teacher/director of a long day care centre and has been teaching five years. Sue has been teaching five years and is employed as a teacher in a long day care centre. Karen is also working as a teacher in a long day

centre and she has been teaching for four years. The group was originally drawn together through a shared interest in curriculum decision making as Joan, Sue, Linda, Karen and Barbara were external students in a curriculum course taken by Catherine.

An initial working relationship was negotiated between the group members. All agreed on the following points: we would like to improve our teaching practices by embarking upon a process of collaborative inquiry, we would meet once a fortnight in our own time to discuss our beliefs and practices, and we would to keep documentary evidence of our inquiry through entries in professional journals. Once the group was established and members felt more comfortable with each other, we agreed to tape the discussions held at the meetings to provide an additional source of information about the collaborative process.

Getting started

The group began meeting in March, 1993 and initially Dawn and Catherine took responsibility for organising the first few meetings. The first meeting took place in a preschool attached to the university where Catherine and Dawn teach. It was marked by the nervousness and uncertainty of all group members. Each participant had brought her own perceptions and expectations of the 'collaborative group' and our initial discussions were tentative and a sense of each person 'feeling her way' pervaded the talking and the journal writing.

In the familiar atmosphere of a preschool centre, participants were able to relax and the discussion focused on issues related to collaborative relationships. Ethical considerations were thoughtfully explored by group members. We were conscious of the need to be constantly respectful of the rights of all participants for confidentiality and anonymity in all aspects of the research process. We agreed that our discussions were to be treated as private conversations and we talked about the need to develop a sense a trust within the group.

We agreed that although professional growth was likely to be the focus of the group interactions, we acknowledged that professional concerns cannot be separated from our personal lives. We wanted to highlight our professional and personal development through sharing our experiences in a open, positive and accepting forum. We wanted to create an atmosphere where we would feel free to share our strengths, our doubts, our concerns, and our hopes and dreams.

The first theme that became very clear over the first few weeks was related to time. The focus on time began with discussions for about how to schedule our collaborative meetings and quickly became a more encompassing concern with trying to balance time in

our professional and personal lives. We talked about 'time management' and exchanged ideas for organising the paperwork of

administration. As a group we shared copies of 'action lists', 'time management strategies', 'a time leakage index', and 'six simple, but powerful ideas to help you get control of your time'.

It seems as though time management was a non-controversial, comfortable topic for everyone to focus on as we got to know one another. It also dominated our thinking as we began to find that other obligations conflicted with our fortnightly meeting times. Group members still go to great lengths to re-organise their professional and personal schedules to meet every second Wednesday evening.

The issue of finding time to meet together and the commitment needed by all members raised another theme related the value of the collaborative group. The theme of continued dedication to the group is threaded through the conversation of our meetings and our dialogue journals. Linda noted at one meeting that she thought the friendship was an important aspect of the group meetings. She explained that although everyone in the group has a common interest (early childhood education), everyone is different professionally and '. . . it's interesting hearing how we all react in our daily lives. The variety within the group really broadens my horizons'.

The non-judgmental nature of the group also received support. Linda said that she felt she could say things within the group she would not say in other situations because '. . . we are an intimate group and we can say what we say because it's for us and no-one else will know and look down on me'. Karen also noted that she liked the idea of having a group where she could come and share what she was going through professionally, yet not to be judged by the other members of the group.

Teaching in long day care centres

Most members of the group have taught in day care centres, and many journal entries and conversations are related to the exploration of the ideal and reality of teachers' experiences in day care centres. Teachers who are employed in a day care environment are expected to work closely with a number of adults to plan and organise an appropriate learning environment for children. Ideally, all staff members in a work as a team with equal status and equal responsibility. In reality, however, a team approach may be extremely difficult to achieve as staff members have different backgrounds, experiences and expectations of their roles. The team may include child care workers with TAFE certificates and diplomas, staff with nursing qualifications and

untrained workers. Staff are often employed under different awards and working conditions, and in these circumstances it is a complex task to determine appropriate roles for staff members.

The voices of the teachers in the collaborative group reveal the difficulties in being able to build on the knowledge and experiences of all team members to create a common sense of purpose. Karen raised the issue in her journal by questioning: 'How do people of varying skills, abilities, perceptions attitudes, methodologies or whatever work together to achieve consistency? How do you determine what is appropriate, what is possible, what is realistic, and what will enhance a strength of responsibility in other early childhood workers?'

Dawn responded in a thoughtful way that acknowledged the complexity of the issue: 'Your questions about roles of teacher in day care really 'hit home' to me. It is difficult because it's really a balancing act. We need to keep our professional integrity intact while maintaining equitable and empowering relationships with those with whom we work.'

The issue was explored in more depth during a spirited group discussion initiated by Sue who noted that she was working with two other adults including a TAFE qualified staff member and the teacher-director. She said '. . . we are supposed to share the roles and have an equal role in the teaching - but it makes it very difficult because you can't define your own role in that situation. There are too many people trying to do too many things.'

Linda agreed with Sue and commented '. . . although I feel so egocentric, I just want my own children - I'd love to have just my own group and maybe one other person working with me. I like having the children as mine . . . to be there for the whole time when they are there. She added that she liked working with other adults and enjoyed their company, but she also liked just being with one other person rather than a group of people. She said '. . . sometimes I don't want to be involved in all this sharing and doing equals and making sure you're not upsetting someone. It's exhausting thinking about being a fair team player all the time.'

Joan joined the conversation by saying: '. . . I've been reading that children shouldn't be subjected to the point of exhaustion of having to be social, they need private spaces and being away. And I actually think that team teaching especially in roles where you can't retreat into your own teaching skills and your own teaching person is exhausting. I can remember as a teacher in day care that I loved the team situation, but I wanted to be able to

step away from it as well.'

Sue agreed with Joan and commented that she found the emphasis on team work frustrating. 'You're always thinking: am I saying the right thing? And you start worrying about what other people are thinking - it gets very frustrating. I think about when I was in a classroom by myself (in a primary school). I used the love the end of the day when all the children had gone home and I'd calmly sit at my desk and do something like look at their writing or put up their art work. It was quiet and I had that time to wind down, to be by myself and reflect on how the day had gone. Now I find that the shift ends and the children are still there and there are still people around and parents demanding attention. And the only way to deal with it is to get out of the place as fast as possible. Then I don't have time to tidy up or put up displays of the children's work.'

Frequently, the team approach towards the care and education of the children is extended to an expectation that all staff working with the children will be involved in planning, evaluating and recording curriculum decisions. As there are no mandated curriculum documents for the education of children under five years of age, staff may be seen to have great freedom and flexibility in their teaching. This freedom, however, brings a corresponding responsibility for the well-being and development of each child, and staff in day care centres find it difficult to organise for time to meet together to be involved planning and recording. This lack of common time and space available for meetings is a significant dilemma for the teacher or director who would like to promote team decision making.

When the collaborative group members were discussing this issue, Sue explained that the staff at her centre were giving up their lunch break for a week, so they could meet to evaluate their work with children and plan for further teaching and learning. As the staff in her day care centre work shift hours, they had found it difficult to organise staff meetings before or after work. Some staff may finish work in the afternoon and then have to return to

work later in the evening for a meeting when the rest of the staff are just finishing work for the day. As most of the staff had family responsibilities outside their working hours, it seemed as though lunch breaks (in the middle of an eight hour shift) were the only opportunity for meetings.

The voices of these teachers illuminate the unique working conditions for teachers in day care centres. The expectations that teachers will be involved in a team approach for the care and education of the children provide a challenging context for

early childhood teachers who wish to demonstrate professional enthusiasm and commitment.

Points of dissonance

Although group members shared concerns over the issues related to their roles as teachers in day care centres, they did not agree on all aspects of their work. Different points of view were expressed when aspects of caregiving routines were discussed. In day care centres, caregiving routines provide an important time for learning. These routines include meal times, washing, dressing, sleeping and nappy changing or toileting. Opportunities for learning and development occur through social interaction, sensory experiences, and the development of self-help skills and independence. Caregiving routines may become the focus of tension among staff as the treatment of young children during caregiving times strongly reflects personal beliefs and philosophies.

Within the collaborative group, for example, there are different views about meal-times in day care centres and opinions vary about whether children should be encouraged to try all the food provided, whether they must make a 'real' attempt to eat all their food before having dessert, or whether dessert should be as nutritious as the first course and so it doesn't matter if the children only want dessert. There are also different approaches to sleep-time -- questions about what type of bedding to use, whether all children have to lie down for the rest period, or whether older children may have a quiet period of relaxation and reading.

These are genuine concerns about the health and safety of young children and collaborative members appreciate the differences that are evident among the group. The points of dissonance have arisen more recently and it seems as though we have increasing confidence in our conversations as a secure place for our voices. As we continue to discuss our differences we have reached the conclusion that we are not expecting a collective voice to emerge from our deliberations, rather we have become aware that challenges to our assumptions are a valuable learning opportunity. As Linda said: 'This group is really about change and growth for each of us. We're learning to listen to other people's opinions and we're learning that there is more than one way of doing things. We know that we can still support each other, yet we can accept that people from different areas and backgrounds have other ideas.'

Dialogue journals

As we continue to explore our teaching practices, the crucial role of the dialogue journal is evident. Initially, the group members agreed that we would all keep professional journals for 'documenting evidence of our inquiry'. However, it didn't take

long for these journals to assume a subtle, personal role. As the meetings have continued and the collaborative process has developed, the dialogue journals have provided a significant record of personal thinking, reflection and learning.

At first, Dawn responded to the journals each fortnight and this

responsive aspect transformed the 'professional journals' into an on-going dialogue that currently explores the personal growth of each individual. Recently, however, Joan and Linda began responding with each other and this has led to a more complex role for their journal writing. Joan's journal entries reveal their dilemma as she and Linda try to work out how to nourish and sustain their 'written' relationship.

'When I read your journal entry, I start thinking about the things you have said and put your ideas into my context. In doing so, I find I'm not corresponding to what you are saying, but to my own thoughts that your ideas have stimulated. I think this is an important part of the 'conversation' we are having. But when I reflect on how Dawn responded, it was always personal and immediate . . . like a mirror. Not like the piece of elastic that I think I do for you. The end result is I don't think I give you support for your ideas and words when I respond to your journal . . . Like we said, this responsive journal is going to take some work!'

Group members agree that we are still discovering our own style and structure of journal writing and we expect the journals to change as our confidence grows and our voices become stronger. In one recent example, Linda used her journal to write to Joan to explain her concern and stress over a child abuse case at her centre. She was required to complete formal documentation for the case and she was having difficulty dealing with the legal language as well as her own feelings about the case. Prior to writing the case report, she used her journal entry as '. . . a silent listener' to relieve her stress and help her sort out her thoughts, although she knew Joan would not receive the entry until after the documentation was completed.

Researching collaboratively

The discussions of our personal work experiences are often interspersed with reflective episodes focusing on our collaborative research relationship. When we were preparing this paper, Dawn asked the group: 'How do we communicate with teachers or researchers who aren't in tune with what we are doing? How do we answer their question: What are you researching?'

Joan's immediate response was: We're researching what we know.

There are so many levels in this group. There's a level between Linda and myself because we write to one another and we are investigating what we know in our writing. And Linda and I are changing because we're thinking and reflecting and evaluating our work, and we're building on our knowledge and changing it - just because discussing what we know opens the door to further thinking and doing. And then there is what we learn from this kind of chatty level - the conversation at these meetings - almost a professional chat about our practices. And on top of that there is the 'go away and think about it'. You know when you're on the way home in the car and you're thinking about the discussion. There is just so many layers and I think it is about researching what we know and challenging what I thought I knew.'

Dawn probed this response further: 'But what's the difference between a professional network and this group?'

Joan replied: 'It's research because we actually question ourselves. We don't just swap and share. We're brave enough and honest enough to confront our ideas and agree to disagree -- and disagree quite strongly in some things because that's investigating and researching.'

Catherine recalled the initial meeting of the group when she and

Dawn had outlined the purpose of collaborative research. She reminded group members that ' . . . we agreed each person would have an individual research project and the collaborative group would be a support system for independent research. Linda chose to work on the developmental records of the children in her class and she spent some time recording her thoughts in her journal and discussing her ideas at our meetings. Then we didn't really pursue that idea of individual projects any further. But I've noticed in her latest journal entry that Linda has raised the issue of developmental records with her staff and her staff are interested in improving their record keeping systems. So Linda's story goes on, even though this group has moved away from independent research projects.'

Joan commented that it seemed to her that Linda was looking at children in a whole new way because of her experiences with the collaborative group. 'And that to me is the research part. It takes a long time and it's a process. We can't just say 'da - dum Linda has done it -- finished!'

Dawn added 'And we've re-defined for ourselves what we think research is.'

Sue said: ' I remember that we had a discussion in this group a

couple of weeks ago about sleeping routines in day care. And now I find myself constantly thinking as I'm putting out mattresses 'How can I make this better?' I think about what Joan said, and I remember the horror when I said that we have mattresses and not stretchers. I can still remember Linda's and Joan's tone of voice and it made me think about what I'm doing. It's the thinking that I do afterwards that makes this group so valuable. Teaching is so dynamic and that's why we are researching our practices. As we go through the working day we are constantly thinking about what we are doing and we ask if this is the best thing to do. We don't do things just out of habit. I find that during the day, I remember our discussions and wonder about what I'm doing.'

In conclusion

This paper has reported on the early stages of a collaborative relationship. The group is changing and re-shaping as we work ' . . . to devise forms for research into education that honor the spontaneity, complexity and ambiguity of human experience' Grumet (1991:67). The shared understandings that are emerging from the project highlight the power of this collaborative relationship. Our experiences have shown us that we are all engaged in learning how to teach and in understanding what it means to be a teacher.

'The work undertaken in collaborative relationships is uncertain and improvisational. We cannot predetermine our inquiries' (Clandinin et al, 1993:220). These characteristics of collaborative relationships are mirrored in our professional lives. Teaching is a complex process that is fundamentally ambiguous, uncertain and inconsistent. By reflecting on our personal experiences we can make sense of our professional lives and understand our professional beliefs and practices. We feel we have built a firm foundation of trust upon which to continue our exploration of the possibilities and dilemmas of collaborative relationships. The value of the friendships, the supportive and collegial atmosphere achieved by this group of diverse women sharing their thoughts and experiences has been a remarkable feature of this collaborative relationship.

The group is entering a new stage where we feel more comfortable challenging each other's views and we are more willing to question each other, yet we are still supportive and accepting through our telling, listening and responding. We are finding our

voice within the group and the boundaries of our collaboration are moving to accommodate different views and perspectives.

Recovering the voices of teachers involves questioning the dominant approaches to research on teaching. It requires that teachers speak in their own voices and struggle to legitimise

their own knowledge and perceptions. 'And it demands that we turn the world of research on teaching upside down - didactic, intimidating and oppressive approaches can be scuttled in favour of interpreted, shared and creative ones . . . ' (Ayers, 1992:265)

This new sense of ourselves as knowing people emerged over time as we developed a language and a way of working with each other. We learned to make spaces for each other in which to hear our voices, to know that our voices were our ways of making sense of ourselves and of our work.

(Clandinin, et. al., 1993:2)

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