

2010

Speaking ourselves: The intersections of women educators' personal and professional lives

Leigh M. O'Brien
SUNY Geneseo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/school-of-education-faculty>

Recommended Citation

O'Brien L.M.. Speaking ourselves: The intersections of women educators' personal and professional lives. *Current Issues in Education*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2010, pp. 1-36. <https://doi.org/>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the By Department at KnightScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Education Faculty works by an authorized administrator of KnightScholar. For more information, please contact KnightScholar@geneseo.edu.



Speaking Ourselves: The Intersections of Women Educators' Personal and Professional Lives

Leigh M. O'Brien
State University of New York at Geneseo

Citation

O'Brien, L. (2010). Speaking Ourselves: The Intersections of Women Educators' Personal and Professional Lives. *Current Issues in Education*, 13(4). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/>

Abstract

This paper presents findings from interviews conducted with 33 women educators working at varying levels of education and in diverse fields, and who varied in terms of age, ethnicity, race, family structure, geographic location, and sexual orientation¹. Semi-structured interviews, building on variants of this question, *Does who you are as person influence what you do as an educator and are there ways being an educator influences your life outside of work?*, were conducted, tape recorded, and inductively analyzed. The themes uncovered suggest that women educators function as whole persons, aware of multiple intersections between their personal and professional lives. In a time of “teacher-proof,” scripted curricula, standardization, and other so-called reforms in the field of education, these findings remind us that teaching cannot be reduced to curricular guidelines and generic texts mandated from above. Rather, the diversity that teachers bring to the profession argues against a one-size-fits-all model and for a contextualized pedagogy that cannot be limited to mere content dissemination.

Keywords: women educators, pedagogy, qualitative research

About the Author(s)

Author: Leigh O'Brien

Affiliation: State University of New York at Geneseo

Address: SUNY Geneseo, Geneseo, NY 14454

Email: obrienl@geneseo.edu

Biographical information: Leigh O'Brien is a Professor of Education who teaches and conducts scholarship in the areas of Early Childhood Education, Inclusive Education, and Social Foundations of Education. She is especially interested in women's issues, diversity, and democracy in education.



Current Issues in Education

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Speaking Ourselves:

The Intersections of Women Educators' Personal and Professional Lives

The title of the paper comes from an unwillingness to separate mind and body, affect and intellect; hence, speaking "my self" – or in this case, our selves – rather than speaking "my mind" or "from my heart/gut," and is indicative of my rejection of Western, Cartesian dualities (e.g., mind/body, logic/emotion, reason/passion).¹ The holistic approach, focusing on a rejection of certainty and universalisms, is a reflection of a feminist orientation that guides my thinking and will frame the paper.

Consistent with holism, it is becoming increasingly accepted that who you are influences what you are (or, more accurately, what you do). Noddings contends that "who we are, to whom we are related, how we are situated all matter in what we learn, what we value, and how we approach intellectual and moral life" (1992, p. xiii). In education, there is much evidence that what teachers know about teaching derives from the links between personal life history and professional career (e.g., Brown & Gilligan, 1992; O'Brien & Schillaci, 2002).

Palmer, a long-time proponent of foregrounding the personal in teaching, maintains that "teaching is always done at the dangerous intersection of personal and public life" (1998, p. 17; italics added), and he exhorts us to acknowledge the forces at play within ourselves. Doing so, he says, helps us to know ourselves better and thus be better teachers.

¹ See, for example, hooks (1994) and Johnson (2006)

Harout (cited in Göncü, 1995) describes this kind of knowing as an integration of his different “me”s.

What I learned as a teacher helped me understand things that troubled me personally. My knowledge of developmental theory and my experience in the classroom met and made each other more meaningful... Now, in my professional life, I no longer seek to exclude either my personal intuitions and style or the experience of teaching from my research. (p. 120).

The research reported here, based on interviews with 33 female teachers, arose out of my own life history and experiences as a woman educator (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). I have long been interested in thinking about how women who teach can identify and resist policies and practices that keep them from living an “undivided life” (Palmer, 1998). While voiced directly by few of the women with whom a graduate assistant and I spoke, I believe this struggle is an overarching theme in the women’s responses.

Many of the teachers comfortably accepted this integration of their personal and professional lives, whereas others struggled with how to make it work – or wondered if it was even desirable. I believe the women in this study described a unitary, fairly stable self, which, however, might look, act, and even feel different depending on the situation. Building on both Palmer’s idea of leading an undivided life by seeing teaching as integrally linked to the teacher’s identity and integrity and Bateson’s notion of women “composing a life” (1989), I will use the women’s stories to address the travails and rewards of teaching in a way that attempts to mesh the personal and professional. I will also provide examples of oppressions experienced as well as opportunities for/examples of agency in the teachers’ lives.

Literature Review

John Dewey, who has done much to draw our attention to the fundamental unity of child and curriculum (1902), *experience and education* (1959), and *the school and society* (1915), provides insights on the necessarily overlapping lives we live. He posits that experience is central to our construction of understandings, and that our lived lives are always the starting points for our growth. As Göncü writes,

[W]e are often encouraged to consider our professional and personal lives as isolated from each other. We are tempted to engage in a struggle to maintain this isolation... Nevertheless, both we, as teachers, and our students stand to gain from an emphasis on the whole person. For us as teachers, that means exploring the unique self underlying our personal and professional lives as well as celebrating, elaborating, and developing this self. (1995, p. 121)

Jipson, Munro, Victor, Jones, and Freed-Rowland (1995) argue that the totality, the complexity, and the multiplicity of women's lives have been muted by the institutionalized subordination of women to men (p. 229). Similarly, reporting on her research with female elementary school teachers, Biklen (1986) argues that the traditional notions of what it means to be a paid career worker are unduly restrictive for many women. Thus, the neat separation of work and family, school and home, teacher and mother that we often try to make can cloud the complex processes of identification and differentiation that make up women's realities.

These polarized positions may also limit women's visions of their potential in life. "It seems that women [often] feel forced to make decisions based on a male-modeled career pattern which ultimately denies them the full range of choices in life," write Leonard and Malina (1994, p. 34). Gutek and Larwood (1987) contend that women's career development is both different from and more complex than men's because of role expectations about both

paid work and family life. And Hall (1987a) compares the traditional view of careers as linear and predictable with new values such a concern for balancing paid work and family life. Despite recent and ongoing societal changes, this still appears to be more a women's issue than a men's.

Building on the foregoing, I believe we cannot leave personal experiences out of our work lives; that our personal lives do, and must, overlap with our professional lives. Many educators have come to see learning and teaching (i.e., pedagogy) as the being the essence of everyday relations. We learn and teach in multiple contexts across our life spans, and all of us are involved with, whether consciously or not, a life-long pedagogical project of reconstructing our positions on the basis of new learnings. These reconceptualizations, or new knowings, lead to a "rewriting" of life stories.

Life-history research is a way to access life stories. It not only provides material about individual lives, but also offers the opportunity to explore how individual lives are shaped by society. Thus, life-history research offers critical insights into larger societal processes by connecting the lives of individuals to society (Foster, 1997, p. xxi). Such "little narratives" of local knowledge (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999), told in public forums, can become a powerful form of protest (Gitlin & Myers, 1993). This kind of storytelling can be a means of testifying, or "bearing witness" (Burdell & Swadener, 1999) to injustices perceived and experienced.

More specifically, the life-history approach, with life-story interviewing being one form, has been used by scholars interested in documenting and interpreting women's perspectives and experiences (Biklen & Shakeshaft, 1985). I chose to use (brief) oral histories² as they capture more

² Although the interviews we did were too brief to qualify as full life-history interviews, the respondents often described historical moments and paths that influenced where they currently were.

closely the essence of the differences between men and women, and “help [us] to describe and understand better the webs in which ... women ... weave their lives” (Perry, 1989, p. 3). Oral histories allow women to tell, in their own words, portions of their life stories. For researchers, oral histories offer the advantages of gaining insight into subjects’ experiences and being able to expand into areas not thought of prior to the interview and so dig more deeply into relevant issues; in short, to achieve the qualitative researcher’s goal: “thick” description. Oral history interviews are unique in that the interaction of researcher and subject creates the possibility of going beyond the conventional stories of women's lives to reveal experience in a less culturally edited form (Anderson & Jack, 1991).

In fact, Weiler argues, "women must create a new language based on women's actual lived experiences." And since the everyday world is an integral part of the social world, "...focusing on the everyday life of women should...reveal that connection between public and private..." (1988, p. 61). Analyzing that connection was my intention, as feminist research emphasizes the worth of lived experience, and draws on intuition, emotion, and feelings. It also questions the possibility of finding one “right” answer and, like other interpretive research methodologies, tends to generate a variety of answers (and questions) leading to further exploration and discussion.

Telling our stories, then, can be viewed as contributing to the exercise of freedom – understood in a Freirian sense as potentially liberatory and in a Foucauldian sense as being able to think critically, in a way that opposes docility. We take control of our lives through questioning the ways we view the world and increasing our ability to shape our own subjectivity, make our own meanings (Dahlberg et al., 1999). Settled, transcendent meanings, what some call

meta-narratives, have not served women well. Because of this, what “feminist movement”³ has been about, first and foremost, is meaning making. Nothing is more radical than meaning making; it is what we women educators are about here.

Methodology

The author and a former graduate assistant conducted and tape-recorded interviews with 33⁴ women educators working at varying levels of education and in diverse fields, and who varied in terms of age, ethnicity, race, family structure, geographic location, and sexual orientation. All of the women were known to either my graduate assistant or me personally or were “friends of friends”⁵; obviously, this was not a random sampling, and I do not pretend it or wish it to be. In fact, the methodology is grounded in relationship: It was natural to ask other women educators to talk about their lives. Knowing the women and doing face-to-face interviews also meant geographical proximity; hence, the majority of the women lived in Western New York at the time of the interview, although a number grew up elsewhere.

After obtaining informed consent from each woman and scheduling a meeting, the interviewers used an in-depth, semi-structured interview procedure to ask each woman about what she saw as the personal-professional intersections in her life, if any. The interviews typically took about one hour and were built on variants of this open-ended question: “Does who you are as a person influence what you do as an educator and are there ways being an educator influences your life outside of work?” (See Appendix A for the Interview protocol.) All

³ bell hooks’ term (2000)

⁴ Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that the researcher is “asking questions of the data” and maintain that we cannot stop until we’ve answered the questions. I stopped after doing 33 interviews, because I felt I was able to make sense of what I was hearing, able to pull out repeating themes across women’s ‘lived’ experiences as educators. Further, Warren (2002) notes that a minimum number of non-ethnographic interviews is 20-30; this is considered a small but theoretically significant number.

⁵ This is also known as “snowball sampling” (Warren, 2002).

respondents were encouraged to focus on specific areas of personal-professional overlap, but we also strove to allow each woman's own experiences and perceptions to emerge.

Qualitative research seeks to describe and understand, consistent with my focus. "Getting inside the lives of others is the object of the qualitative researcher, who cannot understand the acts of others except from the perspectives of the actors" (Campbell, 1988, p. 72). Additionally, we attempted, where relevant, to share our own experiences as educators in order to reduce the power imbalance between researcher and researched, and because I was aware that, ultimately, the interviews and interpretations would fuse our perspectives and theirs. As my graduate assistant and I were educators, we had experienced some of the tensions and pleasures participants described, often allowing us to empathize with interviewees' stories and bringing us as close to the "inside" of the experiences as possible. Although the interviews were designed to elicit respondents' stories, they were also conducted to test my theories about personal-professional intersections in women's lives. Therefore, it was important for us to be clear about our perspectives and our agenda; I believe the informed-consent process and form the interviewees completed, as well as the dialogic nature of the interviews, contributed to clarity in terms of our positioning.

After the interviews were transcribed (by the author and previous student assistants), they were coded by the author and a current student assistant. We did initial, line-by-line coding, using active terms to capture implied and explicit meanings, then used focused coding to sort, synthesize, and conceptualize. The categories that emerged from the focused coding were further developed and, in some cases, integrated, then used to construct a theoretical framework. During the data analysis process, we both did memo writing and met regularly to discuss our ideas for categories and possible links across categories. These will be discussed in the Findings section.

An interview is a useful way to get large amounts of data quickly, and when there is more than one informant, the interview process allows for a wide variety of information and a large number of subjects (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

For this reason, perhaps, the interview has become the most common qualitative tool used by researchers in education (Warren, 2002). In-depth interviews, which we used, can be described as conversations with a purpose, and involve an interaction between the interviewer and interviewee, the purpose of which is to gather valid and reliable information. Further, the interviewer's purpose is to try to understand the meaning of respondents' experiences and life worlds by deriving interpretations from their statements. It must be noted that the interviewer and interviewee always speak to each other from their situated perspectives (e.g., based on their race, class, and gender). These varied perspectives shape the flow of the interview and have to be taken into account by the interviewer in understanding the meaning-making process (Charmaz, 2002).

Researchers often choose to use interviews when their concern is establishing common patterns or themes between particular types of respondents, as was the case here. Qualitative interviewing provides an "open-ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 676). The basic question driving such a study is, What is happening here? As a grounded theory researcher (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) using an inductive approach, I started with areas of interest to me and constructed interview questions to open up those areas. I used, then, a symbolic-interactionist theoretical perspective with constructivist methods. With this approach, the following assumptions adhere: (1) multiple realities exist; (2) data reflect the researchers' and

participants' mutual constructions; and (3) the researcher, however incompletely, enters and is affected by participants' worlds (Charmaz).

Conducting the interviews in a way consistent with feminist research was also important to me, and consistent with the foregoing. Whereas traditionally social researchers have been encouraged to interact with their subjects in a "neutral, value-free" way, Mies (cited in Leonard, 1994) argues that feminist researchers must become involved with the people they study. "Feminist methodology places great value on woman-to-woman research, based on personal identification with the subjects' experiences, as a mechanism to produce more meaningful and insightful research" (Leonard, 1994, p. 166). Part of this strategy involves self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer so that empathy, trust, and mutual interaction are enhanced.

The interviews would not have been the same had my graduate assistant and I not been women educators, as the feminist researcher "makes her direct experience the ground of her knowledge" (Smith, cited in Middleton, 1993). In Banks' (1998) terms, we were "indigenous-insiders," endorsing the values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge of the community and, presumably, perceived by people within the community as legitimate. Because feminist researchers never claim or aspire to objectivity or detachment, subjectivity, then, is a given of feminist research. In feminist research, "truth" is found in an accurate and adequate reconstruction of the experiences of the researcher and the researched (Goldstein, 1997).

Additionally, I had to acknowledge the likelihood of data analysis being an "unmanageable, messy, and arbitrary process" (Kleinman & Copp, 1993, p. 24). It is important, therefore, that the story told have internal congruence and be deemed "trustworthy." In addition, feminist research has an explicit political agenda and argues against "value-free" knowledge. Thus, the point of research is not solely to describe or even understand the

world, but to seek to change it through enhanced understanding. This is what Hollingsworth calls feminist praxis: "a willingness to risk and examine personal experiences as women and to be changed by the research process itself" (1992, p. 373). The questions underlying feminist research and its designation of experiences as the ground for social transformation ideally lead to the creation of knowledge that can be put into practice to produce changes beneficial both to women and to the larger society (Goldstein, 1997; Hollingsworth, 1992; Lewis, 1993). In this way, we can see teacher narratives as "treasonous texts, for they offer the possibility of an alternative set of stories about teaching and the education system" (Thomas, 1995, pp. 15-16).

The primary aim of the investigation, then, was to derive interpretations and try to understand the meaning of the respondents' experiences and life worlds (Warren, 2002). As Denzin (1994) so aptly puts it, "In the social sciences, there is only interpretation" (p. 500). Rather than asking if my interpretations are right or true, a Bakhtinian perspective suggests that it is more helpful to ask if they are reasonable and appropriate replies to my informants' statements. For Bakhtin (1990), the highest ethical responsibility, not just of researchers but also of human beings, is to answer the utterances of others. To answer, we must first interpret what the other person is saying to us. Our answers can never be perfect because our interpretations can never be completely true; there is, necessarily, "slippage" of meaning. However, this slippage need not and should not keep us from trying to make sense of and connect with others. We listen to each other, try to understand, and answer the best we can. Inevitably, we project our own perspectives and preoccupations onto the words of others, and yet generally, we manage to understand each other well enough that our conversations make sense (Tobin, 2000). Unfortunately, because the interviews took place

some time ago, it was not possible to check back with our informants. Thus, it is up to the reader to decide if I have listened, heard, and understood reasonably well and appropriately.

The strength of grounded theory, such as that used here, is that provides a theoretical narrative with explanatory and predictive power (Charmaz, 2002). A grounded theory interview can be viewed as an unfolding story. This story arises as the interviewer and the study participants together explore the topic and put a human face on it. With this kind of research, the storyteller is considered both the expert and authority on her life. The concept of persuasion, then, applies here: does the study/story strike a resonant chord with the reader? Is the story deemed “trust-worthy?”

Findings

Through multiple readings, reflections, codings, and discussions, my student assistant and I came up with 10 repeating themes that comprised the women’s responses, their collective story, as it were. The categories that emerged from the coding were further developed and, in some cases, integrated, then used to construct a theoretical framework. In the following, I present the seven extant categories with supporting data and literature. For the sake of brevity, only a few quotes will be used to support each category, although the reader will “hear from” all but three of the women interviewed as I present their compressed life stories.⁶ As I had suspected might be the case, based on my own life experiences, virtually all the women educators in our study functioned as whole persons, aware of multiple intersections between their personal and professional lives.

The first, overarching category, then, is this: Teaching is more than just a job; it’s more “who I am than what I do.” For instance, Edna⁷ said, “I guess I can start by saying that everything

⁶ For the full data set, please contact the author.

⁷ All names are pseudonyms.

that I am, and I think this is true of all people, directly influences your profession.” With specific reference to education, Trish told us, “When I tell people what I do, I say, ‘I’m a teacher,’ but it’s more of who I am rather than what I do.” In fact, all but one of the women interviewed could not separate who they were from what they did as educators, although they differed in terms of degree and kinds of integration. Andrea noted that, “anywhere I go something gives me an idea. You know: the kids would really like that or I could do that with the kids, or just managing things at home. It all kind of rubs off both ways.” Maureen addressed this more directly, saying, “I don’t think we can separate who we are, although at times I find I [have to] bite my tongue.” Cherie summed this category up well: “I can’t separate the professional part. I can’t separate the cultural part. And I definitely can’t separate that personal component of it...because it’s all a part of me.”

Many of the women cited liking working with people/children or wanting to help others as a major reason for going into education. This is clearly who they are. Biklen, in her study of elementary school teachers, notes that the women she studied maintained consistent “internal conceptions of themselves as teachers” even when they were not employed in the field (cited in Young, 1992, p. 157).⁸ Sarah, reflecting this idea of internal conception, told us:

“Who I am as a person is that I’ve always enjoyed being around people...forming relationships with people.” Trish described how she came to be a TESOL⁹ teacher: “I went to do an observation of a TESOL classroom and I fell in love with the students; I fell in love with their desire to learn the language and their desire to be assimilated into this culture.” Crystal adds, “I really enjoy being with children. I enjoy working with younger children and I’ve found over the years that that’s not something a lot of people like to do. It floors me [when they ask], ‘how can

⁸ Or, as the lead character in Alexander McCall Smith’s *Friends, Lovers, Chocolate* puts it, “You carry your profession with you.”

⁹ Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

you work with little kids?' How can I not? I think it's been a part of me all along, something that I've always enjoyed...

The one woman whose thoughts about personal and professional intersections in education clearly did not align with the foregoing was, at the time of the interview, in the process of deciding to leave the field. Of note is that Darlene was leaving education for the same reason the others were staying in it. She put it this way:

I think one of the reasons I know that I want to be done teaching is that I can't keep fragmenting and segmenting, and that's why I'm moving toward something that is integral, that will have carryover. I'm a little worn out with going to off to war every day.

Thus, a response that might appear to challenge my theory may instead be further confirmation of the importance of women educators being able to live undivided lives. Directly related to the foregoing is our second finding: Women educators build on their life experiences to create who they are as teachers. Karen said, "As a daughter, there are many strong connections because of my dad being an educator. I've always held my conversations with him around being an educator very highly, and I think those conversations ...have helped develop who I am."

Larice, a Mohawk special educator, notes that she mainly brings in a Native American perspective: "when it's addressed...when we're talking about early American history...I would give a different perspective [than non-native teachers] on Thanksgiving [for example]..." Prada, born and raised in India, adds this: "I encourage the female students to [be assertive] because I have seen how much success that has brought me...being from a completely different country and being short (laughs), that was something to battle against."

Many of the women built on their experiences with children out of the classroom, especially those who were parents. For example, Briana noted: "the mother instinct is there... I

think that is almost something you can't avoid when you have children of your own." And Maureen said,

I think you can't be a parent, without going to open house, parent conferences...you can't go into those roles as a parent and leave behind your own philosophy of how you think schools [should be]. One of the things I learned early on [because of an experience with her son] was to help students become self-advocates; helping them understand that they have the right to ask questions and to be a participant [in the decisions made about their schooling].

Third, teaching is seen as complex, multifaceted, and challenging; as being about much more than just content dissemination. In addition, as experience is gained, teachers feel that they can bring more of themselves to the job. Briana, who was coming to teaching after an earlier career as a scientist, sums up the complexity and challenges of teaching nicely, "I have always been good at multi-tasking. I can keep a lot of things going on at the same time. [But] teaching is taxing my full-time multi-tasking ability." Caitlin, previously a girls' gymnastics coach, put it like this:

To me, in many respects it [learning in school and sports] corresponds. Because I see sports in many respects as very cerebral: problem-solving, anticipation of what your opponent's going to do. So I like to think about how that comes into the arena of education. And I bring a lot of that in there.

Bette addressed how she and her colleagues viewed their students holistically when she told us,

In our early years of teaching we [she and a colleague] were everything to these kids. Whether it was housing, or food, or the 16-year-old boy who slept in the same bed as his mother for want of another bed, we intimately entered into every part of our students' lives.

Maureen, a college professor and department chair, saw her job as a college teacher as having both a formal academic component and an informal, more personal one:

I think as teachers we have two roles. And the first one is the assumed one. We have a scheduled class meeting time, course syllabi, and we teach a specific body of knowledge. [But] I think the best teaching is what one does one on one. And ...I'm going to say that the [students] I think I've impacted most have been women that have come [to her] for career life changes.

And toward the end of our conversation Edna, the director of an Art Therapy program who had indicated earlier in the interview that now that she was over 40 she did not really care what others thought, spoke specifically to the integration of her personal and professional selves in her teaching:

It used to be when I was a less-evolved human being that I could take off my clinical hat and leave it at work. It doesn't work that way any more and I guess it's better, but I was taught that you were supposed to separate, so what I teach my students now is that it's a myth...to think that neutrality and objectivity can exist in the workplace. ...What you're going to be left with, whether you're in a therapeutic or educational setting [is that] some of that personal stuff is still going to eke in and some of it's good because it's experiences we bring to the classroom...and it's what makes us what we are. So I don't think it's so terrible anymore...What I try to do as a professional and an educator...is I really try and take only the personal stuff that is really going to make a difference, make an impact, and share it.

The fourth theme was not surprising given the expansive view of teaching most respondents had: Many saw themselves as being in relationship with students; hence, they share themselves and support their students as people. Flo put it succinctly: "You treat [students] like people, they will give you what you need. It's just like parenting." Similarly, Lainie said,

“We’re all human beings, children and adults. They need to know me, warts and all.” Caitlin once more drew on her coaching background to respond:

One more thing that I carry over: I was lucky enough to work with girls going through adolescence who had a lot of self-confidence. Then you go into the classroom and see girls this same age who are so wrapped up in how they look, how socially acceptable can they be. ... I kind of felt, if a girl had a lot of self-confidence, when they hit that stage, they’re not going to turn to acceptance by their peers, especially boys, to prove their self-worth. They’re not going to decide they can’t be smart any more because boys don’t like smart girls, so I try with this age group to work a lot on getting these girls to be very independent and feeling that they have a lot of self-worth.

Related to the foregoing, our fifth theme was that being a role model for students was an integral part of teaching for many of the teachers with whom we talked. Within this theme, we also noticed that European-American teachers tended to focus more on the gender piece, whereas teachers of color focused more on race and ethnicity. As Terry, a white elementary school teacher, put it,

Well, I think I [bring in my belief system] through modeling. I ask them who they are and share that about myself as well. I model a healthy lifestyle and taking risks like canoeing, or outdoor things that I do, or writing and traveling.

When I asked Mona, who self-identifies as “Caucasian, Arab, and Indic,” if she shared pieces of her personal life with the children with whom she worked, she responded with animation: Oh yeah. Like when I talk about riding my bike. They say, ‘YOU RIDE A BIKE?!’ So I show them a picture and talk about it...sometimes it’s an overt manipulation of a student; other times, it’s to model social behavior that is personal or appropriate.

Jasmine, an administrator of a city high school said, "I am African American and I hope I'm a positive role model. I hope that parents, staff, and students have gained from me because I'm African American." Yolanda also spoke of teaching in inner-city schools and the importance to her students of her of being African American:

One kid came up to me and said, 'You're the same color, you know.' I said, 'Yes, I am.' And they're like, 'Good.' And I asked, 'Why is that good?' And they tell me, 'You remind me of my auntie,' so they make a personal connection... And even with the Hispanic kids, they want me to be Hispanic (laughs).

Cherie, born and raised in Barbados, had a complex take on this.

[Subbing] was challenging for me because even though I'm Black, I tend to stay very close to home. So it was different in terms of the children and the way they behaved. And the expectations: I'm used to having this high value for education and here I am sitting in front of 30 kids who don't want to be there.

Nella, who self-identifies as Creole and Catholic but who says she is probably seen primarily as Black, talked a lot about the role of race and gender in education. At the time of the interview the director of Multicultural Affairs at a small college, she explained how she viewed the inevitable integration of the self into teaching, in this case, her spirituality:

One does not have to teach in the classroom to be an educator... I think that with educators you don't have to espouse a Christian belief to look at people and stories of models, and for me, that's the greatest model and that has to do with my spirituality, and I don't think I can separate that out.

Sixth, virtually all the women noted serendipity/life circumstances and, for many, especially those who were middle-age or older, gendered expectations, in terms of ending up an educator. Where they currently were in terms of their jobs was very rarely a specifically

planned career choice although almost all said they liked their jobs. According to Keohane (cited in Hall, 1987c), this kind of “flexible” success is characterized by interruptions in paid work, by part-time paid work, and by slower achievement. This was certainly true of many, though not all of the women in this study. When I asked Hattie, my grandmother, how she ended up being a teacher, she told me:

I can tell you why, [although] I’m embarrassed to tell you – I didn’t really know I was going to get a degree in the science of education. I thought I was taking courses in journalism. My plan was to be a great writer, but it didn’t turn out that way (laughs)...girls weren’t accepted in college at Penn [the University of Pennsylvania]...but you were allowed to take courses...[in education, fine arts, and nursing].

Maureen, a middle-aged woman, also felt the effects of gendered roles on her decision to become an educator:

At the time, it was tradition that there was a token female in the [medical school] class, and if you were female and applying, the perception was you were taking the place of a male student. So it became apparent to me that I was probably not going to be successful getting into medical school, and ... I met my future husband in my senior year, got married, and transferred to Rutgers.

Liza, born in Cuba and much younger than both Hattie and Maureen, had a similar tale to tell about the life circumstances which led to her becoming a teacher:

I was very interested in teaching but then in high school I won a poetry context and I was very much into writing and so I thought I might want to do journalism...and then my first year in college I took a writing course and was very discouraged. My love for it [writing] kind of went into hobby mode...and then in my second year I did a field experience in an elementary school

and the children loved it, and I thought, this is for me; there is no question: I am going into education.

Miranda, a new teacher, had very similar, serendipitous experiences. She said, "In high school I wanted to be a social worker...but then I talked with a friend's mother and decided it wouldn't be good for me...I went to college, loved psychology, and decided to teach young kids. I got involved with Montessori [education] and thought it was fun...and wound up in education."

In a story echoed by many, Jeanette summed up this theme when she said, "Well, a friend of mine was in deaf education and it just kind of happened." And, although serendipity and life circumstances may have led these women into education, once they found their home in the profession, the majority of them were happy to be there.

Last, but certainly not least, role strain was heard in almost every interview. Balancing their lives was a constant challenge for most of these women, especially those with children. Young (1992) calls this dual commitment to paid and family work, the combining of multiple roles, "competing urgencies." She argues that women generally take primary responsibility for "family work" and so regard successful juggling of their simultaneous responsibilities as a considerable accomplishment (pp. 150-151). This is what Hochschild (1989) famously called "working the second shift" and may align with what Griffith and Smith (1991) call the "mothering discourse," the expectation that mothers will love, care, and sacrifice the self. Like good mothers, good teachers find their work is never done (Acker, 1995). A feminist analysis would add that teaching, like mothering, has the expectations of "altruism, self-abnegation, and repetitive labor" (Grumet, 1988, p. 87). Because of this, teachers are often exhausted (McPherson, 1972; Steedman, 1987). This is the consequence of the social expectations that

women's caring work should blur the distinction between labor and love (Acker). Reflecting this tension, Yolanda told me,

I'm almost finished with my course work [for her Master's in Education], [and] I find myself always [feeling guilty]. That guilt: I should be doing more with them [her own children], and I hope they know I still love them, but sometimes I have to say, "I have to do this, I can't do that"... And you know what's so funny? My husband can bring something home from work and he says, "You can't bother me," and they don't. But they still ask me, you know, "Mom, can you sew this button on?"

Janet explained how she tried to balance her work and home lives, in part by letting go of expectations that she do all the work and that things needed to be "just so" at home:

There's no question there's a [misperception] that education doesn't require [a lot of] time because it takes an enormous amount of time. I guess I worry less about certain things. I like my house picked up but the big stuff on the floor, that doesn't upset me. I don't do my husband's shirts; that's his responsibility... [and] the children do help....

Mindy, who began her career in education as a part-time preschool teacher and worked her way up into school administration, addressed her struggles to maintain friendships given the time demands of her position and other work-related challenges. Her "solution" was rather ingenious, though probably not consciously planned:

In administration, the work is so consuming that my friendship circle is shrinking. There is just not a lot of time to maintain those relationships... I have a "cell-phone friendship" with a woman who does very similar work. ... We have a lot of the same issues we're dealing with and for years we'd talk to each other every day on the way to work... I didn't have time to play volleyball anymore which was a major recreation for me that we had done together, so we had to find a way

to be friends and so we sat on the phone. But part of that friendship was coaching each other on our work.

Discussion and Conclusions

So what does this mean? How are the pieces related to the whole? What story are these women telling? I think I can reasonably argue, based on the evidence, that these women educators see themselves as living – or, more accurately, trying to live – undivided lives. Each one is an individual who brings her personality, life experiences, cultural and ethnic background, current life situation, and so forth to her work as an educator. In fact, for most, there was simply no way they could separate who they were as people from who they were as teachers. Further, most saw no reason to try to separate their “two lives.”

Kyra, a college professor, directly addresses the complexities of this situation. I struggle with that [how much of herself to bring into the classroom] all the time. There are some courses and some semesters in which it all seems to come together quite nicely, and other semesters where it's all at odds. And of course I was educated in graduate school that one should be objective and value-free. And so I still carry some of that with me and I think that's a piece of my struggle around bringing the personal into the professional arena – although it's obviously always there.

These findings have implications for practice, knowledge, and policy. First, teachers are full, immeasurably complex humans working with other full, complex human beings – their students. If teaching were reducible to filling identical vessels with the same, pre-packed materials, anyone could do it...but it wouldn't be education, then; rather, just filling pails on an assembly line. If, instead, education means, as the word's Latin origins suggest, the drawing out of knowledge, teachers and students must come to know and address each other as the unique

individuals they are. Obviously, this then affects how we conceive of learning and teaching. This study's findings argue for ever-varying, never-identical pedagogical processes that cannot be reduced or simplified to mere content dissemination. This, in turn, has implications for policy. Briefly, if it is true that teachers, and students, are not interchangeable automatons, then public policy must acknowledge the diversity that teachers bring to the profession by not trying to make one size fit all. This, I believe, is the key finding of this study, making these stories, perhaps, the treasonous texts mentioned earlier.

This research shows how women educators' personal lives are inextricably linked with their work lives. I believe it also challenges technical-rational models of teaching (see, e.g., Steinberg, Kincheloe, & Hinchey, 1999), and makes a case for understanding teachers as individuals who construct meaning through social mediation and as agents who are embedded, embodied, localized, constituted, fragmented, and subject to systems of power and exploitation (Dillabough, 1990). In this study, teachers do not present as passive, disembodied "professionals"; rather their identities are shaped by their own narratives as well as social and structural relations both within and outside education (Dillabough). Teachers, then, are embedded in social and political contexts where multiple selves meet within a dialectical frame (Dillabough, 1990). Thus, experience and self are key constructs and research should include an examination of these.

As women's voices are increasingly heard in education (Smith, 1997), this study's findings suggest that we must acknowledge a perspective on teaching and learning that incorporates the personal, the contextual, the lived lives of teachers (and students) at all levels. Greene urges women to become truly present to themselves by reconsidering their own lived experiences, using what she calls their personal biographies (1973). And she argues "... for an

intensified awareness of women's own realities, the shape of their own lived worlds" (1978, p. 219). I hope that this research will help women educators who may feel marginalized or not quite "whole" realize the efficacy and importance of their own personal/professional approaches to pedagogy, the feminist praxis, and the importance of living an undivided life.

Ultimately, only an understanding of the daily realities of teaching will lead us to social and political changes. In a time of standardization, "teacher-proof," scripted curriculum, and other so-called reforms in the field of education, this alternative set of stories about teaching and the education system reminds us that teaching cannot be reduced to curricular guidelines and generic texts mandated from above. However, the No Child Left Behind act and other moves toward what is seen as "accountability" in education have promoted and rewarded an image of teaching and teachers as generic and readily replicable. And so, as always, there is always more work to be done.

References

- Acker, S. (1995). Carry on caring: The work of women teachers. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 16 (1), 21-36.
- American Psychological Association. (2001). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author
- Bakhtin, M. (1990). *Art and answerability* (M. Holquist & C. Emerson, trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Banks, J. A. (1998). The lives and values of researchers: Implications for educating citizens in a multicultural society. *Educational Researcher*, 27 (7), 4-17.
- Biklen, S.K. (1986). Schoolteaching, professionalism, and gender. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 14 (2), 17-24.
- Biklen, S.K., & Shakeshaft, C. (1985). The new scholarship on women. In S.S. Klein (Ed.), *Handbook for achieving sex equity through education* (pp. 44–52). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Brown, L.M., & Gilligan, C. (1992). *Meeting at the crossroads: Women's psychology and girls' development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Campbell, J. C. (1988). Inside lives: The quality of biography. In R.S. Sherman & R.B. Webb (Eds.), *Qualitative research in education: Focus and methods* (pp. 59-75). London: Falmer Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2002). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 675-694). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (1999). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. London: Falmer.
- Dewey, J. (1902). *The child and the curriculum*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1915). *The school and society: Being three lectures*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1959). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Denzin, N.K. (1994). The art and politics of interpretation. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 500-515). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Dillabough, J. (1990). Gender politics and conceptions of the modern teacher: Women, identity, and professionalism. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20 (3), 373-394.
- Gitlin, A., & Myers, B. (1993). Beth's story: The search for the mother/teacher. In D. McLaughlin & W. Tierney (Eds.), *Naming silenced lives: Personal narratives and the process of educational change* (pp. 51-70). New York: Routledge.
- Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. New York: Longman.
- Goldstein, L. (1997). *Teaching with love: A feminist approach to early childhood education*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Göncü, A. (1995). Harout and I: A short story for becoming a teacher. In W. Ayers (Ed.), *To become a teacher: Making a difference in children's lives* (pp. 113-122). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Greene, M. (1973). *Teacher as stranger: Educational philosophy in the modern age*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Greene, M. (1978). *Landscapes of learning*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Griffith, A., & Smith, D.E. (1991) Constructing cultural knowledge: Mothering as discourse. In J. Gaskell & A. McLaren (Eds.), *Women and education: A Canadian perspective* (2nd ed.). Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises.
- Gutek, B.A., & Larwood, L. (1987). Introduction: Women's careers are important and different. In B.A. Gutek & L. Larwood (Eds.), *Women's career development* (pp. 7-14). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Grumet, M. (1988). *Bitter milk: Women and teaching*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Hall, D.T. (1987a). Introduction. In D.T. Hall & Associates, *Career development in organizations* (pp. 1-20). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1989). *The second shift*. New York: Avon Books.
- Hollingsworth, S. (1992). Learning to teach through collaborative conversation: A feminist approach. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29 (2), 373-404.
- Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

- Hooks, . (2000). *Feminist theory: From margin to center* (2nd ed.). Boston: South End Press.
- Jipson, J., Munro, P., Victor, S., Jones, K. F., & Freed-Rowland, G. (1995). *Repositioning feminism and education: Perspectives on educating for social change*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Johnson, T. S. (2006). Performing a/sexual teacher: The Cartesian duality in education. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 28, 253-266.
- Leonard, M. (1994). Transforming the household: Mature women students and access to higher education. In S. Davies, C. Lubelska, & J. Quinn (Eds.), *Changing the subject: Women in higher education* (pp. 163-177). London: Taylor & Francis.
- [Leonard](#), P., & Malina, D. (1994). Caught between two worlds: Mothers as academics. In S. Davies, C. Lubelska, & J. Quinn (Eds.), *Changing the subject: Women in higher education* (pp. 29-41). London: Taylor and Francis.
- Lewis, M.G. (1993). *Without a word: Teaching beyond women's silences*. New York: Routledge.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1989). *Designing qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- McPherson, G.H. (1972). *Small town teacher*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Middleton, S. (1993). *Educating feminists: Life histories and pedagogies*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- O'Brien, L.M., & Schillaci, M. (2002). Connecting the inner self to the public self: Utilizing autobiography in teacher education. *Teaching Education*, 13 (1), 25-40.
- Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Perry, L.A.M. (1989). Weaving the web: Oral histories as a feminine methodological stance. In C.M. Lont & S.A. Friedly (Eds.), *Beyond boundaries: Sex and gender diversity in communication* (pp. 3-13). Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press.
- Smith, J. K. (1997). The stories educational researchers tell about themselves. *Educational Researcher*, 26 (5), 44-11.
- Steedman, C. (1987). Prisonhouses. In M. Lawn & G. Grace (Eds.), *Teachers: The culture and politics of work* (pp. 117-129). London: Falmer Press.

- Steinberg, S.R., Kincheloe, J.L., & Hinchey, P.H. (Eds.). (1999). *The post-formal reader: Cognition and education*. New York: Routledge.
- Thomas, D. (Ed.). (1995). *Teachers' stories*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Tobin, J. (2000). "Good guys don't wear hats": *Children's talk about the media*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Warren, C.A.B. (2002). Qualitative interviewing. In J.F. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 83-102). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Weiler, K. (1988). *Women teaching for change: Gender, class and power*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Young, B. (1992). On careers: Themes from the lives of four western Canadian women educators. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 17 (2), 148-159.

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

We need to gather some background information first; would you tell me a little about yourself...for example, your:

- Name (although we knew these and didn't really have to ask, these were recorded)
- Age or age range
- Race/ethnicity and socio-economic status (SES)
- Marital/family status
- Current teaching situation (where, doing what, etc.)

The focus of this study is on if/how women educators perceive connections between their professional and personal lives. Do you see your personal and professional lives as intersecting? If so, how? If not, please explain.

Possible areas to consider/ask about:

- Power
- Physicality/voice
- Flexibility/balance
- Relationships
- Intuition/emotion/spirituality/creativity
- Demographic influences (e.g., age, race, and so forth)
- Etc. (whatever comes up in conversation and seems relevant)

Are there any other areas you perceive as connections that we haven't addressed?

Other comments or discussion...

Appendix B

The Women Educators

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity/Race	Marital/Family Status	Teaching Situation	Regional Affiliation
Madge	47	White/European ("mutt")	Single, no children	Chair, College Nursing Dept.	New York State
Sarah	39	White	Married, no children	Special Education, Elementary level	Grew up in Savannah, GA, lived in NY State. Now in Seattle, WA

Karen	38	Caucasian	Married, 2 children	Ass't Prof Education	NY State
Maureen	57	White/both parents born in Scotland	Married, 3 children	Chair, College Education Dept.	NY State
Edna	45	Caucasian/White/Jewish	"very single mother of two kids"	Associate Professor & Director of Art Therapy	NY State
Trish	35	"Eclectic" (European American)	Married, 3 children	TESOL classroom teacher & adjunct faculty for TESOL	NY State
Marla	35+	Mostly grew up in France, now NY state	Married, 1 son	Assistant Professors, Religious Studies	All over!
Darlene	53	White	Married, 3 children	Associate Professor of Education	PA and NY State
Andrea	27	White	Married, no children	Child Care Center Teacher and Assistant Director	FL and NY State
Prada	40	Native of India	Single, no kids	Assistant Professor of Education	India, Iowa, NY state
Hattie	91	European American/WASP	Widowed, 3 children and many grand-children & great grandchildren	Retired Secondary English Teacher	PA all of her life
Kyra	49	White/ "mutt"	Married, no children	Sociology Professor	NY State

Dena	53	European American	Married, 2 children	English Teacher, Continuing Education Program	NY State
Mindy		European American	Married, with children	Public School Administrator	NY State
Janet	mid-40's	European American	Married, 3 children	5 th -Grade Science Teacher	NY State
Priscilla	50's	European American	Divorced, 2 grown children	1 st -Grade Teacher Suburbs	NY State
Jasmine	40's	African American/Cherokee	Married, 2 daughters	School Administrator – City School	Grew up in Texas College in OH and GA; at living in NY
Caitlin	42	White (Anglo-Irish)	Married, 3 sons	Special Educator – 5 th Grade	Grew up in Ontario, Canada. Now in NY State

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Marital/Family Status	Teaching Situation	Regional Affiliation
Cherie	35-40	“Black...Irish, Indian, & African descent”	Single, 1 daughter	In teacher prep program & subbing, city schools	Born and raised in Barbados. Currently lives in NY State.
Yolanda	36	African American	Married, 2 children	In teacher prep program & subbing, city schools	Grew up in the south. Attended college, Atlanta, GA. Lives in NY

					State.
Crystal	36	Italian American	Married, 2 kids	Part-time preschool teacher and director	NY State
Nella	49	Creole (Black/French)	Married, 3 Kids	Former Catholic. School Principal / Current Director of Multicultural Affairs @ a college	Born and raised in New Orleans. Now living in NY State.
Jeanette	52 “and proud of it”	White/Caucasian, Irish/German/a little French	Married, 3 kids	Teacher of deaf children	NY State
Lainie	42	“Human being” (African American)	“I want for nothing” – 3 kids, single mom	Teacher, City schools	Raised in the South, now living in NY State.
Briana	42	White/Czech- American	Married, 2 kids	Student Teacher	NY State
Flo	39	African American & Jewish	Married, 3 kids	6 th Grade Inclusion, City Schools	Grew up in North Caroline, now NY State.
Ciera	36	“White”	Married, one son	Teacher of Children with Visual Impairments	Grew up all over the U.S. Now NY State
Terry	41	White	Married, no children	Elementary-level special educator	PA

Liza	38	Cuban-American	Second Marriage. 2 kids, one stepdaughter	TESOL teacher	Born in Cuba. Lived in U.S. & abroad. Now NY state
Miranda	28	“Caucasian”	Married, one child	2 nd Grade Teacher	NY State
Bette	56	“White generic”	Married, one daughter	TESOL Teacher	NY State
Mona	43	“Caucasian, Arab, Indic”	Has been with her partner for 18 years/no kids, “two dogs”	TESOL Teacher	Raised in U.S. & Iran; now in NY state
Larice	49	Native American: Mohawk	Divorced; one son	Special Education Teacher	NY State



Current Issues in Education



<http://cie.asu.edu>

Volume 13, Number 4

ISSN 1099-839X

Authors hold the copyright to articles published in *Current Issues in Education*. Requests to reprint CIE articles in other journals should be addressed to the author. Reprints should credit CIE as the original publisher and include the URL of the CIE publication. Permission is hereby granted to copy any article, provided CIE is credited and copies are not sold.



Editorial Team

Executive Editors

Jeffery Johnson
Lori Ellingford
Katy Hirsch

Section Editors

Krista Adams
Hillary Andrelchik
Miriam Emran
Tracy Geiger
Sarah Heaslip

Melinda Hollis
Amber Johnston
Seong Hee Kim
Lindsay Richerson
Rory Schmitt

Tapati Sen
Jennifer Wojtulewicz
Lucinda Watson

Faculty Advisers

Gustavo E. Fischman
Jeanne M. Powers
Debby Zambo
