Awakening Teacher Voice and Student Voice:
The Development of a Feminist Pedagogy

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Women are like aberrant stars, suddenly changing orbits. Or an unconforming sea, resisting the obvious structures of piers and harbors, refusing to be merely blue or green, tame as a formula. It is women who shift the borders. The seasons run wild. Women flow and slide. Men are larger. Women eat the silence. Women. Survive.

Kate Braverman, Palm Latitudes

The Reunion

When I finished loading my car with the last boxes of teaching files and teen novels, I was not sure what I would do with them. My one-year leave of absence was over, and I had officially resigned as a middle school language arts teacher to continue my doctoral program. My friend and mentor, Margaret Powell, helped me dig the boxes out of the cramped storage room where all the teachers hastily stashed their unwanted materials at the end of the year. As I sat on the floor sorting through books and papers with beads of Illinois August sweat dripping down my back and face, my most faithful friend from the middle school—the head custodian—stopped by to fill me in on all the gossip that I missed from the last year. “Lucy got married Saturday... Judy’s girls decided to go to school at St. Louis University... Steve changed schools, so Jana took his room because she didn’t want to deal with all the kids going up and down the stairwell by her room... The new social studies teacher is kind of cute... Jill, are you seeing anybody?” Listening to her talk about the people I used to work with brought back vivid memories of what it was like teaching there.

Sellwood Middle School (SMS) is located in a small working-class community in Illinois. Most of the 450 middle schoolers live with parents who are nurses, teachers, painters, construction and factory workers, and plumbers. Four days before school began—the day I was hired—my new principal walked me through the dark, concrete block hallway, and I peeked into the other classroom doors to get some idea about the teaching strategies of my future colleagues. All I saw were small rooms, bare green walls, and lots of desks jammed in straight rows. As I looked around I suspected I might have to keep quiet my enthusiasm for innovation. I was right. After the first week of school I quickly realized that even though I was hired for my eagerness to explore creative teaching methods, my nontraditional teaching strategies and beliefs were not exactly welcomed by the other teachers. During my first few months there I felt isolated because I was the only one in the building who did not put my classes of thirty-five students in rows and lecture. I had just finished an undergraduate education program at Principia College that maintained a social justice orientation and modeled ways to involve students in group projects, literature study circles, and collaborative curriculum planning. Even though I originally wanted to teach high school and work in an urban area, I took the position because it was late August, and I desperately needed the job. My initial observations told me that I would be more liberal and radical than my new col-
leagues. Even so, my youthful optimism made me believe I would be able to avoid conforming to the culture and relinquishing my ideals.

The day after I was hired at SMS to be a language arts teacher and the assistant high school volleyball coach I was to report to practice. I knew very little about volleyball and was apprehensive about this sport at the high school level. The principal had warned me that the head coach was a little “gruff” and not to take anything she said personally. When I met her, I knew exactly what he meant. She was a tough and abrupt woman in her midforties and greeted me nonchalantly.

I wore to practice what I thought any athlete would wear—shorts, a T-shirt, and a new pair of basketball shoes. No makeup, hair spray, or jewelry—just my gym clothes and my short, straight blonde hair. This was in stark contrast to most of the girls on the team, who had long hair, bangs that stood straight up with the help of sticky hair spray, thick makeup, and color-coordinated athletic outfits. At that time I still did not know much about the community; I was not aware that my dress and hairstyle were that different from many people’s in the area. It did not take long for me to discover this, though. As I was driving away from practice, windows down, I heard a group of teenage boys yell, “Dyke!” I looked around and realized they were yelling at me. My stomach sank. I tried to appear as if I had not noticed, and I continued driving.

My sexual orientation was something I believe was never confirmed (though I am sure they suspected I was gay) by my colleagues or students. I was extremely careful to keep it secret. My fears of being “found out” escalated when I heard hateful comments about gays from the faculty and students. I remember being in the teachers’ lunchroom and noticing a note one teacher wrote on the cover of a Newsweek issue about gays in the military. It said, “If we can’t hate gays, who can we hate?” Fear that I might be accused of harming children, being a pervert, or converting my students to homosexuality—and losing my job—kept me quiet on this issue. I dated men that I was not particularly interested in so that I could tell my colleagues I had a boyfriend, tried to dress close to the norm of the school culture, and did not share my personal life during the lunchroom talk.

Throughout my adolescence I felt silenced by my family and teachers. At home I believed my voice was the cause of turmoil and anger, so, to survive, I stayed silent. From seventh grade on the only place to express my voice was on the basketball court. It was there that I could act out my anger and swear at the refs and the players on the other team.

My feelings were acceptable on the basketball court. I could express my abilities and creativity when I had the ball in my hands, knowing that the players, coaches, and spectators were watching me. The gym was the only place where I felt I had a voice and that it actually mattered. Luckily, I was good. Those women who are not successful and cannot play sports “as good as the boys” are not allowed to shoot, dribble, pass, or score points. They are ridiculed for their attempts at doing something designated for boys. If I had only been mediocre and played “like a girl,” I would not have been allowed the time to express myself. Most people would not have paid any attention to me.

Culture Shock

Once hired at SMS, I had a few days to set up my new classroom before school began. Because SMS was near my undergraduate college, I was able to maintain a relationship with a few of my education professors. This mentoring relationship began when I was a student and evolved over the next several years as I came to rely on the group more and more for personal and professional support. Margaret, who had been my most influential professor and was/is the matriarch of the group, came with me to help arrange my classroom. When I entered the room for the first time, I found out from the custodian that because I was the newest faculty member, I was assigned the smallest room in the building. Even without students there was little room to maneuver around the forty desks set in rows, the large desk in front for
the teacher, and the one file cabinet. I remember, for the first time, feeling deflated when it dawned on me that the only books in my room were the one hundred language arts textbooks and vocabulary workbooks. For some reason the combination of the textbooks, the size of the room, and forty student desks washed away my resolve to ignore the school culture and throw the textbooks out the wall of 1960s aluminum windows. During my first two months as a teacher at SMS, I modeled my teaching after that of the other teachers in the building: put the desks in rows; gave weekly vocabulary tests; taught grammar skills in isolation; and disciplined students by using detentions, issuing in-school suspensions, raising my voice, and sending the worst to the principal to be hit with a wooden paddle that had holes drilled in it to maximize the noise it would make as it made its way to students' bottoms.

It did not take long for me to begin feeling depressed about how I was teaching and how badly my students were behaving. Sure, I was a first-year teacher and new teachers typically struggle with classroom management and instruction, but there was something stirring inside me that I could not ignore. I spent a weekend in my classroom with Margaret and Ann Taylor, another education professor and member of my mentor group, figuring out how I could put the desks into a horseshoe shape so that the students could see each other's faces rather than the back of their heads and so that I could more easily access all of them—not just those in the front two rows. I also received the principal's support in installing bookshelves along one wall, which unfortunately made it even more difficult for students to get out of their seats and move about the room. The bookshelves were made of eight-foot plywood boards with sharp corners that the students frequently would bump up against. When I was an undergraduate I had purchased a few books for a classroom library and I was able to fill one of the shelves with them. Margaret and Ann also helped me decide that I no longer would use the vocabulary workbooks and weekly tests to teach vocabulary but would instead use words from the novels we were reading; those students who received an A on the vocabulary pretest would not have to take the test at the end of the week. Throughout my first year and into my second I continued to take very small steps away from what I saw my colleagues do and heard them talk about in the lunchroom. I began to move away from teaching skills in isolation and worked to keep language activities whole and relevant to students' lives (Smith). Although the steps were small and in a more liberal context might seem insignificant, to me they felt monumental and risky—I did not know if I would be ostracized by my colleagues for my differences.

In April of my first year of teaching my older brother, Jay, died of AIDS at age twenty-seven. Jay and I had grown very close in our early adulthood because our mother died when we were children. Jay, sounding frightened and short of breath, called me one evening in February. He said that he was not well and asked if he could come stay with me in Illinois. I did not ask him many questions at the time (perhaps I was too afraid of the answers) and told him to please come. When he and his golden retriever arrived from Albany, New York, I realized immediately that he was quite ill. At that point I did not know what was wrong with him—I just thought that he had a really bad cold. It was not until we returned to my house from the airport that he finally revealed to me that he was suffering from AIDS. I was shocked. I had suspected my brother was gay, but we never talked about it. It never seemed appropriate or the right time to discuss it with him. That night Jay told me that he had known for two years that he had the virus that causes AIDS and that he had not told anyone. He was too afraid that if he told his friends and family he had AIDS, they would reject him. It was not until he was at a crisis point that he had the courage to tell me. Soon after he arrived at my house, he was admitted to the Critical Care Unit at a nearby hospital, where my friends from the mentor group and I comforted and nursed him for two months until he died.
He allowed only a few people to visit him in the hospital and he never discussed his homosexuality with anyone. Jay died with his secret.

Tenure and Rebellion

After my first two years at SMS things were looking up: I was granted tenure, had not received any parental or administrative complaints about my teaching, and was able to move into a larger classroom. The fall of my third year the principal even gave me what he thought was a very high compliment. He told me that my students were so quiet and that I had such good “control” that if I asked them to jump out the window, they would. I know his intentions were good and he wanted me to know that he respected my classroom management strategies, but I was horrified by his statement. Quiet, compliant students were not what I wanted. His comments shook loose something I had not realized had such a firm grip on me. I realized that even though I organized my lessons around Nancy Atwell’s reading and writing workshop, used the textbooks as a resource rather than a primary text, did not arrange desks in rows, and facilitated some group work, I was conforming to the stated and unstated norms of the school to a certain extent. From that point I was stronger in my resolve to challenge the notion that I should try to fit in with my colleagues, and I was determined to stop rewarding obedience over resistance, silence over dissent, and conformity over rebellion. Resistance, dissent, and rebellion are certainly not concepts taught in most teacher preparation programs, but in my undergraduate program I learned that student inquiry, complexity, and conflict, when structured appropriately, have the potential to elicit student insight, connection, and learning.

Continued work with my mentor group was also an important part of my development at that time. In addition to Margaret Powell and Ann Taylor, the group consisted of two other education faculty from Principia College: Brian Johnson and Jolanda Westerhof-Shultz. My other support person, not a part of the mentor group, was one colleague from SMS whom I trusted and collaborated with and turned to during the school day for help with teaching ideas and to just feel connected to another adult. Calling the group of education professors a “mentor group” describes only part of the relationship. Yes, they were instrumental in awakening my consciousness as an undergraduate, helping me to develop a feminist agenda in my teaching, and pushing me to put those beliefs into practice in a community that did not welcome liberal perspectives. But over the years we became close friends. They had all supported each other in their feminist teaching methods while teaching at a conservative, Christian institution. Fortunately for me, all of them believed in the importance of working with their graduates as an essential part of effecting change in schools and took me on as a friend and “family member.”

The line between mentor group and friends was blurred after I graduated. Our personal lives intersected with our professional lives. We frequently ate together, shopped at the grocery store together, and shared rides to church. At the same time we maintained an ongoing dialogue about politics, our teaching, and the challenges we all encountered in our school settings. After I graduated from Principia the administration changed. My mentor group felt that the new administrators were somewhat hostile toward the education department. They were leery of what they called the education department’s feminist agenda, did not approve of their constructivist teaching methods, and were disapproving of some required course books. Additionally, it appeared as if they were suspicious that the education department had a homosexual agenda and that some of the faculty might be gay (not allowed at Principia). They were right about Ann, but not the others.

Over the next five years the department was slowly dismantled. Jolanda left to finish her doctorate at Indiana University, and Ann and Margaret resigned because they grew tired of the administration’s never-ending scrutiny.
It is ironic now to think about how everyone in the mentor group was struggling with oppression. Perhaps this was the most significant role we all played for each other during that time. We not only reassured each other that what we believed in and attempted to practice was worthwhile, but we also pushed each other pedagogically and politically to dodge the pressures and negative undercurrents and to continue teaching in a way that we knew was liberating, democratic, and relevant. Without this group, I know I would not have been able to resist the culture at SMS and more than likely would have left the teaching profession after a few years. Instead, with the ongoing help of the group, I gained just enough strength to eventually have my students work more frequently in collaborative groups without worry of what my colleagues would think about the noise, teach all grammar in the context of their writing that emerged from the writing workshop, eliminate all vocabulary tests, organize my curriculum around themes, and refuse to raise my voice at any of my students no matter the offense.

Even before we entered McCluer High School my friends and I had all heard of Mr. Keller, the freshmen algebra teacher. Older students told stories of how mean and difficult he was and that if we crossed him, he would first embarrass us and then send us to the principal’s office for disciplinary action. Mr. Keller was a retired marine officer who believed that intimidation was the best way to get students to understand math. I was terrified when I received my course schedule and found out I was assigned to him for my first high school math class. Early on that first quarter I remember having a lot of difficulty with the math, and of course I did not ask him any questions because I was so afraid of him. One day, during one of his many chalkboard demonstrations, a classmate asked, “How did you get \( \frac{3}{4} \)? I thought the answer was \( \frac{1}{2} \).” Immediately, all twenty-five of us sat frozen at our desks when we saw Mr. Keller’s face turn bright red all the way to the top of his thinning crew cut.

“You know,” he said while inhaling and moving in front of the podium to stand closer to Jon, who asked the question, “You all learned fractions in the fourth grade. We will not spend class time going over material you were supposed to learn five years ago! If you can’t understand the simple aspects of this course, then you better go see your advisor, drop it, and sign up for basic math.”

Most students sat silently and looked down at their books to avoid eye contact and perhaps being the victim of another assault from the instructor. Slowly, the teacher backed up to assume his position behind the podium and grabbed his chalk holder. Turning his back to the class, hand poised ready to write on the board, he said, “Any more questions?”

**Feminist Pedagogy Continues to Emerge**

By my third year of teaching I was involving students in class planning sessions. In these sessions the students made choices about their curriculum, that is, how they wanted me to teach grammar, vocabulary, and writing skills. I began by putting students in pairs and having them brainstorm ideas about what they thought should and should not be taught in middle school language arts class. Also in these pairs they looked at lists outlining the curriculum we had to cover and compiled ideas for how they might want to learn it as well as ideas for other study topics. I then moved them from pairs to fours and then from fours to eights until the whole class met in one big circle. Because of the difficulties with having middle schoolers plan the curriculum, I had to help them focus. I gave them questions and charts to work on in a specified amount of time and asked them to complete self- and peer evaluations before, during, and after the sessions. I also relied heavily on written feedback notes I gave to each student during the planning sessions. When time allowed, I met with individuals and small groups to reflect on the group dynamics and planning process. These strategies helped students effectively perform sophisticated tasks of organizing and collaborating with large groups of people.
It was through these planning sessions that students made choices about how they wanted to learn required materials; created daily self-, peer, and teacher assessment strategies; defined how much time they would spend on the reading and writing workshop; decided what rules they would use to govern the classroom; and generated classroom activities. I let them know that although the school curriculum directed their learning in part, their interests and needs were also important. We created lessons that met the school requirements (learning the literary elements, studying required novels, writing five-paragraph essays) as well as addressed their questions. For example, students agreed that I should facilitate daily mini-lessons covering the “skills” outlined in the school curriculum, but that they should be allowed more time than I had originally allotted them for the writing workshop. The students usually responded well to these planning sessions and appeared to be more enthusiastic about daily activities because they had a central role in the decision-making process.

These class planning sessions were grounded in feminist pedagogy because the process handed over some authority to the students and gave them extensive power in determining what they would learn, how they would learn it, what and when they would write, and what and when they would read. Central to feminism and feminist pedagogy is the development of voice. Educators have the ability to help their students find, fashion, awaken, craft, activate, or uncover voice. As Carol Gilligan writes, “To have a voice is to be human. To have something to say is to be a person. But speaking depends on listening and being heard” (178). As a feminist teacher I operated under the assumption that having voice is having power. Giving all students equal access to power through equal opportunities to speak, wield influence, and participate in a democratic community was my primary goal in involving students in the planning of curriculum and methodology.

During one class planning session one student, Travis, jokingly came up with the idea of a “talking workshop.” The other students and I took his idea seriously. I was eager to help students implement this activity because student talk “needs to be an everyday event, so that students begin to engage in meaningful discussion generated by genuine interest and a curiosity for knowledge” (Von Dras 61). Over the course of the year we generated ideas about how a talking workshop (Weisner and Powell) would be facilitated and assessed. We determined how often and when students would participate and outlined the requirements and choices. We also defined how talking is related to language arts. The talking Workshop was successful that year because it not only gave them a structured outlet to use their voices but it also integrated required course curriculum, that is, brainstorming writing ideas, discussing and analyzing books they were reading in the reading workshop, forming and articulating opinions, and practicing communication skills. The talking workshop was especially exciting because it arose from a student who was not strong academically and did not have a great deal of status among his peers.

Seventh grade—the year of lice and Forever. During passing periods a few of us hung out at our lockers. Jeannie and I were best friends and had lockers right next to each other. Several times a day we gathered at our lockers to discuss the day’s most important developments. Usually we shared brushes and combs so that we could feather back our shoulder-length hair in just the right way. That is, until lice came to our school. We discovered that some students had lice and that we had better stop sharing brushes or we, too, were going to have those things crawling through our heads. Another most important development was the discovery of Judy Blume’s Forever. As we passed the book around we tore through the pages looking for and then sharing those most graphic sex scenes. Afraid we would get in trouble for reading such “pornographic” material, we huddled closely, backs turned to the hall, and read, over and over, passages that taught us some of our first lessons about sex, boys, and the power of books.

In our middle school, like in most schools,
the important information was passed on through the students in the hallways where the teachers could not stop us. During each passing period long stretches of gray lockers stood open to hide conversations and inappropriate “activities.” In seventh grade fashion tips, lice, and boys were the most pertinent issues. I remember the adrenaline I felt when the bell would finally ring and I could meet my friends and talk. Classes only seemed to get in the way of what I really wanted to know.

Exploring the talking workshop that year was a significant catalyst in my teaching career. It helped me to further analyze my beliefs about the role of student discourse in a language arts classroom and to further my academic study of the topic. John Barnitz clarifies how talk allows students to question, negotiate, and interact with the content: “We have become aware that each classroom is a community, and that discourse is at its heart. It is discourse that connects people, that enables them to negotiate meaning in a situation to form a text, that enables a teacher to lead a class in new directions” (586). That year was rewarding because I finally overcame fears about allowing students to share in classroom power, was able to facilitate instruction Barnitz advocates for, and move closer to matching my practice with feminism. I believed that I had to be an active agent in removing obstacles that inhibited the awakening and expression of student voice in my classroom. As Peter H. Johnston and John G. Nicholls note, “students yearn to have a voice in their schooling, to be free and to construct their own vibrant lives in school” (94). The talking workshop was another step toward breaking down knowledge and power hierarchies that are potentially divisive and keep students out of positions of power.

It was already hot and humid at 7 A.M. in Illinois. It was my first year at Principia College and I was not yet used to the heat. Tired, I walked across campus to my work-study job—cleaning uniforms for athletic teams. Usually I was able to walk to the gym, half asleep, without interacting with anyone. This morning was different. On my way to the gym, Margaret, my first education professor, rode past me on her bike. She wore a long skirt and had a woven bag from Kenya hanging from each handlebar. She cheerfully said “Hello,” and I mumbled “Hi” back to her. Thinking nothing of it, I continued on to my job in the peace and quiet of the laundry room.

That afternoon I attended my education course, Small Group Communication. This first required course for all education majors was taught by Margaret, who did her graduate work in the sixties and had been at the forefront of the feminist movement. The course focused on themes and issues related to education, such as poverty, gender equality, and disability. Twenty of us worked in small and large groups while Margaret sat on the outside of our groups and wrote individual notes to students as well as metacognitive questions for the whole class to consider. These notes and questions related to the process and product of the discussions. That afternoon during one of our whole class discussions, I received a note from Margaret: “I wonder if something is wrong because you seemed droopy this morning.” I read and reread the note. I was angry. Leaving class I sputtered to a friend, “I can’t believe she wrote me this note. What right does she have to tell me I’m droopy outside of class?!” I felt exposed—suddenly noticed in a world that I thought did not even know that I existed. The invisibility that I felt I had experienced up until that time caused me much sadness but also a certain level of comfort. Soon, though, my anger shifted to excitement. I began to realize that it was a good thing that one of my professors actually knew my name, was interested in my disposition, and would take the time to challenge me by giving me feedback about my demeanor. Although many students continued to complain about the class, I grew to love it.

During my last year at SMS I was able to make substantial strides toward my teaching goals because I no longer felt that I had to make compromises in my teaching and was not incompetent just because I did not do what others in the building were doing. For so long I had been afraid that my femi-
Feminist pedagogy was too "radical" and parents would complain. But I slowly began to accept that I had not received one complaint about my teaching in my three and a half years there and that my fears were unfounded. Most students liked me, most teachers liked me, and the principals appreciated my hard work and dedication. Additionally, I was the seventh grade girls basketball coach. We won almost all our games, so the administration and parents thought highly of me and my role in the school. I was also less afraid to stand out from my colleagues and to stand up for my beliefs about teaching and learning. The challenges I had with my conservative co-workers never resulted in heated pedagogical discussions or confrontations, but because I was always afraid of a confrontation I kept my door closed and shared little about my classes. It was during the last year that I was able to do things that allowed my students to become more visible in our school. For example, that year Jolanda, of my mentor group, spent a semester in my classroom collecting data for her dissertation. Also, my classes organized several schoolwide fundraisers to sponsor a family at Christmas time, began building an outdoor classroom, and planted trees on the school grounds.

I also made several other changes that were consistent with my feminist beliefs and provided my students with even more opportunities to make choices, engage in relevant academic and personal discourse, express themselves creatively, and have even more say in the class's decision-making process. Two of these changes had the most significant impact on my teaching. During a Donald Graves workshop I attended with Margaret, he talked about portfolio development, the importance of giving students opportunities to choose what goes in their portfolios, and the significance of eliminating structures in writing assignments that inhibit student voice. The energy that resulted from the workshop was palpable for both Margaret and me. The two of us furiously crafted a way to completely restructure my writing workshop so that it would give students more power and choice in their writing process. Up until that point, the way I had organized the workshop forced my students to be more concerned about the rules than about their writing processes. I hesitantly eliminated most of the requirements and told my students it was their responsibility to just write. I told them that they no longer had to be concerned about completing a certain number of assignments each quarter and that the length of assignments did not matter. This was a big risk for me. The other teachers generally had strict guidelines and frequent tests, so this change would potentially affect their opinions about the rigor of my language arts curriculum. The new portfolio requirements were an attempt to take the students' focus off the outlined assignment and direct it toward being engaged and fluent. To keep track of the students and to provide them with incentives, I had them evaluate themselves daily, keep a log of what they accomplished each day, and have a conference with me periodically to negotiate the amount of work they were to complete by the end of each quarter.

I was amazed at what happened. The students actually became involved in more challenging, creative, and lengthy assignments. Because they were no longer concerned with the requirements, they felt safe enough to explore new genres and research. For example, two boys who had written very little during the first half of the year decided to write a one-hundred-page summary and review of their favorite songs and musicians. Another girl became interested in the Salem witch burnings and conducted her own research at the public library and spent the entire quarter analyzing and presenting her discoveries to the class. Four other girls decided they wanted to write a book for next year's incoming middle schoolers. They spent the semester interviewing each middle school teacher in the building, asking students for opinions on the teachers, photographing the teachers, writing up all their data, and then presenting it to the sixth graders. Many students told me that they had felt confined by the five-assignment requirement. It seemed as if their primary concern was to complete the predetermined number of assignments rather
than engage in work that was meaningful to them. When they no longer had to reach the magic number of assignments, they felt freer to experiment with longer, more in-depth projects. I saw a significant difference in the quality of the chosen topics and of the finished products. This was an important lesson for me because I was always afraid that if I did not outline specific rules for the students, they would not do the work. Amazingly, the opposite happened. The more room I gave them to choose, think, explore, and create, the more the quality and quantity of their work increased.

Growing up in Oregon, most kids thought the best part of sixth grade was outdoor school—five days with your classmates at a camp nestled under ancient evergreen trees. We stayed in cabins with a high school camp counselor. We panned for gold in the river, made name tags out of pieces of wood, analyzed soil, learned about trees, and sang songs and put on skits at evening campfires. I remember most a hike we took with a seasoned camp counselor. A woman in her fifties or sixties led about ten of us through a trail, sharing what she knew about the plants along our pathway. She stopped and pointed out a nearby deer. Then, in unison, we put our fingers to our mouths and said in excitement, “Shhh!” She told us that we did not have to be silent around wild animals but that we should talk in low, quiet voices. We asked her questions about the deer in our best, soft, sixth-grade voices just to see what would happen. To our amazement, the deer did not leave. Later in the week this same counselor injured her leg. After I found out about her accident, I spotted a three-foot narrow branch that curved into a horizontal line on the end and thought it would be just perfect to hold her weight. I meticulously peeled away all the bark and used my pocketknife to smooth the rough edges. She seemed genuinely grateful when I gave it to her, and I noticed that she walked with it the rest of the week. On the last day of camp, when most of us were crying because we had to get on the school buses and return home, she thanked me for the walking stick and told me to keep it. Reluctantly I took it and kept that walking stick for years.

The second key change I made that year was to have the students be in charge of the “business of the classroom,” a pedagogical change created with Margaret’s help. This classroom business went beyond the typical class meetings in which the teacher is in charge and the students make a few superficial decisions. This classroom business was grounded in feminism because it was “anti-hierarchical in learning, cooperative rather than competitive, communal rather than authoritarian” (Taylor 11). This meant that students decided what committees they felt were necessary for the class to run efficiently and then determined how the committee members would be selected. They created a computer committee, a conflict committee, a noise control committee, a secretary, a president, a vice president, and teacher helpers. Once the students appointed themselves to committees and outlined their duties, they were in charge of making sure the committee business was completed. They also held weekly class business meetings and sat in a large circle, conducting the meetings with only a little direction from me. Again, because I did not want the students to defer to me, just as Margaret did in my Small Group Communication class at Principia, I sat on the outside of the circle and wrote feedback notes that I would distribute either during or after the discussion. Each week the students submitted proposals, discussed them, and voted on whether to accept them. Proposals included requests for more writing workshop time and less talking workshop time, fund-raising suggestions, committee recommendations, information they wanted to tell me, and information I wanted to tell the class. Not all business meetings ran smoothly, but overall they greatly benefited the classes. According to Patrick Shannon, teachers do not lose control during whole language lessons. They share it. In a real sense, they become more powerful forces in children’s lives because they are willing to share authority and responsibility as
both teachers and students become actively engaged in making decisions based on their theoretical frameworks about literacy. Sometimes these decisions are thoughtful and productive; sometimes they are not. But they are intended to be authentic, based on the concrete experience shared in whole language classrooms. (629)

I definitely shared control of the classroom. As a result of the weekly business meetings the students more reflectively governed themselves and were more willing to participate in the daily work. The business meetings also helped me become aware of the students' needs and interests, which enabled me to generate more effective curriculum and teaching strategies. Because the committee work and weekly business meetings encouraged students to think critically about their role as language arts students, they were developing skills necessary to become readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers.

My fourth and final year at SMS was a powerful one. I accomplished what I had set out to do when I finished my undergraduate program. With increased confidence, my desire to put student voice and inquiry at the center of my curriculum was achieved. No longer was I nervous or embarrassed about facilitating a feminist teaching pedagogy that looked substantially different from that of my colleagues. The development and organization of the class planning sessions enabled me and the students to navigate a balance between the required school curriculum and the curriculum that emerged from my students' lives. During this year I was able to put into action a language arts class grounded in feminist pedagogy. It is interesting for me to look back at the progression of my teaching practice: at first I mimicked my colleagues' behaviorist approach and relied on workbooks, frequent tests, assigned novels, and an authoritarian style of classroom management. Then I moved into a constructivist or whole language approach to language arts. I used literature groups, theme cycles, and reading and writing workshops to teach the required curriculum. But even a constructivist or whole language approach did not go far enough for me. As a feminist I believed it was essential that my students use their voices (written and oral) as primary learning tools rather than parrot mine or the textbook's. During my last year I was able to develop and implement units centered around issues of oppression, involve students in tangible ways in running their classroom, and allow them to write about what they wanted without worries of requirements. The exciting result was that many students chose to write about or take on projects related to oppression, such as environmental conservation, gender equity in their school, and animal cruelty. Hearing their voices and handing over power to them made me feel like I finally practiced what I preached about feminist pedagogy.

The Personal and the Professional Merge

Obviously, my personal life and professional life are both essential elements of this story. Simply sharing the development of my teaching strategies and their relationship to feminism is an incomplete story and is not particularly useful. My background, politics, insecurities, strengths, and values directly influenced the development of my teaching pedagogy. According to Ivor Goodson, “a more valuable and less vulnerable entry point would be to examine teachers' work in the context of the teachers' lives. Much of the emerging study in this area indicates that this focus allows a rich flow of dialogue and data. . . . What I am asserting here is that, particularly in the world of teacher development, the central ingredient so far missing is the teacher's story” (141). Goodson makes clear the interconnections between teachers' stories and teacher development. Unfortunately, most teacher preparation programs ignore the personal. As Wendy Bishop puts it, teachers are able to make sense of their teaching when they write about their teaching lives: “In writing about our own teaching lives, we figure out our classrooms, we speak to others, and we com-
pose ourselves in beneficial ways. At the same time, teaching life journeys reflect a lot of hard work and a lot of figuring-it-out-through-words and putting those words into circulation and practice” (viii). This article is a journey into the past for me—as I look at those experiences that had the greatest impact on my professional life, I am better able to get a more accurate perspective on what went on in my SMS classroom.

To continue professionally challenging myself I had to find ways to validate my teaching philosophies and my intellectual abilities. Both personally and professionally I worked to speak out, articulate my beliefs, and keep my classroom door open for others to see the learning that was occurring. Nancy Gray describes the necessity for women to speak out: “Silence is golden, so the saying goes. If silence is golden, it costs too much. Women have been paying the price for a very long time. Breaking silence is seldom as simple and direct as it seems, for language and thought are not neutral givens arbitrarily accessible to anyone” (1). Elizabeth Flynn captures perfectly how my self-censorship affected my self-concept: “The quest for self and voice plays a central role in transformations of women’s ways of knowing. Silent women have little awareness of their intellectual capacities. They live—selfless and voiceless—at the behest of those around them” (427). As long as I remained silent I was not able to fully identify and realize my intellectual and teaching potential.

I was able to explore my teacher voice because of my mentor group. Without any role models in the building, I relied on my mentor group to support me and give me the confidence to put my beliefs into practice and do what I knew was best for the students. It helped substantially that my mentors considered themselves feminists. It was through my mentor group that I was able to overcome some of my anxieties. As Elizabeth Flynn confirms, “in breaking those silences, naming ourselves, uncovering the hidden, making ourselves present, we begin to define a reality which resonates to us, which affirms our being, which allows the woman teacher and the woman student alike to take ourselves, and each other, seriously: meaning, to begin taking charge of our lives” (423). I needed the mentor group to help build my confidence and to mature as a teacher and as a woman. Without this network of educators who shared similar views, I know that I would not have been able to accomplish what I did during my four years at SMS. The group listened to me, encouraged me, and pushed me. On those days that I felt most isolated, I could turn to any member of the group for affirmation and inspiration. This was undoubtedly a career saver for me.

While teaching at SMS I learned about how to help my students develop their voices and how to find and use my voice—as a woman, teacher, and social activist. To be an effective teacher and create a curriculum and methodology that I knew to be the most effective for my students, I had to identify and articulate the value of my teaching strategies to the other teachers and principals and not compromise my teaching pedagogy just because others did not agree with me. According to Manju Kuriyan, “in order to negotiate any kind of power, I must be able to speak my position. I need to speak it, yell it, scream it louder than the uncomfortable silence that accompanies the oppressors’ guilt” (27). Speaking my position and experiencing the power that comes with it were essential at that time to the development of my personal and professional life.

As I gained confidence and had a better awareness of my abilities as a teacher, reader, writer, and speaker, I simultaneously tried to integrate those insights into my teaching and follow bell hooks’s advice: “Teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (15). I wanted to help my students uncover and craft their voices but knew that only as I found and developed my own voice could I help them reach their potential. As my confidence grew and I became better able to say and do what I knew to be best for my students, I was more equipped to identify forms of oppression and silencing in my
own classroom. Because I was building the personal strength and academic background to facilitate the kind of classroom I had envisioned since my undergraduate program, I tried to please my colleagues less and keep my students’ best interests at the forefront.

My undergraduate education professors instilled in me a desire to involve students in relevant, authentic, discourse-oriented reading and writing activities. As my consciousness was raised and as I identified more and more with feminism, it became ethically impossible for me to assign work that would not engage my students in learning about the rules of language and about how language can help them explore their world and emerging identities. I wanted to “show students how to consider what is not on the page, a new frame for their ideas, a real revision—another way of being, of creating a structure that may not—should not—already exist” (Sommers 423). I was able to act upon my values only when I gained enough strength to nurture my own voice.

The Story Never Ends

I credit most of the progress I made as a teacher to discovering and developing my personal and professional voice, which brings me back to the beginning of this story. After leaving SMS to complete my doctoral program, I had no reason to return. I have now come full circle and live in the Northwest. Once I finished my doctorate I was ready to move away from the Midwest, which I found culturally and geographically oppressive. When I was offered the job at Willamette University, I knew that it was time for me to return to my home near the ocean and mountains as well as live in a more politically liberal climate. Although I will not physically go back to SMS, I have felt compelled to revisit those four years there through my writing and research (Weisner). I began my teaching career there with naive intentions of spreading the good news about the wonders of constructivism, critical theory, and social activism, but I quickly learned that my opinions were not shared by others in that community. Despite the culture of resistance I found at SMS I was able to discover that resistance did not mean I had to censor myself. It was my lack of confidence and experience that forced me to close my door and be afraid of aligning my teaching methodology with my educational philosophy.

It has been several years since I have taught middle school. Now as a teacher of teachers I find myself asking how what I learned from my experiences at SMS and my research relate to my college teaching. The relationship is obvious to me. First, I have to maintain contact with my mentor group. Even though most of us now live in different states, we continue to stay in touch. When I lose contact I tend to get pulled by the cultural norms of my department, and I back away from some of my beliefs and principles. As a teacher educator I need to create a curriculum and a methodology that elicit student voice and enable students to construct meaning through discourse and self-discovery (Barnes; Barnes and Todd). If I offer them ways to uncover their voices, they can compare theirs with those of experts and that allows me to make more informed pedagogical choices (Ayers). I also must encourage students to write in a variety of discourses because “freedom of creativity fosters interest and commitment. It challenges students to think rather than merely try to find ingredients to fill proscribed form” (Browning 5). Only as teachers gain and understand their authority as thinkers, readers, writers, and teachers are they able to share some of that authority with their students. Teachers must be in touch with their power, individuality, and voice to make choices based on their research rather than on what their colleagues are doing. Finally, I need to continue exploring my voice as a woman, writer, speaker, and teacher. Without an awareness of the silences that interfere with my life, I cannot advocate for my students to challenge authority and resist those traditions that keep them from discovering their voices.

The process of writing and rewriting this article has served as a reminder to me about how important it is and always will be for me to stay connected to my mentor group. I am now in my fourth year of teaching at Willamette
University and feel like I am in the same place I was at SMS when the principal expressed his pride in me for having achieved a silent classroom. As I reach for tenure, teaching has become easy; I get positive student evaluations and I believe my colleagues respect my hard work and dedication to the program. But I have to admit that the ease with which I teach my classes and the lack of student complaints is somewhat disconcerting. I suspect that it means that I am not challenging myself, not continually searching for ways to better match my theory and practice—raising consciousness and taking students out of their comfort zones is messy business. Complexity, dissent, and disequilibrium are not currently a major part of my classes. This realization has recently brought me back to my mentor group and we are now collaborating and trying to synthesize the work we have done independently and collectively over the years (Westerhof-Shultz and Weisner) as a way to keep us motivated and working toward our shared and long-held ideals. I am also realizing that I am, once again, confronted with challenges similar to those at SMS. I am an out lesbian at Willamette, but now I am eight months pregnant and trying to find my comfort level with being an out lesbian mom while working with a fairly conservative student population. I certainly cannot hide my ever-growing belly, but I make daily choices about whether to censor my language and not correct people who assume this baby will have a dad and a mom rather than two moms. Again, issues of voice and self-confidence knock on my front door. I know that to really effect change among my students and to be happy in my personal life, I must not be silent.

As a child I spent summers with my family on the ocean dunes at Cannon Beach, Oregon, camping in our trailer, an old bread delivery truck that my parents turned into a camper with intentions of quitting their jobs and driving it across country. Each day, rain or shine, my brother and I would sit on the beach reading Judy Blume and Nancy Drew/Hardy Boys books, send secret messages in wax-sealed bottles to our friends down at the other end of the creek that divides the north and south beaches, jump chest-high waves in the freezing cold ocean, take early morning walks with our mom in search of unbroken sand dollars, and lie against large pieces of driftwood to doze in the late afternoon sun. This was my favorite place to be. My mom once told me that she enjoyed taking me to the beach because I acted the most like myself there. Looking back, I think she was right. While at the beach I could be absorbed and held by the constant roar of the ocean as we jumped risky waves. My brother and I could sit on the soft white sand and read books we chose and share the best parts of the stories with each other, explore the beach without any fear of not finding the perfect sea shells, experiment with writing and physics to be evaluated only by the amount of water that leaked through the bottles, and end our days with a comforting nap against a half-burnt piece of driftwood.

REFERENCES


