

Through the recursive process of working alone and collectively, the combination of narrative, dialogue and critical reflection offers possibilities for more feminist, collaborative processes in schools and creates relationships in which conversations can take place. These conversations foster the social construction of reality and interdependence among organizational members, two crucial elements in creating feminist forms of leadership in schools.

The Use of Narrative, Dialogue and Critical Reflection in the Development of Women as School Leaders

Joanne E. Cooper

This article describes the use of narrative, dialogue and critical reflection to enhance the professional development of women. The author first discusses current feminist theories of leadership and the recent history of women in school administration. A case study of sixteen women in a single elementary school is then used to describe the impact of narrative and dialogue as springboards to begin critical reflection and possible transformation of the assumptions about leadership and the possible roles of women as organizational leaders.

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Introduction

Although a growing number of women are entering administrative positions in the educational world, most women working in this field represent a vast untapped resource of potential lead-

Joanne E. Cooper is in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. She wishes to thank Dr. Rosemary Sutton for her thoughtful editorial assistance with this publication.

ership. Given the organizational and societal constraints women encounter in what is essentially still a patriarchal system, what can be done to foster the growth and development of women as leaders in education? One possibility is the use of narrative, dialogue and critical reflection in school staff development programs to begin the formation of more feminist forms of leadership. The use of narrative allows women to find a voice and begin to tell their own stories of professional practice, thus forming a legitimated knowledge base that challenges more hierarchical, bureaucratic forms of professional practice. Dialogue among teachers and between teachers and administrators begins to break down the isolation many women encounter in their work in schools, fostering mutual respect between colleagues and the recognition that all toil in the same organization for essentially the same purposes. Finally, critical reflection begins the essential work of examining the values and assumptions upon which women in education currently base their professional practice and provides opportunities to rethink crucial epistemological constructs. This paper argues for the use of narrative, dialogue and critical reflection in the creation of fertile soil upon which women can develop their leadership capabilities and realize their ultimate potential.

Many feminist scholars have argued elsewhere that the profession of teaching has been engineered to recreate patriarchal practices¹. Grumet² claims that

... the contradictions that evolved in the nineteenth century between the doctrine of maternal love and the practice of a harsh and regimented authority, between women's dominance in numbers and our exclusion from leadership, between the overwhelming presence of women in classrooms and the continuing identification of men as the only persons with the capacity to know, are still present in the culture of schooling.

Recent texts have argued for the rejection of male authority as the basis for all knowledge and the reclaiming by teachers of the ability to create knowledge through research involving both "reflective practice" and "critical praxis".³ Scholars, such as Clandinin and Connelly,⁴ advocate the inclusion of personal, practical knowledge and the power of teachers' stories as valid forms of knowing in education. Narrative or story is presently emerging as a way of knowing that honors local knowledge derived from experience rather than formal knowledge derived through positivistic scientific research.⁵ Narrative and dialogue thus become important avenues for validating the authority of women educators in their own profession.

The move from recipient of knowledge derived from authorities into a position of producer of knowledge, a claim for one's own professional authority, empowers women in both teaching and administrative positions. It is then possible for feminist processes, such as collaborative dialogues, to take place around the examination and solving of mutually defined problems in schools. As Pagano⁶ has stated: "The task I see for feminist theory in education just now is one of making conversation with our professions and with our history within them."

What follows is a description of how both dialogue and critical reflection might foster this conversation through the use of narrative in an elementary school setting. I will first discuss women and leadership, both to examine the impact of past theories of leadership on women and to describe more feminist forms of leadership. I will then give a brief overview of the history of women in school administration. From there I move to a discussion of narrative, dialogue and critical reflection and their impact on a particular group of women working together as teachers and administrators in an elementary school.

Women and Leadership

Feminist theories of leadership assert that in traditional conceptions of leaders and leader traits, women were viewed as lacking the necessary attributes for leadership. Nieva and

Guterk⁷ claim that traditional studies of leadership, which studied male leaders and applied the findings to women, often concluded that women were compliant, submissive, emotional and had great difficulty making choices. In other words, if leadership relied on the "great man" theory, women simply did not measure up.

More recent studies suggest that participative and democratic leadership styles which were usually condemned as stereotypical female behaviors and therefore sometimes shunned by women, are more accepted in women today. They are also currently considered to be more appropriate management behaviors for men.⁸ However, these recent studies have relied on traditional models of leadership. With Hollander,⁹ feminists have called for studies of leadership which break through traditional concepts of a leader as one who occupies a high position. They are advocating studies which examine the ways in which this hierarchical definition defies notions of empowering and collective leadership. Asking that researchers put aside their preoccupations with the effects of leader behavior on followers, these scholars call for efforts to understand the origins of leadership by posing questions about leaders' self-perceptions and expectations.¹⁰

Astin and Leland's cross-generation study of leaders and social change reflects current feminist studies of leadership, and relies on three constructs found in feminist discourse: 1) the social construction of reality, 2) interdependence, and 3) power as energy, not control. According to this conceptual framework,

leadership is a process by which members of a group are empowered to work together synergistically toward a common goal or vision that will create change, transform institutions, and thus improve the quality of life. The leader—a catalytic force—is someone who, by virtue of her position or opportunity, empowers others toward the collective action in accomplishing the goal or vision.

This definition underscores the fact that leaders can be both formal or informal. Formal leadership roles in the school include positions such as principal, vice-principal or grade level chair. Informal leadership roles can be held by any organizational member and would fall under Astin and Leland's definition of a leader as someone who empowers others by virtue of her opportunity, rather than by her formal position in the organizational structure. In this case, informal leadership roles are available to women who may be floundering but through narrative, dialogue and critical reflection are able to be the leaders of their own lives. Clarifying the map of their own lives thus becomes a precursor to stepping into more formal leadership roles in the school.

Women in School Administration

Given the past theories of leadership which emphasize "great men," it is not surprising to find little written about women as school leaders. As Shakeshaft¹¹ asserts:

The traditional literature in school administration largely ignores women. It tells us little about their past or present lives, nor do we hear of their struggles. Only in the past decade has there begun to be a literature about women in school administration, and only in the past couple of years have scholars begun talking about examining current theory and practice for the impact of gender.

Not only the literature on women as leaders, but the profession itself, vastly underutilizes its pool of potential female candidates. In 1982, for instance, the American Association of School Administrators reported that women held a mere two percent of the nation's superintendencies, only nine percent of the assistant superintendencies, and just sixteen percent of the principalships.¹²

Shakeshaft¹³ believes that schools might profit if all administrators, men as well as women, borrowed from the leadership strategies and practices more traditionally associated with women. New ideas on how women are leading in education can be found in "Women Leading in Education" by Dunlap and Schmuck, 1995. However, until the organization and culture of schooling recognizes the untapped and valuable resource women provide as potential leaders in schools, many women, both teachers and students, will continue to see themselves as followers and will miss valuable opportunities to realize their potential.

As Edson¹⁴ has stated, "Because women are underrepresented, people assume they are either unsuited for school management or they do not desire those careers. Literature on educational administration proclaimed it, both female and male educators believed it, and consequently, even some female administrative aspirants internalized it." Although not all women must hold formal positions of authority to be leaders, these positions enhance the informal power women may already hold in organizations. In addition, formal administrative positions place women so that they can begin to legitimate newer and more feminist forms of leadership in schools.

How might schools be changed to encourage women to see themselves as potential leaders and to foster more feminist forms of leadership in organizations? Once women have attained leadership positions, how might they be encouraged and supported in their role? A beginning step is the use of narrative and dialogue to enable women to find their own voices. Their voices can then be used in collaborative and shared leadership processes. Finally, having experienced collaborative leadership, women may move to formal administrative positions from which they can both initiate and nurture shared leadership processes. The following study of the use of narrative and dialogue in an elementary school provides possibilities for just such changes, changes that both foster and support the potential of women as educational leaders.

Narrative

Educators, researchers and scholars in education today have shown increasing interest in the power of narrative as a way of knowing.¹⁵ Scholars¹⁶ have made story or narrative a central element in their analyses of teachers' knowledge. Personal narratives are known to draw on the strengths, experiences, tacit knowledge and expertise of public school educators.¹⁷ In contrast to quantitative measures such as test scores and correlation coefficients, narrative and dialogue as ways of knowing are believed to be more reflective of the "richness and indeterminacy" of educational experience.¹⁸ When critical reflection is added to narrative accounts of experience, a powerful combination is formed that can lead to transformative and emancipatory learning in adulthood.¹⁹

As a result of the above scholarship, women today are being encouraged to tell their own stories. Narrative, or story, has taken a central role as a mode of knowing, a vehicle for research on teaching and teacher education, a framework for issues of gender, power, ownership and voice, and a pedagogical tool in the education of teachers and administrators.²⁰ Wood²¹ used personal narratives to provide a more humane evaluation process in a private school. Yet relatively little is known about the effects of the combination of narrative knowledge, dialogue, and critical reflection, especially in a public school setting. How do these stories or narratives, once told, impact other teachers, counselors, librarians, and administrators and the school in general? Can narrative function to foster more feminist forms of leadership through the social construction of reality, a sense of interdependence and the empowerment of women educators? What follows is an attempt to answer these questions.

Narrative (or story, terms which are used here interchangeably), is defined as a basic form of representing action.²² Everyone tells stories. The ability to recognize and produce narratives appears in children about the age of three.²³ Narratives help us make sense of our experience and help us tell who we are.²⁴ They provide a means for us to look back on who we have been, to reflect on who we are now, and to project a sense of who we might become.

Furthermore, narratives, coupled with critical reflection, "can allow a moral investigation of the practical consequences of beliefs and theories that are otherwise decontextualized abstractions."²⁵ Often both administrators and teachers operate on a set of theories-in-use which do not match the espoused theories they discuss when asked to give a rationale for their professional practice.²⁶ Traditional conceptions of leaders as those who occupy hierarchical positions within the organizational structure and behave in prescribed ways are an excellent example of espoused theories which may not match the current viable forms of leadership both at work and possible in schools today. Sometimes women may simply be unaware that the theories upon which they actually base their practice differ from those they espouse. In other instances, the organizational culture does not encourage them to explore deviations from currently accepted educational theories. Furthermore, theories-in-use are difficult to uncover because they are often derived through experience and based on intuitive or tacit knowledge. Many scholars²⁷ have argued that practical knowledge is often tacit. However, much of this knowledge can be uncovered through narratives or stories of practice.²⁸ As Mattingly²⁹ states:

Storytelling or story analysis can facilitate a kind of reflecting that is often difficult to do, a consideration of those ordinarily tacit constructs that guide practice. Stories point toward deep beliefs and assumptions that people often cannot tell in propositional or denotative form, the "practical theories" and deeply held images that guide their actions.

Thus, reflecting on stories of their professional lives allows women in both teaching and administrative roles to learn from experience and provides them with alternative future actions. In other words, new possibilities for women to see themselves as leaders, as well as new forms of leadership in schools are awakened through narrative, dialogue and critical reflection. What follows are examples of how the women in this study used narrative and dialogue to examine and learn from their own experience and to find new leadership possibilities for themselves.

Reflection, here, can be defined as "a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation."³⁰ If reflection is the exploration of experience, the question logically arises: "Reflection upon which experiences?" In this case, narrative provides the structure and expression of past experience which can then be reflected upon. Reflection upon the professional experiences of others can take the form of case studies or case analysis.³¹ Reflection upon our own experiences can take the form of identifying and analyzing critical incidents in our professional or personal lives. Critical reflection upon these experiences moves beyond mere reflection and begins to critique the underlying assumptions and presuppositions upon which we base our beliefs and actions.³² Brookfield asserts that critical reflection has three interrelated phases:

- 1) identifying the assumptions that underlie our thoughts and actions; 2) scrutinizing the accuracy and validity of these in terms of how they connect to, or are discrepant with, our experience of reality (frequently through comparing our experiences with others in similar contexts); and 3) reconstituting these assumptions to make them more inclusive and integrative.³³

What follows is an examination of the effects of asking a group of women in a single elementary school to write and share narratives of critical incidents in their professional and personal lives and to reflect upon the underlying assumptions embedded within these incidents through dialogue and writing. By reflecting critically upon the assumptions which guide their actions, these women can begin to rethink the validity of their premises. By sharing these reflections, women are able to find their own voice and begin to emerge as both informal and formal leaders within their organizations. Ultimately, it is through critical reflection on their guiding assumptions about themselves and their roles as leaders that transformative learning takes place.

The sharing of narratives and critical reflection upon those narratives was studied in a series of staff development activities in Lokahi Elementary School, originally built in 1968 for 600, but now housing about 1300 students in grades kindergarten through sixth, with a staff of 65 to 70 teachers who serve a predominantly military population. Because the school serves a mobile population, they experience a 25–50% annual student turnover rate. The current principal has been there for eight years. Sixteen women in both teaching and administrative roles from Lokahi met on a regular basis on Wednesday afternoons and Saturdays for five months, from January through May.

These women, both teachers and administrators, were asked to identify and recount critical incidents in their teaching or learning experiences. Those incidents were shared in small groups and occasionally with the whole group. The women kept individual journals in which they made entries both at home and in the group and through which they engaged in continual reflection on themselves and their place in Lokahi Elementary. They also kept a collective journal, a collaborative document in which all shared reflections about the progress of the group, about themselves and their organization.

Narrative and Dialogue

Encouraging educators to produce and share narratives of professional practice can be a powerful tool in the development of leaders in the school and of the organization as a whole. Mezirow and Associates³⁴ assert that the role of dialogue is crucial to critical reflection because "it is through dialogue that we attempt to understand—to learn—what is valid in the assertions made by others and attempt to achieve consensual validation for our own assertions." Thus, the formation and facilitation of dialogic communities is centrally involved in education for adults. Dialogue among school personnel allows them to begin to find their own voices and to share their professional concerns. Using narrative or stories of practice as a springboard for this dialogue encourages school personnel to examine the assumptions upon which they base their practice.

Yet it is not always easy to begin writing and sharing these stories. Women often do not trust or value themselves and their ability to contribute as members of the group. They often believe they have nothing of value to offer to a collaborative leadership process. At the beginning of the course, one teacher wrote:

I feel very apprehensive . . . I really can't write my thoughts as I would want to. I also feel embarrassed about sharing my writings because it seems too superficial compared to others . . . it's tiring at this time of day to sit and write . . . to think about what I want to write. . .

Despite the apprehensions, these women soon found great rewards and a sense of connection through their writing and dialogue. Tired at the end of a school day, the process of creating and sharing narratives can be energizing, rather than draining. Later this same teacher wrote:

Brownie points to this [group]! I feel light and carefree! This morning was a drag—waking up, semi-cold, still tired . . . coming to school was no fun either—kids, plans, after school faculty meeting . . . but now, this . . . it's fun. I feel good. I like the comradery. I like what I'm learning. I like the way in which my eyes and brain have been opened like a venetian blind.

Given a chance to reflect upon their personal and professional lives proved useful and insightful to these women in many ways. One teacher wrote about being burnt out and what a year of professional leave had meant to her. She is now much more conscientious about taking time for herself away from school in order to prevent further burnout. Several others wrote about their need to find their own voices, to speak up in various situations. A first step here is the recognition that they have remained silent when they had something they really wanted to say. After attending a state commission meeting on educational performance standards, one teacher wrote:

I didn't speak out. I didn't ask questions. I simply left my destiny in the hands of these people. Why didn't I assert myself in this situation when I felt so strongly about it? Why did I just sit there and make snide remarks? I'm so disappointed with myself.

Given this recognition, the class became a safe place for school personnel to begin voicing their feelings and concerns. The chance to write, think, and dialogue with others in the school gave these educators positive experiences with finding their own voice, speaking up and being heard. A member of the teaching staff wrote:

I've found I need to speak up, too, and not merely solve things on paper. By becoming comfortable with this group, I've found I can speak out about some of the things that bother me.

Through finding her own voice and the ability to speak out about her concerns, this teacher became an informal leader in the school. No longer silent, she was able to step forward and become part of the collective conversation that feminists, such as Astin and Leland,³⁵ define as leadership.

Narrative and dialogue not only allowed school personnel to find their voices and be heard about issues of concern to them, but began an important process of building trust between various members of the school. One woman, for instance, chose to write about her attempts to regain a sense of trust after her former principal had tried to fire her. She wrote:

"Dragon Lady," one of my former principals . . . broke and violated the trust I had for her and henceforth all administrators. . . Teaching at Lokahi Elementary these past two years has been very positive . . . the administrators at Lokahi have been fair and impartial. I am beginning to start to trust administrators. I needed this . . . I (have begun) to trust both myself and others in a discerning way.

The opportunity to share thoughts with both teachers and administrators was a significant part of the healing process for this teacher. The group provided a vehicle for dialogue with caring administrators, as well as other educators and thus for the building of more trusting professional relationships. These relationships and the honoring of each individual's view provide fertile ground for the development of collective action toward a particular goal or vision, and thus toward more feminist forms of leadership.

Finally, the construction of narrative and the accompanying dialogue combat the isolation women often experience in their professional lives. Isolation has a direct bearing on professional development,³⁶ has been linked to the absence of shared practical knowledge,³⁷ and has been used to explain the minimal-to-nonexistent influence of research-based infor-

mation on teacher decision making.³⁸ Being given a chance to think, write and share reflections through dialogue begins to break down isolation and encourages teachers and administrators to see others as fellow travelers on the same path. In short, it becomes an important step in building more feminist and collaborative leadership practices.

After a writing exercise in class where everyone reflected on a piece of their past, one teacher said that she had never known another except as someone who taught at her school. Now she felt a sense of her "as a real person." Another teacher felt the group was able to make connections with each other, find the commonalities in their lives, through dialogue and reflection.

The physical arrangement of the school tends to increase teacher isolation. Many of the teachers work in portable buildings, scattered around the perimeter of the main building, isolated from the rest of the school. When one teacher had a fire under her portable, she ran to the school for help and was locked out. There is a big iron gate across the front of the school with a padlock on it. Several of the teachers described the place like a fortress or a zoo. When asked whether the school was locking people in or out, the group said, "Out. Vandals." Yet half the teachers and children are in portables, and thus are locked out of their own school.

Both teachers and administrators reflected this sense of isolation and its debilitating effects in the metaphors they chose to represent their school:

Lokahi Elementary is like a hat because the administration is isolated in the middle/center and the rest of us are on the outer fringes, left out, separated, segregated and isolated from the main/administration and from each other.

. . . I would like to say that Lokahi is like a prison—each teacher stays confined in a cell and the prisoners are dying to communicate with one another.

Past perspectives on teacher isolation include a view of isolation as a product of institutional characteristics, such as "egg-crate" architecture,³⁹ and a second view of isolation as a psychological state centered on teacher perception.⁴⁰ Both these perspectives are reflected in the above statements, the physical characteristics of the school as a prison with cells, and the feelings of being left out and "dying to communicate" with others.

A third perspective considers isolation as an adaptive work strategy, grounded in the transactional process of teacher-environment interaction.⁴¹ In this case, teachers actively seek isolation in order to protect the time and energy needed to meet immediate institutional demands. Although isolation functions here to allow teachers to provide the best instruction possible on a day-to-day basis, ironically, over the long term, it undermines "the very instructional quality this work strategy is intended to protect."⁴²

Critical Reflection

The opportunity for reflection upon critical events in one's professional life adds an important additional element to the use of narrative and dialogue in schools. Beyond providing a vehicle for speaking up, being heard, building trust and combating isolation, critical reflection invites the transformation of individuals and groups by allowing for the examination of assumptions upon which professional action is built.⁴³ As Mezirow and Associates⁴⁴ have stated, "Becoming reflective of content, process, and especially the premises of one's prior learning is central to cognition for survival in modern societies." In this case, school personnel were encouraged to take an honest and critical look at the bases for their behavior and their potential role as leaders.

One teacher named Jane, for example, decided to honestly and critically examine her growing dissatisfaction with the teaching profession. She wrote:

... for the last five years, my enthusiasm and enjoyment of being in the classroom has declined. This dissatisfaction with teaching really became apparent during the first day of this class. It embarrassed and troubled me to admit that I didn't enjoy teaching and that the only things that kept me in the classroom were the vacations and the steady paychecks.

Dialoging and sharing narratives in class provided Jane with a vehicle to begin her examination, as well as the contrast of other more enthusiastic educators:

Every time I saw Lou, Karen, or Sally, all of whom have such a love for teaching, it reminded me of the love and satisfaction I once felt and of the disappointments and unhappiness I now feel.

As she began to identify and examine critical incidents in her career, Jane realized that she was happier with structure and order in her classroom. However, her desire to try a whole language approach to teaching came into conflict with her need for order. She wrote:

At first, I thought my unhappiness with my job now was caused by this battle going on within me between my desire to have a whole language type learning situation and my desire for structure.

After writing about her unhappiness and struggle, Jane explored her dilemma in dialogue with her colleagues. This dialogue stimulated further critical reflection which helped her to identify the root of the problem:

However, as I discussed my incidents and discovery with some teachers in this class, I was told that they also detected another battle going on. This was the battle to find individuality as a person and teacher and yet to conform to the expectations of others. It shocked and troubled me because I did not think any one would notice. In the back of my mind, I've always known that I would do what others did or what they wanted me to do rather than make waves or be different. But . . . I just kept telling myself that a difference in teaching philosophy was the cause of my unhappiness rather than my inability to choose to be different.

Jane's experience illustrates that critical reflection and dialogue form a powerful combination. Without further dialogue with others, Jane might have missed the essence of her problem. In addition, dialogue allowed others in the group to take leadership roles in helping Jane to honestly examine her own professional practice. Through the use of both critical reflection and dialogue she was able to identify an important assumption she held which was getting in the way of her desire to teach in her own style:

So now, when I revisit incidents in my teaching career, I see a bigger battle. I see the battle within myself . . . my desire to teach to my own style and beliefs, against my fear of being different.

Jane was even able to identify the source of her fear of being different and therefore not acceptable:

This assumption was probably taught and ingrained in me by my well meaning mother, who stressed the importance of not standing out . . . of always doing the normal or what was accepted. To be looked upon as different might bring shame upon the family.

This assumption is most likely embedded in strong cultural messages. Jane is Japanese-American and both the need to blend in to the community and the need to avoid bringing

shame on the family are strong Japanese cultural imperatives. A familiar Japanese saying reflects the imperative for conformity: "The raised nail is hammered down."

At this point, Jane has moved from Brookfield's first step in the process of critical reflection, namely "identifying the assumptions that underlie our thoughts and actions," to step two, "scrutinizing the accuracy and validity of these in terms of how they connect to, or are discrepant with, our experience of reality" and has begun the third step, "reconstituting these assumptions to make them more inclusive and integrative."⁴⁵ She wrote:

How do I resolve this problem? I don't know if I'll ever overcome the fear of being different but it has helped me to feel better just by admitting that my unhappiness actually stems from my desire to be considered "acceptable" by my peers.

Jane has taken a step to change her reality by moving to another grade level, one with more permission to be different as well as one she feels fits her teaching style better. Through this step, she has provided a safer place for the further examination of how she might begin to "reconstitute her assumption." In addition, she provides leadership for others who may be unhappy with their current teaching practices.

By using critical incidents from her own life, this teacher was able to ground "the activity of critical reflection in the context of the daily decisions and dilemmas learners face."⁴⁶ She is wise in moving slowly and carefully. As Brookfield⁴⁷ has stated:

Admitting that our assumptions might be distorted, wrong, or contextually relative implies that the fabric of our personal and political existence might rest upon faulty foundations. Even considering this possibility is profoundly threatening. . .

Yet, Jane also reports that her new discoveries have been both a revelation and a satisfaction to her. Through critical reflection and dialogue, Jane was able to uncover the crux of her unhappiness with her work and has begun steps to improve both her understanding and her situation. This situation provided opportunities for both Jane and her colleagues to feel empowered. Her colleagues felt like an important and supportive part of the process, as Jane struggled to understand her unhappiness. In working through to the crux of her problem, Jane has given voice to her own desires and beliefs, no small feat for someone conditioned to always conform to acceptable ways of behaving. Through narrative and dialogue, a process of incubation was begun. Where this process will end is unknown. Whether Jane will step into a formal leadership role is both unknown and irrelevant. Jane has simply taken initial steps to solve her own problems, rather than to suffer silently. This, in itself, is a form of leadership, which may lead to further professional growth and development for her and for others who work around her.

Beyond the understanding provided when women teachers and administrators form dialogic communities, narrative, dialogue and critical reflection offer opportunities for women who might be burnt out or resistant to staff development activities. These individuals may be those most in need of encouragement to grow and improve their professional practice. The story of Helen, a member of Lokahi Elementary's faculty who expressed initial reluctance to join the group illustrates the remarkable transformation possible through dialogue and reflection. As a working, single parent, most of Helen's energy goes to the daily tasks her job requires, and to her daughter, whom she is raising alone. Like our earlier discussion of isolation, which professionals often choose, but which is ultimately debilitating, the lack of energy for staff development activities has long-term debilitating effects. Women like Helen (as well as many others) are not likely to volunteer for extra duties because they are already overwhelmed with their professional and personal responsibilities.

In January Helen wrote in her journal:

I don't really know why I am [doing this], since I hate to write and I hate to think. Guess that's because I haven't done either in so long . . . never have any time and when I do have the time, I usually fall asleep.

After several meetings she began to feel the benefits of the work she was doing:

I really thought I would have a hard time with this writing. Now I'm beginning to have the opposite feeling. Once I can get started, it seems to go okay . . . I think this is something more people in the school should be doing; sometimes we make decisions so fast some people don't even know what's happening.

Toward the end of the school year, having identified and analyzed several critical incidents in her past, Helen wrote:

This . . . turned out to be so much more than I thought or expected it would be. It has made me realize that I need to retake control of my own life and that I need to start planning for the future. . . Today I am not really certain where I am heading, but am very hopeful that since I now have the map, perhaps I can follow it correctly and finally emerge a better person. . . Thank you for giving me back my life.

Clearly, Helen has experienced growth and transformation resulting in renewed hope for her future life. Having been "given back her life," through narrative and critical reflection, Helen is now more understanding of her own human condition, as well as that of her fellow professionals. Although she may never take on a formal leadership role in her organization, she has started to emerge as an informal leader, one who has empowered herself and consequently those around her.

Conclusion

In the past, adherence to the "great man" theory of leadership meant that women interested in leadership roles in education, must either become great men or, at best, great women. They entered formal leadership positions, such as the principalship, often pondering their own identity and feeling constricted by traditional conceptions of what leadership in schools might mean. Today, feminist theory has opened the door for more collaborative definitions of leadership which center on the shared construction of knowledge. However, much work must be done to create articulate, empowered individuals and a high trust atmosphere that fosters the productive, shared creation of organizational vision. For example, while the group activities described previously were being conducted, the principal of this school was struggling with the entire staff to create a shared vision for the organization. The teachers in this group, for the most part, were skeptical and resistant to this process. It is evident from this that much groundwork must be done to prepare and empower teachers and administrators to engage in shared vision building and feminist forms of leadership.

Narrative, dialogue and critical reflection can provide the ground in which these leadership processes are fostered and through which new leaders can emerge. Through the recursive process of working alone and collectively, the combination of narrative, dialogue and critical reflection offers possibilities for more feminist, collaborative processes in schools and creates relationships in which conversations can take place. These conversations foster the social construction of reality and interdependence among organizational members, two crucial elements in creating feminist forms of leadership in schools. These conversations become opportunities to make sense of individual and organizational experience. They create understanding across disciplines, age, and racial lines, allowing women to come together in schools in order to think and talk about their lives and the life of their organization.

Narrative, dialogue and critical reflection are the tools which support the tiny, initial steps that must be taken with ordinary organizational members, especially teachers, who might be isolated, discouraged, or burnt out and feeling disempowered by the systems within which they work. The processes described in this paper begin to empower these women so that they are able to take first informal and then, possibly, formal leadership positions within their schools. Narrative enables women to find their voice and make much needed connections across often isolating circumstances. Dialogue enables the shared construction of reality so that the building of trust can begin. Critical reflection upon these narratives provides opportunities for educators to examine the values and assumptions upon which their lives and practice are based, allowing for possible transformations of professional practice. The transformation of professional practice, both individually and organizationally, is what leadership in schools is all about.

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