

September 2009

Walking a Hall of Mirrors

Kami Patrizio
Virginia Tech

Follow this and additional works at: <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>

 Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Patrizio, K. (2009). Walking a Hall of Mirrors. *Occasional Paper Series, 2009* (23). Retrieved from <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2009/iss23/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.



WALKING A HALL OF MIRRORS

kami patrizio

I remember Lois's eyes the most clearly, though not the color so much as the kind affect that danced around them. I was 21, a new teacher in a massive urban school district. I entered the job through an alternate route program, more aware of social injustice than the realities of teaching and learning. With no experience or coursework to qualify me, I had been placed as a teacher in a junior high special day class for adolescents labeled as "severely handicapped." These 10 students were between the ages of 11 and 13, and ranged on cognitive assessments from 3 months to 8 years of age. There were three aides in the classroom, women who alternately rescued and humiliated me in front of colleagues and students—when they were not on the playground smoking cigarettes.

I honestly cannot recall a single discussion about content or pedagogy during that first year of teaching. Like many new teachers, I was in survival mode. The fluid political and cultural contexts of that urban school presented me with a myriad of challenges. Questions of race, socioeconomics, and my own preparation as a teacher impeded my ability to focus on the individual needs of the exceptional students in my classroom. Figuring out how to engage in any best teaching practices required that I figure out who I was as a person and as a professional.

The memories that I do have of that first year are all connected to conversations with Lois. A representative of the Special Education Department who was responsible for supervising 14 first-year special educators, she was one of three mentors that I had been assigned by the school district. Though our contact was only monthly at best, I immediately felt sustained when she arrived at my classroom door. She was calm, centered, intelligent, and still passionate about her work after over 20 years of working in schools. She allowed me to connect with her at a time when I was drowning. In many ways, Lois's mentoring kept me in this field and shaped my five subsequent years in the classroom, my leadership in educational nonprofits, my graduate and doctoral studies, and my focus on the role of identity in education. The hours that we spent talking were the foundation of my identity as a teacher.

It has been almost 15 years since I have had any contact with Lois, but her influence continues to fuel my work. My dissertation research about mentor teacher development in a Professional Development School (PDS) was an homage to her and a testament to my continued exploration of the relationship between identity formation and leadership in schools. Investigating the ways that teachers became

leaders when they took on mentoring positions in the PDS often reminded me of Lois. I watched mentors develop during the three years of the research project, often suspending their own judgments and opinions in an attempt to help interns understand the complex social and political dynamics that played out in the school and the classroom. Moreover, when they worked together in the PDS Steering Committee, they began to demonstrate the same tendency to try to understand other mentors during the process of PDS program development. Individuals who were stridently opinionated in faculty meetings and personal interactions became more collaborative and process-oriented when they were put in the leadership position of PDS mentor. It was a change that I remembered Lois beginning to facilitate in me, long ago. The PDS's collaborative underpinnings and theoretical foundation in inquiry-based renewal (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad, 2004), harmonized mentors' voices in dyads with interns and in the Steering Committee.

These collaborative processes also provided people with opportunities to learn about their practice, their colleagues, and themselves. The mentors in this PDS were secondary-level in-service teachers, presented with the additional charge of working with a graduate-level intern from a nearby university for nine months of the school year. These mentors also participated in PDS-specific professional development workshops and a steering committee, which required that they consider the dynamics of group process, adult learning, organizations, collaboration, and programmatic decision making. They were in positions of teacher leadership. I found a dearth of research on mentor teachers to inform my understanding of these mentors' experiences (AERA, 2005) and wondered how they went about making the "psychological shift from being authored by...to authoring their own stories" (Rodgers and Scott, 2008, p. 733) as they worked in the PDS. Mentors often seemed to require support when changing their focus from the classroom to the PDS partnership. I had observed this happening in different groups and dyads in the PDS. *How* they came to understand themselves in relation to this type of big picture thinking was the "black box" (Rodgers and Scott, 2008) that I hoped to illuminate through my research. It was with this in mind that I set out to use a constructivist-developmental framework of identity and voice to explore mentors' leadership development in the PDS.

Variable Terrain

The context of the mentor's identity spans vast *emotional geographies* (Hargreaves, 2001), shaped by moral, professional, cultural, ethnic, personal, profes-

sional, and political influences. The narratives that emerged during mentors' meetings with interns, PDS Steering Committee meetings, and research interviews revealed the complex nature of identity formation in the PDS. The process was dynamic and unstable (Rodgers and Scott, 2008), grounded in relationships, and often found mentors questioning their most deeply seated beliefs in the face of new situations. Self-authoring their identity in the PDS terrain "within the professionally pertinent array of possibilities" (Coldron and Smith, 1999, p. 714) required considering who they were and how they acted. There was frequent dissonance between the two.

I chose to feature some of "Debbie's" narrative here because of the ways she went about addressing this dissonance. She was an experienced mentor who tried hard to understand others' perspectives and had a sense of agency about her role in creating the PDS program. She was committed both to acting as a "guide on the side" to interns as well as to learning from them. She was confident in her abilities and open to learning new things.

As I analyzed the transcripts of my conversations with Debbie, I was struck by the variety of experiences that she recounted. She discussed complicated, sensitive, and painful incidents where she both sought support from colleagues and interns and provided support to them. Her role as a mentor put her in a new leadership position and made the politics of these incidents more pertinent—and confusing. Many of Debbie's words suggested that she was forced to confront conflicting and painful questions about her sense of self. Her descriptions and questions left me with a recurring image: as Debbie sought to make meaning and self-author her identity, she walked a hall of mirrors. The hall was lined with the reflections of those with whom she had the closest relational ties: her mentee, her colleagues, and occasionally university representatives. The interactions of these reflections defined the emotional geographies she would use to orient herself during the course of her mentoring experience. Her choice of where to place herself in relation to these geographies was based in the common ground of the students in her school, to be sure, but also in a search for what it meant to be human on a path informed by others' variable ways of knowing.

Listening for Voice, Listening for Resonance

I decided to use the listening guide (Balan, 2005; Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, and Bertsch, 2005) to analyze Debbie's process of mentor development. I wanted to "draw on voice, resonance, and relationship" (Gilligan et al., p. 253) in Debbie's experiences, as well as my own. Part of the listening guide's four-step analytical process involved the cre-

ation of *I-poems*. Sections of one of these poems are featured here because they so poignantly limn the rich layers of Debbie's identity formation. The poem also illustrates that one woman's narrative can hold universal lessons of humanness that transcend school boundaries. The emotional geography of Debbie's identity grew far beyond the context of the PDS in which she worked.

To work through and respond well to the conflicted conditions of our own becoming and of our students', we need to consider narratives, such as little Phillippe's or Hans's or Jonathan's, that contain the painful conflicts that make history, and to resist, as much as we can, the wish to prevent them with the right pedagogy or interpretation. Quite divergently, pedagogy resides in the tensions between the past and the present, between the history we can recall and its "invisible ink," and, if all goes well, in narrating the meeting point between "the adult in the child" and "the child in the adult." What allows for these conflicts to be meaningful is the teacher's capacity to symbolize them, rather than school them away, both in herself and in students.

Intersections and Allegiances

When I asked Debbie to describe a critical incident from her mentoring experience, her reflections led seamlessly from one to another until she had described two such incidents that had occurred during the course of one year. Each story detailed a challenging situation that put Debbie at the center of multiple tensions. She often seemed conflicted between perceptions of herself, her allegiances to her colleagues, and her responsibilities to and for interns and students. The moral and political undertones of each incident found her turning to different collegial support groups in search of resolution. These groups acted as *holding environments* (Kegan, 1994), each a "transitional culture, an evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over, supporting developmental transformation, or the process by which the whole...becomes gradually the part...of a new whole" (p. 43). Her in-service colleagues and pre-service interns both provided support for her learning processes. Interns occasionally required protection and supervision, but even in these instances, Debbie preferred the company of their perspective to standing alone.

Secondary school students sometimes emerged as antagonists in Debbie's narrative. The actions of students in her school evoked intense emotional responses. So much so, in fact, that Debbie found it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain objectivity. The first of Debbie's narratives depicted here describes an incident that prompted widespread media coverage and intense community dialogue. A student at the school posted digitally altered, slanderous, and obscene images of a teacher on an

internet blog. Debbie realized that students had the power to destroy reputations and even careers; students' mirrors reflected back to her a vulnerable image of herself that was frightening and painful to see. This image conflicted with her sense of being in control in her classroom. What she saw instead was evidence that students could jeopardize her very livelihood.

Debbie strove to be understanding of the developmental characteristics of her adolescent students and to act professionally. She actively sought shelter behind the closed doors of the teachers' lounge. Here, Debbie worked to reconcile her duties as a teacher with her needs as a human being. This collegial support group provided another reflective surface, one that was sympathetic and familiar. It was at this crossroads that her identity as a teacher ended and her needs as a human emerged, with adolescents prompting the shift.

Debbie's participation in this holding environment was an attempt to understand the "politics of survival" (Coles, 2000, p. 21) in a public forum of community, school, and university voices in which people "can be given a chance to express their yearnings, their worries" (Coles, p. 21). It helped Debbie address the challenge of how to learn from this experience. The public outcry in reaction to this morally provocative incident brought Debbie, as a leader (though not in a traditional role), into a position to see how "a range of individuals can bring us all up morally... a child, an adult, a person in politics, or one quietly trying to get through a seemingly quite ordinary life" (Coles, p. 21). She was connected morally and emotionally to the impact that one student could have on an entire school. Navigating this aspect of her identity as a leader was still difficult, even gut-wrenching, for her; her "acts, ideals and ordeals, ideas and thoughts" (Coles, p. 21) were suddenly under the scrutiny of her intern and colleagues at the school, as well as of the general public, simply because she was there. She received a high level of support in a highly challenging situation. The holding environment allowed her to engage in self-authoring her personal, and suddenly political, identity. Her I-poem reflects this elegantly:

I learned that I'm a human being
I can't let it go
I find it difficult
We've had that discussion
I can try to
I don't know
I'm going to have that student
I don't know if I'll ever fully trust

I learned
I am human
I question
What kind of teacher I am
What kind of person I am
I still think
I don't trust
I have reason
I've always prided myself
I'm trying to focus
I'm trying to focus
I think my intern learned
Where can we—how can we let our personal feelings go
Can we do that?
Can we ever...?
Maybe we can...
I think
I think

Debbie's reflection on her relationally supported self-authoring process indicates that she learned that her personal and professional selves are inevitably intertwined, though the relationship between the two still seemed unclear to her; she specifically articulates her sense of self-as-teacher and self-as-person separately. She is struggling to act as a mentor, to put herself aside and facilitate learning for her intern. She questions her ability to lead while suppressing personal and professional aspects of her identity. Her belief that one can act as a mentor while separating emotion from professionalism suddenly becomes impossible to maintain.

Lots of Shady Areas

Debbie's understanding of her self-as-mentor was an even more pertinent factor in her response as a professional to a second incident. Due to its extraordinary sensitivity, involving an intern's observation of another educator, I quote Debbie directly:

The intern felt very uncomfortable with the way the teacher was dealing with students. Physical touching. Comments that she thought were inappropriate. And sort of not conducive to a good learning environment. And she was concerned enough that she was near tears.

Debbie's I-poem is once again revealing:

I felt that I needed to do something
So I did
I spoke to the principal, so
We had that happen
I'm not sure that anything happened
I felt that it was a learning experience
I wanted her to know
I didn't ignore
You know, what could I have done
I went through the process
I'm not sure that the process totally worked
It was a learning experience for us
We determined as a group
We didn't feel that we had to step it up anymore
I couldn't ignore it... You know
Lots of shady areas and we're, as a school, looking at them.

Debbie is prompted to address her moral identity again in this critical incident. Her self-perception as a leader and her moral code find her reporting a colleague to the school administration. The nature of the intern's concerns prevented Debbie from discussing them with her preferred peer group; the sensitive topography of her emotional geography made them inaccessible as a source of support. This was a potentially tricky situation for Debbie; since she was bereft of a holding environment and faced with a highly political situation, her ability to grow from the experience was at risk. The relationship between challenge and support was more likely to find her in a state of complete stasis or retreat (Dalo, 1999), rather than of growth.

The intern becomes Debbie's "we" in this critical incident, the school administrator she references rendered bureaucratically symbolic by virtue of affiliation with the institutional "process" that she is "not sure" "totally worked." Debbie's leadership and cultural values prompt her plan of action in this context. Her moral identity compels her to act, though to what end she is unclear. She remained unsure even at the time of the interview, seeking validation from the interviewer—"You know, what could I have done"—the narrative storytelling process of the interview itself a continued attempt at identity construction. In calling on what Coles (2000) refers to as

“the moral passion within oneself” and in trying to “set it in motion among others...resourcefully, pointedly” (p. 192), Debbie finds that she is far outside the relational landscape which has been so professionally pertinent to her. She faces school policy alone. As a result of this incident, Debbie reflects:

The learning that comes from mentoring and being an intern is the whole package. The where do we stand as colleagues. You know this was a colleague of mine that was being observed and where does my loyalty to my colleague end and my loyalty to my students and the students of my school and my mentee begin?

Debbie articulates the separation that she experiences by virtue of her leadership work as a mentor. It causes her to revisit her moral identity yet again, unsure whose interests are most important when deciding on a course of action. The lines of her identity blur again. Her perceptions of her teacher, colleague, and mentor selves create dissonance for her. To whom should she demonstrate loyalty? Here she chooses to look into the mirrors of her in-service colleagues to shape her identity. These interns will, after all, be “gone” like the students that she referred to in her first critical incident; however, the safety of her students is her first professional responsibility as a teacher. Debbie stands at a crossroads; her moral passions are ultimately the framework that she relies on most heavily in her decision making.

Voicing a Reminder

This brings me back to Lois, who recognized that the work of developing educators as teachers and leaders involves attending to the relational and emotional aspects of self and identity. Scholarship about teacher leadership, mentoring, and PDS has documented this over the past two decades. This paper presents nothing particularly new, but during a decade when schools, leaders, teachers, and students struggle with unprecedented pressures to scientifically document student achievement, it is my hope that Debbie’s voice will serve as a reminder of the struggles inherent in teacher leadership. The identity formation of those who work in schools transcends organizational boundaries, stands to influence action, and frequently transpires at complex moral crossroads. In the words of one mentor I worked with, it would serve us well to remember that those we teach are ultimately looking to us for what it means to be human.