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The Social Construction of Teachers’ Practical Knowledge in the Advisement Conference Group: Report of a Case Study

Gail Hirsch

The work described here concerns the phenomenon of teachers’ practical knowledge and the dynamic processes involved in its articulation and development within the local context of the teacher education experience as these were examined in a longitudinal case study, Telling Tales Out of School (Hirsch, 1987). The focus is on the advisement conference group as an integral part of the unique advisement curriculum enacted in the graduate teacher education practice at Bank Street College. The case study explored the potential of this model of small group communication for the promotion of reflective and critical inquiry and, thereby, for the construction of teachers’ new practical knowledge. The study was organized around three central questions: How does the advisement conference group process facilitate the expression, examination, and synthesis of different strands of the teacher’s developing practical knowledge? What role does the conversational exchanging of stories—the telling of tales out of school—play in this process? What is the actual nature and content of the practical knowing as it develops over time?

The study itself had its origins in the convergence of a combination of my personal and professional associations with a powerful educational philosophy, institution, and professional practice; with a theory of learning and teaching originally conceptualized as the developmental-interaction point of view (Shapiro & Biber, 1972); and with an ideological perspective on early education and the

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professional preparation of children’s teachers known simply as “the Bank Street approach.” My concerns center on why certain people think they want to become certain kinds of teachers—concerns about teachers’ pre-professional and developing professional images of teaching and their construction. They are working questions about the characteristics of different contexts in which teachers learn to teach, as well as the reciprocal relations among them—concerns about the contexts, cultures, and interpersonal processes of teacher education. I am particularly interested in the fine details of teacher education programs that support students’ opportunities to become the teachers they hope to be and that are conducive, both structurally and philosophically, to empowering students in acquiring the habit of critical reflection on their practice.

As a beginning teacher, I completed my own graduate work at Bank Street and went on to teach children in both inner-city and suburban elementary schools. Then, almost twenty years ago, I returned to the college to become a member of the graduate school faculty, to teach courses, to become an advisor to students in supervised field work, and to begin, in earnest, to learn to teach teachers.

Ever since, together with my students and colleagues, I have been actively confronting the problem of what it means to be, and to continue to become, as Lucy Mitchell once put it, “a real teacher” in today’s schools; what it means to become a teacher in the Bank Street tradition (Mitchell, 1953). Because I work primarily with special educators, I study the problem of what it means for particular teachers to choose special education, to take on the professional identity “special teacher,” and to teach children the system has labeled “handicapped” or “disabled.” In an important personal and professional sense, the pursuit of these problems forms the essential core of my work as a practicing teacher-educator and advisor.

In fact, it is precisely in the role of advisor that I face the most challenging problems, for it is within the advising relationships that each becoming teacher’s preliminary professional perspectives surface. Advisement is where the student teacher’s “best intentions and the impact of external constraints” first meet (Woods, 1980); where the givens, contradictions, and ambiguities of teachers’ practical experiences intersect with their still forming ideas and ideals about moving into the new role, about themselves in the role, and about opportunities for making progress. In advisement, implicit theories come to consciousness for review and critical examination, and fragments of old and new meanings are recalled, articulated, shared, thought through, worked through, and reconciled.

Over the years many graduates have indicated that, in particular, participation in the advisement conference group was a profound experience and still carries great meaning for them. They have reported that the conference group
helped them through their student teaching; first in “keeping it together,” then in “putting it all together,” in “learning to connect with our thoughts—to make it all one piece” (Bloomfield, 1980, pp. 89-90). One former student summed it up when she said, “No one actually tries to teach in a didactic sense in the conference group, but what happens is that we talk about our ideas and experiences and feelings. We realize from each other what we’ve learned.”

After considerable participation as an advisor and conference group leader, I too came to realize what I had learned about the special value of the conference group as one part of the whole teacher education advisement program. That realization led me to think more deeply about the advisement conference group as a model for professional development beyond the immediate confines of my familiar advisement practice. It led me to study different perspectives on teachers’ knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985; Elbaz, 1980; Esland, 1971) and its continuing development (Bloomfield, 1976; Elbaz, 1987; Lampert 1984; Yonemura, 1982; Zeichner, 1983). Progressively, I became acutely aware of the conference group as an informal, instructional context and transactional process; as a truly reflective conversation in which, through face-to-face interaction, teachers’ ideological maps in formation become available for observation and analysis (Bernier, 1981).

My continuing investigations into the many connections between my teacher education practice and established and emerging theory on teachers’ knowledge increasingly led me to appreciate that documentation and description of certain positive educational contexts (Cazden, 1984) and reflective-processes-in-action (Schön, 1983) might be critical for improving our basic understanding of existing learning-teaching transactions in the professional education of teachers. I became increasingly convinced that the advisement conference group model might well represent a well-tested teacher education structure and process of considerable importance for planning, more broadly, the professional education of teachers for the future (see Holmes Group, 1990). At the very least, I deemed it a model that deserved to be studied more closely and described in more detail (see Silberman, 1970) from the perspectives of insiders.

At the beginning of a typical academic year, I discussed my interests and ideas with my students and colleagues. We spoke of our need to continuously evaluate and refine our understanding of our own advisement practice and of the prospect of trying to record exactly what happened in the enactment process. That year my six advisees and I agreed to document one sample of one component of advisement—the conference group—by making a year-long videotape record of our weekly sessions. The conference group case study grew from this beginning.

In this report, I first situate the case study in relation to the advisement...
practice, the stated purposes of conference groups, and recent conceptions of teachers' practical knowledge. I then describe the case study methodology, introduce the group members, provide samples of dialogue from selected "stories" together with some interpretive commentary, and review conclusions and implications.

The Advisement Context for the Conference Group Study

Since the conference group case study is concerned with the very local knowledge of teachers learning to teach within one particular graduate school of education, it is important for readers to understand that the advisement practice described here has long been unique to the institution (see also Feiman-Nemser in Houston, 1990). It differs fundamentally from academic advisement in other professional schools, not only because it is conducted by the teaching faculty who act in a dual advisory and supervisory role, but also because it is a required, year-long, 12-credit program of integrated advisement and field-work activities central to the teacher education curriculum and undertaken concurrently with formal academic coursework. The interpersonal experiences and understandings are expressly designed to enable professionals to synthesize the many and various aspects of their developing personal and professional knowledge—the cognitive and the affective, the social, the cultural, theory, and practice (see also Byers et al., 1984). At the center of the academic preparation in this teacher education program is a complex and dynamic educational and professional socializing process combining academic, advisory, supervisory, guidance, and mentoring features; and, it is known in the graduate school as "supervised field work/advisement," or, more colloquially, as "being in advisement."

Advisement emphasizes a reflective, analytical, experimental, future-oriented, and collaborative teacher preparation model. It is based on the fusion of developmental, cognitive, and psychodynamic theoretical orientations to the learning and teaching of children and adults. Advisement assumes that the competent teacher, as a total personality, acts from a web of interrelated personal, developmental, situational, and sociocultural perspectives that are continuously informed by and informing of theory. And it holds that "the teacher’s professional education must include sufficient and varied opportunities for experiencing, expressing, and reflecting on these interpenetrating realities" (Cuffaro, 1982, p. 270).

The three major advisement components—the biweekly individual conference, the advisor’s monthly half-day site visits to advisees’ schools, and the weekly advisement conference group—all offer a variety of interpersonal situa-
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tions for becoming teachers in which their understandings on a subjective level

can be interwoven experientially with more objective analysis. The benefits are

seen to be in proportion to the extent to which the individual student is enabled
to experience “a new way of learning, a new way of being received as a learner,

and is able to internalize these modes as part of his or her developing image of

the teacher’s role” (Biber & Winsor, 1967, p. 13).

Within the advisement model, the small group is called a “conference
group” rather than a teaching seminar; the approach is informal and inquiring,
not didactic, and the group is considered to be synergistic to the total program.

As described by two of its founders:

The conference group, the second major responsibility of the
advisor, deals with unstructured content, and here the advisor plays the
leadership role as needed to define issues or clarify and enrich content.
It is in these two-hour weekly meetings that the student is offered the
opportunity to integrate his or her new experience in the presence of
peers and with the help of the advisor. Students gain a wider prospect
of the possibilities and variations of teaching styles as observations and
experiences from a variety of field situations are exchanged. At the
same time the process provides experience in group thinking and
problem solving, offers a non-threatening arena in which conflicting,
subjective feelings may be identified, examined, and coped with.
Through the conference group, the advisor-leader of the group has the
opportunity to probe assumptions, develop concepts, bring new mater-
rial and resources to the group and moderate the discussion. (Biber &
Winsor, 1967, p. 8)

Teachers’ Practical Knowledge

While schooling in the United States has moved further toward conservatism
over the past decade, progressive changes have been steadily emerging in many
educational theorists’ overall organizing views regarding the teacher’s role,
teachers’ thinking and, especially, conceptions of teachers’ knowledge. Today,
the term “teachers’ practical knowledge” is differentiated from “the rigorous
logic and propositional structures [associated with the concept] of theoretical
knowledge” (Elbaz, 1980, p. 37), and it is more broadly defined as “the
knowledge teachers have of classroom situations and the practical dilemmas
they face in carrying out purposeful action in these settings” (Carter, 1990,
p. 299). Prominent characteristics of teachers’ practical knowledge are described
as “experiential,” “procedural,” “situational,” and “particularistic” (Carter, 1990,
p. 307). In addition, sustained investigation of schools, teachers, and teaching
has increasingly emphasized the nature of the interactions among “institutional conditions, cultural relevances, and creative responses” that constitute the activity of teaching (Barton & Walker, 1981, p. 7). Emanating from interactional and interpretive philosophical bases and from constructivist theories of learning and understanding, recent research on teachers' practical knowledge has substantially expanded our understanding of the critical roles the teacher's own knowing and thinking play in children's learning. More important, it has reconfirmed an essential image of the teacher as a knowledgeable and potentially reflective teaching professional. Indeed, the subject matter of teacher thinking, teachers' professional knowledge, and contexts for the professional education and socialization of teachers have become firmly established as important areas for investigation within the educational research community (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Elbaz, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1987; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986; Lampert 1984; Smyth 1987; Yonemura, 1982; Zeichner, 1986, 1987; also see Carter in Houston, 1990).

The pioneering studies of teachers' knowledge specifically conceptualized as “the teacher's practical knowledge” (Elbaz, 1980) and “personal practical knowledge” (Cladinin, 1983; Erikson, 1986; Lampert, 1984), in contrast to prior conventional research, focused on behavior and rooted in a more technical rationality, have, instead, emphasized the implicit or tacit dimensions of teachers' own intentions and have concentrated on the content of teachers' practical knowledge embedded in a teacher's perceptions, understandings, beliefs, insights, and images. Teachers' practical knowledge is understood to be the knowledge required for purposeful decision making and problem solving as teachers deliberate and act in complex and uncertain teaching situations. Rooted in experience (Dewey, 1938), the knowledge evolves from confrontation with experience and from reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). Moreover, a teacher's practical knowledge is continuously shaped and reshaped by the teacher's personal history, by maturing insights into that history, and by the teacher's ideological perspectives. Practical knowledge, then, remains close to practice and is most effectively expressed, analyzed, and transformed in the language of everyday practice.

In general, the personal and practical view of teachers' knowledge has functioned to temper enthusiasm for reliance on simplistic technical solutions to the problem of improved education. Teachers themselves, as individuals, are seen to be critical. The potential power of their knowledge is seen to be enormous. And, as thinking and knowing professionals, it is understood now that teachers may not only strategically comply, but, through the continual development of refined professional knowing, may become empowered to routinely engage in the strategic redefinition of educational situations (Lacey, 1977).
For the work of teacher educators and for the emerging reconception of teacher education there are important implications. For example, if the very nature of the teacher's practical knowledge so powerfully structures what teachers hold and use as knowledge, how is such personal, tacit, and idiosyncratic knowing best acquired within the teacher education curriculum? What is it that we teacher educators know and need to know about teachers' thought; about its constituent elements, its construction, its content, and the qualities of the contexts within which it develops, is used, inquired into, and transformed? How can particular teacher education programs, procedures, and processes function to help us understand more deeply the nature of the teacher's practical knowledge as it is developing? How can they function to help us understand how teachers acquire the habit of continuous and critical reflection on their ever-evolving knowledge of practice? Against the background of the practical knowledge studies, the issue for the problem of learning to teach now "becomes one of how settings affect the development of personal perspectives rather than of how teachers learn a defined body of knowledge about practice" (Carter, 1990, p. 302).

**The Elbaz Conception of the Teacher’s Practical Knowledge**

Significantly, the practical knowledge conception elaborated by Elbaz (1980) drew on a variety of important theoretical ideas most compatible with the underlying assumptions of my own practice; for example, Dewey's (1938) description of the dialectical relationship of theory and practice; the personal knowledge conception of Polanyi (1958); the "everyday knowledge" structures of phenomenological sociology (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973); certain ethnomethodological notions of reality shaped by linguistic usage; and certain psychological theories of cognition emphasizing the role of purpose, feeling, and values (see Elbaz, 1981).

This particular conception of the teacher's practical knowledge was expressly designed "to describe the process by which ideas function to guide practice and to mark out a structure for teachers' knowledge" (Elbaz, 1981, p. 131). The five areas of content knowledge identified are knowledge of self, the milieu of teaching, subject matter, curriculum development, and instruction. The study itself shows how a teacher's practical knowledge can be organized at three different but integrated levels of generality. Teachers can guide practice using rules of practice (methodology), principles of practice (reflection), and images (intuition) (Elbaz, 1983, pp. 131-157).

Of primary interest for my conference group study is the description of the teacher's practical knowledge as experientially based and "oriented" to practice. For it is with a version of the "knowledge orientations" terms that I chose to
work. The term "situational orientation" emphasizes that teachers' knowing derives from the work of teaching and is constructed in response to a variety of situations in schools. The "personal orientation" of teachers' practical knowledge stresses its orientation to self, to knowing and intending. Personal knowledge is used to "express the self, to give meaning to experiences and to realize purposes" (Elbaz, 1983, p. 101). The term "social orientation" refers to the fact that all knowledge is socially conditioned and to the idea that social knowledge is used to structure social reality. This category of analysis is used to examine how a teacher's use of his or her knowledge can reflect and reinforce social views and social class status (Elbaz, 1980, p. 228). It is an important category for studying how teachers try to "shape a social world consonant with their own purposes and beliefs." It is useful also to "foster teachers' awareness of how social class distinctions arise," to indicate choices, and to suggest that alternative situations might be created (Elbaz, 1980, pp. 230-232). The term "experiential orientation" reminds us of how closely teachers' practical knowledge is tied to the experiences through which it was acquired. And, finally, the term "theoretical orientation" is offered to refer to a teacher's understanding of "what theory is" (Elbaz, 1983, p. 21)—an understanding that will influence knowledge and knowing in all other areas.

In summary, the particular conception of teachers' practical knowledge that alerted me to the "knowledge orientations" metaphor—and that connected so powerfully with my understanding of my own advisement practice—described the teacher in the act of knowing when "the teacher's feelings, values, needs, and beliefs combine as she forms images of how teaching should be, and marshals experience, theoretical knowledge, and school folklore to give substance to these images" (Elbaz, 1983, p. 134).

Methodology of the Conference

Group Case Study

Because the study was designed to explore how the advisement conference group contributes to the development of teachers' practical knowledge, it necessarily deals with concepts of knowledge and dynamic relationships among the processes of thinking, knowing, and social interaction—with the phenomenological project of the understanding of understanding. But "understanding," as Paul Ricoeur has remarked, "is a very dense word, an ambiguous word, for it designates our apprehension of discovering how we belong or do not belong to the whole of what is under consideration" (Darroch, 1982, p. 259). Under consideration in the case study is the advisor's project of following the progress of advisees' developing practical knowledge as, through reflection in the group, they move back and forth between the cultures of the schools and the graduate
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school.

The understandings sought were interpretive. Therefore, in developing
methods, I drew on approaches associated with field studies in the phenomeno-
logical tradition (Darroch & Silvers, 1982; Erikson, 1986a; Stake, 1981b;
Wilson, 1977). The case-study format was adopted in order to facilitate the
reader's "naturalistic understanding of teachers' meanings" (Stake, 1981a, p. 3).
Procedures included participant observation (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; McCall
& Simon, 1969), informal interviewing (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973), the
content (Holsti, 1969) and context (Erikson & Shultz, 1981) analysis of
videotapes, and, predominantly, the text analysis of transcriptions of videotaped
conversations. The basic assumption underlying the development of the meth-
odology was simply that the teacher's practical knowledge is built up over time,
across a variety of contexts, and through the synthesis and integration of the
various personal, situational, social, experiential, and theoretical knowledge
orientations described by Elbaz; that important communally constructed mean-
ings may arise from the group's engagement with and reflection on shared ideas
and feelings about members' different teaching worlds—meanings constructed
together and forged in the common experiential world of the conference group.

As the process of analysis unfolded, I found it appropriate to refer frequently
to the knowledge orientations but, for the purposes of the study, to rename them
"strands of practical knowledge." I held in mind the vivid image of a beautifully
complicated tapestry in the process of being woven, in intricate detail, with
different strands of wool. By adopting a dramatic parallel image of different
strands of knowing constantly coming into play in the group's conversations
and, thereby, becoming interwoven in a process of knowledge construction, I
was able to capture, but more globally, a way in which conversational stories and
their telling functioned in the conference group as a major medium for the
apprehension, examination, and transformation of teachers' practical knowl-
edge.

An important aim in organizing methods for the study was my intention
that initial research procedures should grow organically from the work students
and I were doing together during the course of our professional association—my
work as supervised-field-work advisor and conference group leader, and the
students' situations as my advisees, conference group members, student teachers,
and teaching interns in schools, clinics, and treatment centers. Students were
therefore made fully aware of my dual roles as their advisor and practitioner
researcher and of my purposes in collecting data for a study of the conference
group. All agreed that the data could be used for educational purposes; all
understood that highly personal information would be deleted, and that person-
ally identifying details would be altered to protect privacy.

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Six students, four women and two men, became my advisees and formed the conference group. They ranged in age from the early twenties to the early forties. Several sociocultural backgrounds were represented, and one person was bilingual/bicultural. All but one person had classroom teaching experience, and all were graduate students pursuing master’s degrees in education with specialization in special education.

Conference group meetings got under way in late September and continued through the following May. Members appreciated that I intended to “collect data now but to study the group data at a much later time.” We all agreed to admit the video camera to our regular Wednesday after-school meetings, but we resolved to ignore the data-collection procedure and to carry on our work life together as normally as we could.

Conceptual Organization of The Data
In viewing and reviewing the videotapes of group meetings, it became clear that the main thinking activity across all of the group sessions was the conversational constructing and exchanging of stories, or fragments of stories, all commenting on the teaching experience. Group members told about children, themselves, and their field settings. They told about conflicting demands at school and about concrete problems to be solved. They described their feelings, ideas, and beliefs as they worked together to define themselves as teachers. Through the telling, it seemed as if members were distancing themselves just enough from recent experiences to be able to reflect on them. It appeared that they were engaged in a process of accounting to themselves and to each other for their experiences, reviewing what was past, evaluating the elements, ideas, and feelings, and anticipating possible futures. Eventually, in sifting through the data, I understood that the stories—their creating and their telling—played the role in the group of “fundamental particles” out of which the “matter” of each teacher’s practical knowledge was being constructed and conveyed. A story was defined as the telling within a given group meeting of an experience—an experience occurring outside or within the context of the conference group. Frequently, it was comprised of an exchange of ideas among members; sometimes it was almost a monologue; and it always contained one or more of the group’s ten pervasive content themes. In identifying conference group stories as the salient meaning units for the groups’ construction of practical knowledge, I was ever mindful of Hannah Arendt’s plea for citizens to come together, to think together, to “think what they are doing,” and, particularly, of her conception of stories, so eloquently described by Melvyn Hill (1979):

Thinking about an experience requires that we remember it and recount it to ourselves. This invariably takes the form of telling a story.
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Telling the story, then, is the “thinking completion” of the event, it is the form of dialogue in which I think with myself about what has happened... The story gives one the best chance to recapture or imagine what the experience was like, or how the event took place. The point is not that the story is true—or that storytelling leads us to “the truth”—but that it is faithful to the reality of what happened, and so conveys its meaning... if the story is faithful to the experience, it is not, and cannot even aim to be, a re-creation of that experience. It makes no claim to scientific replication. Stories are always inventions or, as Hannah Arendt preferred to say, discoveries.... In telling a story the minute elements that formed part of the experience or the event have to be sorted out and given intelligible order. Details have to be sacrificed, information selected, emphasis placed, a sequence created, speeches modified, situations viewed from different angles—all in the attempt to discover and reveal what happened in a way that is faithful to reality and at the same time illuminates it, so that the experience or event becomes recognizable for what it is in the form of the story. (pp. 288, 297-298)

Conference group stories were often closely related in the sense of being about similar experiences or revisits to one and the same experience. Such linked stories were regarded as composing an entire “tale” focused on one or more themes. However, since the stories exchanged were seen to be, not only “fundamental particles,” but also the basic “carriers” of practical knowledge in the group, it was decided that the analysis should be based on the stories, rather than on the tales. It was, nevertheless, in the recognition of linked stories or tales that the notion of “telling tales out of school” came to mind. I then introduced the metaphor not only to indicate straightforward recounts of what took place, but also to signal that teachers, in telling about their field-work experiences, were frequently “telling on” the school, revealing conditions and highlighting constraints that challenge accepted images.

Procedures and the Reduction of Data

Following review of the videotapes and the overall conceptual organization of the tape data, complete text transcriptions were made of the 27 group meetings. These were studied, together with the videotapes, not only for the group’s verbal communications, but also for its nonverbal communications, including its actions, interactions, procedures, routines, rhythms, style, climate, and emotional tone. Sustained conversations were then searched for major topics, issues, and themes contained within the various stories told. A synoptic data review, meeting by meeting, was constructed to provide a sequential overview of the
content, the process, and the progress of the group over time.

Full text transcripts were searched once again for “major stories”; that is, significant and representative conversational exchanges told within the group process that were seen to actualize the learning process and that, thereby—from my perspective as advisor and researcher—came to constitute moments or instances of practical knowing and the development of practical knowledge. The set of 34 stories resulting from this sifting procedure became the corpus of the data on which my analyses and interpretations were based. Each story was further condensed into one or more of a series of manageable essential excerpts of dialogue that contained—as in a nutshell—the full meaning of what the story had to say. Each excerpt was given a title native to the dialogue itself. That is, I selected from each sample of dialogue representing a story a phrase actually spoken in that dialogue. I then used the phrase as a title in order to capture, in grounded form, the essence of the story it names. Sets of stories, organized into early, mid-year, and end-of-the-year sections, together with analysis and interpretation, constitute the body of the case study and offer the reader an abundance of the raw data advocated by Stake in his compelling call for more “naturalistic generalization” in educational research (Stake, 1981a, pp. 3-5).

In the following two sections, conference group members will be introduced, and sample excerpts from a number of the stories representing the early, mid-year, and end-of-the-year time periods will be offered, and their interpretations described.

Members of the Conference Group

Lorraine Brinkmann was the youngest member of the group. She had recently received her undergraduate degree in developmental psychology. Immediately after college, Lorraine was hired to teach severely handicapped children, although she had not had prior experience or preparation in special education. She then found that she needed to “know more” in order to make “the kind of difference” she felt she could make for children. That realization had led her to pursue a master's degree in special education. Lorraine’s field work was in a public school resource room and in the language clinic of a children’s hospital. Her ambition was to found a learning center for language impaired children.

Carlos Morales, a new bilingual special education high school teacher, was in his late twenties when the study began. He had completed his undergraduate degree in anthropology and secondary education at a state university while holding a full-time job as a child care worker in a residential center for dependent adolescents. Carlos was enthusiastic about working with teenagers and said that he liked to use his skill as an athlete in “doing sports and making a relationship with them.” He was extremely sympathetic to the needs of “poor kids and kids
Hirsch: The Social Construction of Teachers' Practical Knowledge in the Advisement Conference Group in trouble,” and said, “I want to use myself for them in the best way.” As a bilingual/bicultural person himself, Carlos felt strongly that Spanish dominant children, especially those with bona fide learning problems, should have the opportunity to participate in bilingual classes and to be understood by teachers they themselves could understand.

Maura O'Connell grew up in Brooklyn and attended parochial schools. She held a bachelor's degree in chemistry and elementary education and had taught young children for several years in preschool programs. Maura found that she always had a few children in her classes who “just needed something else.” She decided to study special education in order to be able to reach more children when she returned to teach in mainstreamed elementary classrooms.

Elizabeth Rosenfeld had been a classroom teacher in the primary grades for more than fourteen years. She had traveled widely and was multilingual. Her bachelor's degree was in history. Elizabeth was particularly interested in “doing language intervention” with very young children and was a teaching intern at a therapeutic nursery. “My husband and children are just as invested in my new career as I am,” she said. “They support me a lot.”

Rebecca Strong grew up in the midwest and “went through the public education system.” Her undergraduate degree was in special education. Rebecca had been teaching for four years and was most interested in clinical teaching, assessment, and one-to-one educational therapy with children. Rebecca was expecting a second child in January and hoped to continue in the conference group after the birth of her baby. Rebecca worked as a consultant to classroom teachers in a suburban public school and as a tutor to severely learning disabled children at a private learning clinic.

Peter Westergard was in his early thirties when the study began. Since graduation from college, with a degree in philosophy, Peter had been employed as a musician. He had, however, always thought that he really wanted to be a teacher. He decided to study special teaching because he had felt enormous satisfaction in working with handicapped children in an after-school program and in his longtime work as a literacy volunteer. Peter felt that he was now ready to take on the considerable responsibility of becoming a teacher and said he saw the role as “the most interesting and challenging way for me to contribute to the health and welfare of our society.”

Stories, Strands, and Storytelling

The Early Meetings

Eleven stories, culled from the group's first six meetings, were presented in the body of the case study as representative of the practical knowing evolving in the early meeting period. The group talked about first impressions and survival skills,
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about learning to individualize their teaching, and about first days in the field. Some conflicts presented themselves in the third meeting as members met some of their similarities and differences head-on. More conflict emerged in the fifth meeting as implications of social differences were raised, and more harmony was created in this meeting as the group faced certain sociopolitical realities for teachers. Some of this group’s core values and meanings for “teaching”—for being and becoming teachers—were introduced in the sixth meeting.

At the outset, the idea of telling about and thinking about theory, self, and practice together in the group was displayed as the central ritual event. Thus, in the very first story, Telling About Telling and Thinking About Thinking, I told the group about its purpose and task, explaining the kinds of reflecting that might be accomplished in the group’s life together.

Gail: Why don’t I start by saying a bit about the conference group and how I conceive of it? Essentially, as advisor and advisees who are doing this thing we call “advisement” together, we’ll be having a close relationship during the year ahead. We’ll all be meeting every Wednesday after school like this. Just the seven of us, informally, sitting around our table here in Room 403 getting to know each other and getting to know the work. We’ll come together here with our snacks and react to the teaching week. We’ll talk about the worries and the struggles, our insights and our elation. The being and talking together is really intended as a means to help people reflect, to gain perspective. It’s a small group in the process of thinking, feeling, and learning...about children learning, about curriculum, about ourselves and each other. It’s also about the larger world of education and how it feels to become a special teacher right here and right now. So, what happens here will be what you want to have happen...and we’ll try to deal with what that idea might mean to us as time goes along.

When group members took their first turns to talk, the story Introductions began to emerge; a story by means of which, in their opening remarks, members identified themselves, not only by their presence, but by their personal frames of reference, their idioms, their distinctive conversational styles. They told about themselves, their backgrounds, reasons for undertaking graduate studies, expectations for professional development, and described their field-work settings. All of these became the immediate experiences to be reflected on. Typical for first meetings, in exchanging information, members also sought to establish places for themselves within the group.

Elizabeth was a leader—poised, articulate, deliberate, intellectual—the most experienced teacher in the group. She would be working with preschool children as a clinical intern in language therapy and as a teaching assistant in the graduate school. “I made the decision that [now] I really want a profession in special education.” Elizabeth’s style was serious, reasoned; her statements based
on her personal, experiential, and theoretical knowledge of her developmental stage as an adult and master teacher.

Carlos, who was still new to bilingual teaching, expressed concern about contradictory definitions of the work, together with genuine good humor and intuitive trust in himself. “I work with pretty heavy kids with some pretty severe problems.” While Carlos judged himself to be weak in “dealing with paperwork,” he contrasted this with his “strength in dealing with people” and identified one of his preferred ways of knowing as “feeling comfortable.” He soon emerged as a teacher who knew about “street kids,” who wanted to teach others something about the “real world out there,” and about the “Hispanic experience.” Throughout, Carlos used vivid images to structure his thinking about practice, images that later became focal and repeatedly explored in the group. For Carlos had introduced a major theme for this group—the problem of teaching and social inequality—as represented to him in the often to be revisited subject of bilingual education. “I’m in the middle of a double standard,” he said.

With enthusiasm, Rebecca straightforwardly blended personal, situational, and experiential knowing in her initial telling. She alluded to pre-professional association with special needs, but did not elaborate. “I’ve been involved in special education ever since I was in the ninth grade.” Rebecca told of her multiple roles: teacher, consulting teacher, graduate student, mother, and expectant mother. She then indicated her longtime commitment to continuing professional education and her personal inclination to question—to look for both personal meanings and differentiated professional meanings behind the special teaching role. “I always knew I wanted to get my master’s degree, it was really just a matter of where. So I took a couple of courses here. Then I agonized during a good year before I finally sat down and forced myself into writing that application! I’ve been working as a learning disabilities specialist in public schools, and I’m not really very sure about the role. I mean, I still haven’t defined it now that I’m leaving it to be a student again.”

Lorraine’s earnest statement began with a suggestion of insecurity or possible feelings of ineffectiveness as a beginning teacher. “Until June I was teaching emotionally disturbed kids in an independent school. It wasn’t working out at all—not at all. So, I’ve spent all summer looking for the right job.” Lorraine had also decided to seek more professional education, “meaningful education,” as a way of solving the problem. “One of the teachers at my school went to Bank Street, and she said it was a wonderful place. She adored it. So, I got out of the courses I was taking at another college, and here I am!” Then, with positive determination, Lorraine added that she felt quite secure and well prepared in knowing about the developmental needs of “bright normal children” and curious about how to serve the needs of those same children when “they need something special.”
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In her soft-spoken and gentle manner, Maura introduced two more predominating themes for the group: becoming a special teacher, and the field of special education as a changing educational domain. "I've had about four years of experience, only with early childhood in the inner city. It was always an ethnically mixed group. I would keep coming across [particular] children I didn't know how to deal with and I felt that I really should find out. I've never really worked with any real special ed children. This will really be the first time, [working in special education] and I'm looking forward to it...and I'm really nervous about it, especially this first week. I've thought about it a lot."

Peter, an extremely thoughtful and articulate preservice advisee, distinguished himself right away as an introspective and accomplished storyteller. He told of an earlier wish, right after college, to become a teacher, of his initial postponement of that desire, and of his search for not only appropriate work, but also personally meaningful work. He described his recent reinvestigation of teaching and his subsequent decision to risk a new beginning. In his first statement Peter emphasized his personal and situational knowing, as well as the importance he placed on self-awareness and self-direction. "Today, as a student-teacher, I had my absolute first observation in a normal open classroom setting, the class where I'm going to be teaching, and I feel I've already expanded my horizons one hundred percent! I'm really looking forward to what will happen here. I think I'm headed in a direction where I'll feel comfortable in the work that I do. That's really my goal."

Soon, in the action of telling about contrasting field settings—reflected in the story First Impressions and Survival Skills—group members' exchanges revealed important aspects of their different personal, situational, social, and theoretical knowing and began to emphasize their different cultural and experiential backgrounds. The moment in which they discovered their different frames of reference for the term "survival skills" was an important one since it functioned to direct the group's thinking and interacting toward a more conscious awareness of class differences, a major feature of the social inequality theme.

Lorraine: Well, Maura and I went to observe at Parkhurst School yesterday. We're probably going to be student teaching there. It's the most incredible program, so comprehensive! Anything you could imagine ranging from automotive to academics to beauty culture. They even have advanced placement college level courses. They even have one kid who got an 800 on the biology SAT! It's like a regular high school!

Carlos: I don't mean to be sarcastic, but your school sounds just a little different than mine, Lorraine. Well, what's the word? Well, it sounds as if the kids are more money invested over there where you are. What we have here in the city is basically the Board of Education. Nevertheless, we try to
expand—to do a lot—film work, auto mechanics, and stuff like that. We try to make the setting as beneficial as possible. One of our teachers wrote a proposal which was funded by the government, called Survival Skills. It is really good—dynamite—I love it, and I try to do a lot of survival skills with my kids.

Lorraine: You mean long hikes and outings? Like the Outward Bound program in the wilderness?


Rebecca: Wow, when you said survival, I automatically thought you meant taking them out in the woods, too. That’s what I do with middle-class public school kids in the suburbs. That’s what my middle-class mind knows about “survival skills.”

Two subsequent stories served to illustrate members’ early contributions to defining the interests, style, and direction of the discourse. They suggest how the different stories functioned to allow members to remember, to recapitulate, to verbally organize, and to consciously attend to particularly salient elements of their recent teaching experiences. The stories also show how the telling in the group encourages members to articulate what they already know of practice, to speculate about what they do not yet know, to share their feelings about knowing, to discover what they want to learn, and to identify parts of their experience as problematic.

These stories are of two types. The first presents an exchange in which a specific practical problem is brought to the group for discussion, advice, and solution. In the story Individualizing, Carlos had asked a straightforward question about how to individualize, and then explained:

Carlos: I do know that there’s no such thing as always writing up on the blackboard for the whole class. But, on the one hand, my principal wants total individualization—total—and on the other hand she wants to see an overall lesson plan for the whole group.

Elizabeth: That’s because she hasn’t made the transition herself from whole-group traditional to a more open, individualized, child-centered model.

The ensuing dialogue functioned to further define the problem, to generate more information, perspective, and support; and, to initiate a group-derived plan for resolving the problem. Many later discussions were focused around issues raised by questions directly asked in the group and by “felt problems” brought expressly for resolution through collective situational and theoretical knowing.

In contrast, a second story type, the self-report, presented an individual’s report on the process of thinking through the experience of practice. Such a story, Peter’s First Day, largely a self-contained reflection told early in the group’s life, actually functioned as a prototype for many future tellings.
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Thoughtfully and expansively, Peter reflected aloud on his own first reflections in the field. His story introduced important issues for him personally, many of which later became recurring themes for the group. The issues concerned problems of understanding children developmentally; the respective roles of the student teacher and the cooperating teacher and the status relationships involved; the question of differences and similarities between “special” and “regular” teaching; learning to become an appropriate authority figure for children; classroom management; and, perceiving the tensions between notions of theory and practice.

Peter: It’s going well; I really enjoy it. It’s a wonderful, regular, open classroom with a core curriculum. Actually, yesterday was my first full day, and I made it through until three o’clock in the afternoon! The kids are very interesting...sixes and sevens...very responsive.

Lorraine: Do you have any problems yet?

Peter: I don’t really think so. I mean, I guess in any new situation where you just move in and begin working with your fellow adults, someone always has to make room for someone, and someone has to assume responsibility. I’m very aware of that. But, being a student teacher and being asked to be a teacher and get the cooperation of the kids isn’t easy. See, there’s this extremely accomplished, extremely authoritative master teacher. She’s the classroom teacher, and she’s my teacher...and there are three of us student teacher types helping out. I feel as if the teacher wants to see what I can take, what kind of a person I am, and the kids are testing me. It’s a rough period of adjustment, and I’m a big powerful guy, and this is a new situation. The main thing I’m working on now is that my gut approach is so rational and so ineffective—and so different from the teacher’s, who, I thought was going to be modeling, as the theory goes, “functional controls.” Then, right from square one, she lets them know who’s in charge. And I say to myself, Wow, is this child centered education? Is this what’s left of progressive education? Because I would have wanted to say to the child, “You know what, that bothers me, or that bothers the other children when you do that.” Sort of reasoning with the child. Right now, I think the teacher has a heavy-handed approach, and I also think maybe I don’t know how to say “no” to kids yet, and I hope I’m going to learn. The thing is that what I thought was the theory doesn’t seem to be the practice!

Throughout the telling, Peter’s story revealed his effective use of vivid images for framing, contrasting, and communicating his thinking; for example, when he criticized his initial approach to the task of taking on a teacher’s authority as “my gut approach is so rational and so ineffective!” Through the story, the group learned that Peter had almost expected to see his theoretical understandings actually come to life in real classroom interaction, and that in his very first experience of moving into practice he was somewhat disappointed and
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puzzled. They listened carefully as he recapitulated his inner dialogue with himself; as he made tentative judgements and left room for other possibilities; as he admitted a personally problematic situation when he discovered that “maybe I don’t know how to say ‘no’ to kids yet, and I hope I’m going to learn;” as he pointed to an important tension: “What I thought was the theory doesn’t seem to be the practice.”

Peter had relied heavily on personal knowledge—knowing about himself and about the role of self-knowledge in shaping perceptions of practice—although he expressed himself using all of the five strands of practical knowledge. And while he organized his practical knowing primarily in images, he also referred to his theoretical knowledge and used a number of principles of practice that he tended to question. The story, Peter’s First Day, through which Peter reported on a whole series of meaningful experiential elements for himself, can be seen to have served as a potent model for the group; a model for sorting out the complex ideas, relationships, and intentions in operation in practice; a model that other members later used in structuring their own learning from each other, in thinking through and becoming more aware of the task of articulating their developing practical knowledge.

As the conference group’s dynamic process moved steadily forward, through the intense and lengthy story Trying To Be Cool, members were drawn closer together in interaction, but also drawn apart by perspectives shaped earlier in their different social and experiential worlds. The topic of bilingual education itself seemed threatening and provoked substantial attacking and defending exchanges about professional conflict and competition. Carlos had complained that “sometimes, in my school, the bilingual people and the program are seen as highly expendable.” The group then talked about how “some Anglo people are getting laid off,” and one member said, jokingly, “And it's the young punks who have the language capability who are being hired.” Immediately, in reaction, Carlos drew himself back, put both hands to his head, and said, “My problem is that I’m trying to be cool and to realize that you’re my friend, you’re in my conference group!”

In carefully following the raw data account of the conversation that ensued, case study readers are able to “see” the whole group, including Carlos, experiencing Carlos in the act of presenting his “case” in a variety of terms and attitudes: first, in the socially oriented terms of establishment educator attitudes as obstructing the purposes of bilingual education; then, personally, in terms of his own position being given a low priority—“What's been happening to me as the bilingual person is that I become the sub; my resource room becomes expendable”; later, in terms of arbitrary bureaucratic systems for classifying children (tests); and still later, in terms of legal arguments and mandates as social forces—
"Well, it all started with Brown vs. Topeka, then P.L. 94-142, then Diana vs. the Board, and then Lao vs. Nichols."

Simultaneously, the story shows how the whole group had experienced Peter and Elizabeth in the act of taking issue with Carlos, citing instances from their experiences in which the very existence of bilingual education personally threatened experienced Anglo educators. This story shows, too, how in jointly experiencing the dissonance and hostility their divergent points of view created for them in the group, members learned directly more about the various personal, cognitive-affective roots of the perspectives themselves; more about the kind of practical knowing that would be involved for them throughout the year in learning to work through their differences.

Interestingly, it almost appeared that the interpersonal clashing and subsequent healing—when the group transitioned away from the encounter and focused on the narrower problem of administering language dominance tests—moved the group to ask some basic theoretical questions, questions about test validity and reliability, cognitive-developmental theory, and social learning theory. It led to consideration of these theoretical questions from the point of view of members’ own personal knowledge of difficulties, failures, and successes in learning. And, as the theoretical question of learning was explored in the stories How Do We Learn Anyway and The Essence of Writing, more autobiographical experiences of having learned as children and taught as teachers were disclosed in discussion.

Early in the sixth meeting, which marked the end of the early meeting period, Lorraine and Elizabeth spoke about the special affective quality of the teaching they were learning in the graduate school as compared with approaches elsewhere. And, with this exchange, the two-hour-long story Worrying About Affect was launched.

Lorraine: I was talking with people at the clinic the other day as I was writing out one of my logs about my teaching session with a child. They were just amazed at the detail, and said when they were training they got good experience in standardized testing, but they didn’t get that special kind of care and attention and actual working with a child to the same degree that we do here—the real involvement with the child, and putting down all the comments and the hunches, and getting back impressions.

Elizabeth: I guess some people from other professional schools come out worrying about affect, but I get the feeling that affect is not something that most people are terribly concerned about.

Carlos: It just controls your whole life, that’s all!

The story took the form of a fairly intense round-table discussion centered on the subject of “affective interaction” and devoted to the project of coming up with a more differentiated understanding of that term’s multiple subtle meanings...
Carlos reported that, at first, he'd almost thought that he "hadn't planned to do anything" in his teaching. But then he quickly discovered that it was only because he had feared that the "important thing" he had planned to do, "to establish rapport," wasn't acceptable terminology for his lesson plan.

Carlos: They come into my room, like one or two at a time, and I'm talking to them, like, "Hey man, how come you're such a hot rod? What's going on?" And like this one kid, I just found out three people in his family just died; his mother and father are drinkers. All these things are going on for these kids. All the other teachers know is that the kids don't want to work, they want to walk around. So that's what I'm doing this week. Everybody who comes to me, I'm establishing a relationship with them, one to one. I'm saying, "Listen, sometimes it's really hard. Did you tell anybody about what's going on at home?" And the kid says, "No." And I say, "Sometimes when you don't do that, it gets you inside, and when you tell somebody, it helps, you know." And then I do a lot of physical acting out of what the emotions are. I say, "Listen, whenever you're into something, like don't worry about it man, just come and talk. I'll make time, no matter what I'm doing." And they appreciate that!

As members continued to pursue their many meanings for the concepts of affect and affective interaction, the problem of learning to become an appropriate authority figure as a teacher was revisited. The context was still the special education section of Carlos' high school. Now the concern was the difficult problem of management, the presence of both physical and symbolic violence in the classroom and in the gym, and the topic involved the question of a teacher's resorting to the threat of "using force" versus "knowing how to build relationships."

Carlos: I don't really patrol the gym, I just walk around. The administration wants someone to make sure the kids don't kill themselves. I've got to the point where I can say [to a kid], "I know what you're going to do, you're going to smoke. You know, sometimes I smoke too, but if you do it in my face, I'll get on your case. I'll turn you in, and your mother will be up here, and you'll be busted." Some kids give me static, but other kids say, "Hey man, it's his job, it's the teacher's job, respect that!" But there's one teacher at my school, six foot seven and two hundred and eight pounds, he has the most trouble with the kids.

Peter: What is the difference in technique between what you do and what this big guy, your colleague, does, in terms of management, managing the crowd in the gym?

Carlos: I'm trying to see if I can find the right words. Low key, I guess. I give them responsibility, like I force them insofar as possible to be face to face so that they know what is going on. I say, "You're not supposed to do that.
Why are you doing it? To give me a hard time? Is it worth it?” I give them one very important thing, time to respond. Incredibly important! Also, very important, if you say you’re going to do something, do not give out any checks that you can’t cash.

Peter: What’s really interesting to me is that these are really valuable things to know. They are techniques, but also the currency that you must, it seems, especially as a special teacher, develop. I realized today that, as a new student teacher, I can’t do any better in my situations with the little ones, and I’m six feet tall and two hundred fifteen pounds, and these six- and seven-year-old guys are like fifty-two pounds. But they will take me on. I’m afraid I might have used too much force today because I was stuck in a situation where they were really putting it to me—the first time out on the playground alone with my twenty-five kids. It was time to clean up, and suddenly they all go and hide. I look around and I see maybe fifteen who aren’t going to be a problem. The rest of the kids are in the phone booth! They’re all in the phone booth on top of each other, like ten kids!

Later still, as the conference group was increasingly coming together as a cohesive group, their active and extensive search for individual meanings surrounding the concept of affective interaction was broadened to include the notion of teaching across subcultures. Almost everyone, including the advisor, wanted to participate, to remember aloud in the presence of the group community, to ascribe meaning to deeply felt personal experience, to listen, to be listened to, and to make discoveries.

Gail: As a middle-class teacher working with adolescents in detention, my runaways, I didn’t have the cultural background to share in the same way. I had to find ways to prove myself, to show my caring.

Lorraine: And I’m a real upper-middle-class kid, and as a beginning teacher I had no idea what the children’s culture was about in that school. It was a shock! I found some, their distrust of white people was just total. I found it really helped when they [the students] were in a position where they were teaching me.

Carlos: That’s interesting, Lorraine. I’m trying to figure out how I could adapt that, because I was in a different position, being that I was once a kid on my street myself.

Lorraine: But Carlos that helps with your affect, your rapport. I had to learn about their culture, because I wasn’t a kid on the street. Whereas you’ve got the street knowledge and street language, and it’s important, because they feel you can understand them because you’ve gone through it.

Elizabeth: I was always a private school kid too, and as a first year teacher when I walked into an inner-city school system on the Coast, it was unbelievable!

Peter: I even took a several year hiatus from the idea of teaching right after my first culture shock experience right here in the South Bronx!
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Elizabeth: But by the end of the year I was very attached to every one of those kids, and I think they learned. I learned. I learned a lot! I kept going back to my apartment saying, "It's not in the books. Where is it? They didn't teach me about this in teacher training."

Peter: When you were saying, Gail, that when teaching cross-culturally, one of your strengths was just being able to relate just on the basis that you can relate to a kid being in trouble. Feeling stupid, or feeling like he hasn't got a chance, like the school is against him, or whatever...and I've just realized that, in fact, I mean this is a real discovery, I realize that my skill is that I can look a student in the eye cross-culturally, you know, and say, "Look, I know how awful it is to feel stupid and to feel lost." I mean, that's another way to get over," and, in fact, it's a skill. And I don't tend to think of it that way. I tend to think, well, that's just me. But, in fact, it's a skill! And I find that a kind of a revelation, tonight at six, in this here conference group.

Although the series of dialogues from Worrying About Affect reported in the body of the case study barely suggests the tremendously intense quality of the honest and open climate in the group during the sixth meeting, they do serve to illustrate how, in the storytelling, the different strands of practical knowing—first situational, then personal, then experiential, then social, and often, finally, theoretical—were combined to construct and to communicate the individual meanings of each person's genuine efforts to establish positive relationships across cultural boundaries. Notably, the value of doing so was taken for granted by all group members, and the questions, therefore, were directed to the problem of how to accomplish this goal. In this transition point meeting, now more experienced conference group members were able to transcend their earlier differences and to coalesce around, perhaps, the teacher's most basic common need—to establish respectful caring relationships with students. Moreover, in the process of discussing how to do this, and by persisting throughout one meeting to gain insight into their different and common perspectives, conference group members not only underscored the tremendous importance they attached to the idea of worrying about affect, but they also managed effectively to establish even stronger affective relationships with each other.

Close examination of all of the stories told in the six early meetings reveals a pattern of alternating, on the one hand, between disclosure of personal knowing at increasingly deeper emotional levels, and, on the other, intellectual engagements in increasing complexity with the social, situational, and theoretical strands of knowing.

Mid-Year Meetings

In contrast to the early group meetings, where it was necessary to resolve dissonances and disagreements before being able to work cohesively as a group,
in mid-year meetings the group was able to sustain a longer focus on situational problems without being distracted, and almost all the strands of knowing were important, though not equally so, in almost every story told.

By the seventh meeting, a definite pattern of serious telling about the week's encounters was well established. In general, one member would interrupt the early cross talk with a question or comment that signaled the beginning of focused discussion. The group would then sit back, become quiet, and extend attention. The story An Impromptu Discussion began in this way. Carlos had been telling several members that “Gail came to visit me at school today, and it's kind of hard to tell what went on because what went on happens often enough to be commonplace.” Having overheard the remark, Lorraine opened the discussion.

Lorraine: Carlos, are you going to tell us what it was? What the incident was?
Carlos: What happened was an impromptu discussion, me and the kids. It wasn't really a social studies lesson... but, maybe it was... at least it was mostly in Spanish.
Lorraine: Are you going to tell us why you look sort of up and sort of down too?
Carlos: It was just an impromptu discussion—on the fairness of society. And what's needed to survive. About violence and about getting stabbed. One of my kids had just gotten stabbed on the way to school. He wanted to tell me about it. Not the wound, but about his feelings and the injustice of it. He was so angry he couldn't really put his thoughts together. Then I started to talk about prejudice... he wanted to talk about the difference between right and wrong, fair and unfair, just and unjust. I listened to him. And then I simply said that there is a great amount of prejudice in the world, and I said, “Yes, you're right, the world is not a fair place.” Because you can't really “pie in the sky” with a fifteen-year-old street kid who can't understand much Spanish or English and who has just been stabbed. Then I told him, “But you've still got to be able to get around even though all those things are happening out there.” Then the boys and I went on to talk about how it is out in the street, what you have to do to stay alive, and how, sometimes, people can get out. I told them, “I did my time in the street too when I was younger, and now I'm a teacher.” Well it was just a discussion that gave me a lot to think about, so I thought I'd tell you about it here.

Clearly, in the context of this story, it was the social strand of knowing that was essential for Carlos. And, as the story unfolded in the group, some of the very special social, situational, and personal knowing that had been indispensable to Carlos was passed along to the others. Further discussion generated in reaction to this story led to a focus on poverty, violence in the community, and the way violence is brought into classrooms. A short time later, a new story, The Feeling of Danger was collectively constructed by all. It began with personal responses—personal equivalents—moved on to values, then to practical principles that
Hirsch: The Social Construction of Teachers' Practical Knowledge in the Advisement Conference Group might be used to guide teachers in dealing with crisis situations of this kind.

In a subsequent story, Very Helpful, Peter, in considering the intense feelings and images generated by Carlos' story, had proceeded to connect them to his own feelings of bewilderment and frustration in not yet having been able to manage children in his classroom according to his view of what classroom management should be; according to his present meaning for "being firm." Peter then had led the group in a concentrated round-table discussion during which the group, in interaction with Peter, tenaciously confronted Peter's conflicted feelings and ideas about understanding and exercising authority as a teacher.

**Peter:** You may be right Elizabeth in that I've been trying to go after things from too intellectual a position.

**Carlos:** A lot of it is very intuitive.

**Lorraine:** Peter, there are no right answers; it's wrong to think there are right answers.

**Peter:** That may be, but [in the incident I've been describing] I was coming from the position that if there is a behavior problem, there has to be an answer to the situation.

**Lorraine:** Well, who says there has to be a behavior problem? I'm working with a child like that, and I don't see it as a behavior problem.

**Peter:** And Pauline is in total control of her class. And I am not in control of the class from my perspective... and when it's my turn to do certain things, I find myself befuddled and frustrated.

**Maura:** Peter, how long has she been teaching? How long have you been teaching?

**Elizabeth:** It's six thirty, can't we go till six forty-five? It feels like we should be meeting from now until tomorrow!

* * *

**Peter:** Well, this has been very helpful to me. I would like to announce before you all, it has been very direct and interesting.

**Carlos:** Peter, there's a feeling I want to share with you again; and it's just knowing that I have a feeling that a year from now you're going to say, "I did what? I felt what?" Peter, you're going to be a very good teacher!

**Peter:** This has been very interesting, helpful. What I mean is, it's been very helpful!

Two more stories, Good Feedback and Coming To Terms, were reported as illustrations, not only of individual members in the process of making transformations in their understandings, but also to show how the whole group was in the process of consciously coming to recognize their collective role in promoting each other's professional growth and development. In the first, Peter opened the meeting with a personal success story.
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Peter: Well, I'd like to tell everybody that I had a very successful week (cheers from all). And I think our discussion last week had something to do with it. And it was very helpful last week here. I did a lot of homework in terms of working with my Mark for reading. Gail gave me a crash tutorial on some techniques to use with him... and I went in on Tuesday with some new ideas and...

Carlos: Firm resolve.

Peter: Firm resolve, exactly. And maybe they're just getting used to me, but maybe it was last week's talk.

In the second story, Peter told the group about another "breakthrough." Here he described his process in coming to understand, as the result of continuous mentoring by the group, the evolving core curriculum project in the open classroom where he student taught.

Peter: I think what I came to terms with today was a certain understanding that I like the way the curriculum is set up, even though it is still alien to me, because with my traditional background I basically tend to think that they should all be sitting quietly at their desks.

Rebecca: Not exactly the core curriculum model!

Peter: No, not exactly. So what I came to terms with was that these kids are all right... within the environment set up in the room... they are basically learning. I arrived at some sort of conclusion that I could trust the class to function as normal six- and seven-year-old kids to find something to challenge themselves to do. And that that itself [the freedom to challenge themselves] was the learning process!

Carlos: I'm just juxtaposing the things that you're saying now to the first days [here in the group].

Although the relevance of theoretical knowing had been acknowledged as "useful" in the early meeting period, in mid-year meetings the theory-practice connections emerged as issues to be more completely explicaded. In the story An Extension of Self, Rebecca introduced the subject of one of the most complex and important areas of the special teacher's work—the parent conference. Rebecca told the group about a "marathon" conference she had had the preceding evening; one in which she had tried to intervene on the child's behalf with practical suggestions to the parents for organizing "more realistic" interactions with their child around study and homework. She was feeling terribly inadequate, she reported, due to the "parent's resistance" and to her own "inability as a teacher to guide them, to convince them." Then, in reflection on her own telling in the group, Rebecca was suddenly able to review her practical dilemma, to link last night's parent conference situation with her considerable personal and theoretical knowing about "how parents often resist knowing of their children's disabilities because it's too painful," because "one's children represent
Mid-year meetings were also punctuated with many stories of success and achievement, as well as with stories of doubt or perceived failure; the former being lessons to the group, and the latter provoking lessons by the group. Thus, in the story A Very Interesting Case, the group supported Maura in expressing her newly found enthusiasm for hospital teaching, and, in the story A Terrible Meeting, the group was able to help Lorraine re-form her knowing about how to organize her clinical teaching lessons for Jimmy who couldn’t read and about how to approach Jimmy’s classroom teacher.

The telling of success stories, like Elizabeth’s story of Jackie, often marked changes or progress in a group member’s work, and the tellings were frequently treated in the group as occasions for celebration.

Elizabeth: I have to end today with a Jackie story. Today was really an “up” for me, for him, for everyone at the hospital nursery. I just have to tell you about it here.

Peter: Just clue me in again on Jackie’s background. Is he the totally nonverbal one?

Elizabeth: Well, yes, Jackie was diagnosed as severely retarded and autistic at four years and six months old. He was considered totally untestable and labeled “retarded”...no language, of course...no eye contact, nothing...not toilet trained, severely impaired, totally unrelated. Well, today—I guess it doesn’t seem like that much, but to me and to Jackie it was a lot! You see, we’ve been working on mirrors, faces, hands, walking, humming, looking, etc. And one of the things I’ve worked on over and over is the steps involved in waving “bye-bye” with his hand. So, every time I take him from his mother to go into the nursery, we face his mother, and I take his hand and wave it, and I say, “bye-bye, bye-bye.” Then, this morning I did the same thing, and suddenly he turned and looked at his mother and took his hand out of mine, and he waved to his mother, whose eyes got big and overflowing with tears, and he said, “Bye!”

Rebecca: Elizabeth, that’s incredible!

Elizabeth: That was my up for the whole day, nothing could have spoiled that. He may not speak for another six months, but I worked so hard for this word, and so did Jackie, and it came! His mother just grabbed him, the tears started running, and she grabbed me. And he turned around and just grinned from ear to ear. He knew exactly what he was doing!

Almost symbolically, halfway through the nineteenth meeting, which marked the end of the mid-year period, group members initiated a story they later described as “a discussion of values,” a discussion that had brought them back, with almost mirror-like precision, to the very same concern that had marked the end of the early conference period—concern with cognitive-affective interaction and the establishment of positive learning-teaching relationships with
students. However, at this point in the group’s life and at this stage in the course of members’ professional development, the group members themselves were the students described, and the context for learning and teaching was the graduate school.

Carlos: I’ll tell you, I’d hate for this place to be another kind of school—like an education mill or a super elite place.

Gail: It is useful to think about what it is we think we have, what we’d like to change and preserve, and what kinds of structures are organic to our philosophy.

Rebecca: It is one of the few schools that really does manage to foster real human development, the development of potential.

Carlos: But, you know, it’s the people, instructors! It’s the people who take a personal interest in their students here. I mean a personal interest; it’s just not like some places where you kind of get put into the top of the grinder, and they crank, and out comes this teacher.

Peter: But the elements in the course work that I value so much transcend the personality of the instructors and even the content of the course. Because I believe the intention of the instructors I really respect is to provoke the repeated question—“Given this information, what in the world are you going to do with it?” I think that is a primary element of what goes on in here in conference group. It’s not just a practical approach, it’s a challenge! It’s not only being practical, although that’s true to a certain extent, it’s also an intellectual challenge because the question is not just, “What are you going to teach tomorrow and how are you going to do it?” The real question is, “What are you going to do with your professional life, with your education in general?” That’s really what I’ve gotten out of this institution so far; the educational philosophy in a certain way.

In excerpts of stories such as A Discussion of Values, it is thus almost possible for case study readers to experience—following along with the conference group at this more mature stage in its development—the way the group provided a context in which members could begin to make significant links between subjective understandings of their experiences as learners in the college and their growing objective knowledge of how values inherent in their own teacher education program might translate to their classroom learning and teaching transactions.

End-of-the-Year Meetings

The end-of-the-year meetings saw even further development in the conference group’s practical knowing, as both the more deeply personal and the more socially significant implications of their teaching repeatedly became focal. The rhythm of the meetings had changed once again, and this time, although discussions were focused and sustained, the group now alternated—within every
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discussion—between attending, first, to the very personal-situational strands of
their knowing, and then to the more personal-social strands of their understand-
ing. Moreover, although the situational strand of knowledge was still important,
members concentrated more often on attempting to generalize points or,
alternatively, on pressing for still deeper and more complex understandings. All
were intensely involved in the culminating activities of celebrating progress,
summarizing, completing their work with children, separating, assessing, and
generally preparing themselves for their future roles as teachers.

Through eleven of the thirteen stories representing the final meeting
period, group members confirmed what they had come to know about the many
changes they and their students had undergone during the year. In the story
Having A Lot of Fun, Peter had finally come to see himself as a “real teacher” and
looked forward to his role with great enthusiasm. In Maybe a Change of Venue,
Carlos was discouraged and openly discussing the prospect of a role change. In
the story Taking Off, Lorraine had marked her own progress with a story of
Jimmy's progress. Jimmy, with Lorraine’s help, had not only learned to read in
the resource room, but he had “learned how to learn.” Lorraine said, “Now Jimmy
can stay in his classroom, now he knows how to manage his learning on his own.”

In the stories We Don't Need No Education, Fear of Failure, What is Being a
“Good Teacher,” and The Bureaucracy, group members frankly questioned much
of what they had learned of practice “in the real world.” The stories they told
allowed for the expression of a good deal of disillusionment and a considerable
measure of apprehension as they compared the “real” they had met in their field
placements with their ideals for being teachers. Now, with more insight, they
carefully anticipated the difficult personal and social implications of the work
that lay ahead. And, as members acknowledged themselves to be critics of the
educational system, they also tried to prepare themselves to learn how to meet
its challenges, how to sustain themselves in the very same schools and agencies
where they would also try to make changes.

Carlos: And I’m getting sick of all the political stuff that goes along with
people who have some very good intentions and who are trying to do
something that is good in schools. I feel we are constantly being disrupted.
I feel I am not given any kind of real support: I am given “encouragement,”
but no real support.

Maura: And you can't function for so long like that.

Carlos: I agree, and it worries me because, on the one hand, I really enjoy
my work in education, I really enjoy teaching kids.

Elizabeth: Well, I agree with Carlos. It is frustrating, because you come back
to graduate school, and you're idealistic, and you take courses, and you feel
that you really have something to give; that you can do something
productive, something worthwhile. But trying to translate that into some
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kind of a real job in schools that gives you space is a whole different ball game.

Peter: Remember that old rock song, "We Don't Need No Education" (sings) we don't need no mind control, we don't need your dark sarcasm.

Elizabeth: I think it's a horrendous song. But it has something to say. I don't want to just teach anymore. I want to make a difference where I can really make a difference. The kind of work I'm looking for is hard to find.

Carlos: It seems that society's priorities are really ass-backwards (agreement).

Peter: It seems as if society has established its priorities, and regardless of the rhetoric, they're not education.

Later on in the final meeting period, in the stories Where is Your Optimism and What Is The Ideology, the conference group persevered in searching for resources to help them in accomplishing their individual purposes in becoming teachers. In the first story, they looked into themselves, taking account, with now-trusted others, of their personal knowledge, their personal competencies. In the second story they asked for more information, for actual didactic lessons from each other. Carlos asked about history. "What are we going to do about all these things that happen to our kids because of the senseless bureaucracy? I would like to know something more about, to use a phrase that we've used here, about the ideology of this whole bureaucratic nonsense. How has it gotten to the point that its gotten?" And, Peter, who happened to be reading the right book, gave the lesson. "I'm reading this sociological study of the history of school teaching and schools, and there really is more similarity between the expensive private school and the public school than there is between today's school system and other ways people have been taught in this country." Carlos said, "You'll have to explain that one!" And Peter, and then the whole group, explained, first in terms of "this image of the teacher as the nineteenth century factory worker," then in terms of "finance... the economics."

Several meetings later, after many collectively given and taken "lessons," Lorraine summed up some of the social knowing that had occurred for the group in the story Why We're Here. "The most important thing is actually helping the kids learn and trying to find an alternative educational approach... trying to find an alternative to a lot [we encounter] in education. That's really why we're here. That's why I'm here."

By the twenty-third meeting, definite changes had occurred in the content, focus, climate, and style of the conference group meetings. Members were now ready to function not only in the familiar peer support or learning group styles, but more frequently as a responsible professional team concentrating on the portraits drawn of particular children, within particular school contexts, and tenaciously working together to press for further insights into the meanings of
the children’s behaviors presented for discussion.

Some excerpts from the story A Conference Group Case Conference suggest how the group could be seen to be functioning in productive synchrony, as they might later perform as special teachers in practice.

Significantly, Maura, no longer the “quiet” group member who had earlier seen herself as “I’m not the real teacher,” had come to this meeting ready to present an informal case report of Austin, a severely learning disabled child she worked with in her special education resource room at a local public school. Earlier in the same day, Maura as the student teacher, had been called upon to describe the child to a group of faculty members at her school as part of an inservice course on mainstreaming. Now she was eager to talk about Austin in her own conference group.

Maura: I talked about this one child...about Austin, who is known throughout the school as a behavior problem. When you say “Austin,” everybody at the school groans, rolls their eyes, and shakes their heads. It’s sad. Austin is twelve. I showed the teachers a few slides of him and talked about his behavior. I even had a nice time doing it.

Peter: That’s great! I know presenting isn’t your favorite activity.

Carlos: I bet you had it all down, you were really on the case, you talked very knowledgeably. I see Gail was there, and she’s nodding her head vigorously.

Maura: I felt a little uncomfortable about presenting Austin because he has come to trust me so, and all the other teachers’ attitudes towards him are so negative; so if there were to be any negative feedback to him from the teachers, I was afraid he might take it as me betraying him.

Elizabeth: Maura is he really that fragile?

Maura: Yes (sighs). I’m afraid he really is. He’s not [even] officially assigned to resource room, but no one wants him in their class, so he comes, and I work with him there. He’s in the fifth grade; held over once. He’s one of six kids and has no relationship with any members of his family.

Lorraine: Why hasn’t he been looked at by the evaluation team? Doesn’t his teacher think he needs to be referred?

Maura: She doesn’t like him. He’s only being evaluated by me. I’m the only one who works with him. He’s kicked out of class constantly and spends ninety percent of the day in the hall. Nobody likes him. They just put up with him.

Peter: Do the kids like him?

Maura: No. He pushes. He’ll step on the backs of their sneakers, he’ll push them, and he’s a big kid.

Carlos: Does he like the other kids?

Maura: Oh yes, definitely. He tries to do anything to please, but he always screws it up—always.
Lorraine: Is it because he doesn't know how to? Is he aggressive and hostile or friendly and aggressive?

Maura: Well, Austin just doesn't understand the consequences of what he is doing to another child. His cognitive level is about five in many ways. He'll push a kid hard or take something or pick up a six-year-old by the neck.

Elizabeth: Is there any remorse afterward? Does he understand why he's getting the reactions?

Maura: I don't think he can read the reaction nonverbally, the other person's reaction. I think he is "socially learning disabled" for that reason. It's quite complicated. But, at this point I know he can't read the facial and other body language.

At the end of this two-hour-long discussion of Austin, and Maura's observations of him, the group had intensively worked together as supportive collaborators and cohesive members of a professional team; inquiring, broadly, into the multiple meanings of a child's behaviors, special circumstances, strengths and weaknesses, and thereby into the implications of all of these factors for teaching him. On close examination, it seemed almost as if in this "case conference," the group had told two stories. On the surface, the told story had centered on presenting the case of Austin, Maura's student. All the formal elements had been included—description of the child, the behavior, Maura's observations, analysis and interpretation of these observations, formal and informal assessment procedures, theoretical rationales for a variety of possible teaching plans. The informal untold story had, however, been the personal story of a student teacher learning to advocate for her student. The untold story was about Maura, the student teacher, who had taken on the responsibility of acting as Austin's advocate with the mission of helping to teach him, of making sure he received appropriate professional attention and, at the same time, of attempting to transform the attitudes of the professional staff toward him. This time the practical knowing transmitted to the group had come about through Maura's face-to-face communication of her profound investment in her student, Austin, in her demonstrated commitment to helping him, and through the group's consequent identification with that investment. Once again, all of the strands of knowing were used; the personal, the situational, the experiential, the social, and the theoretical. But, the most salient content of this practical knowing was about the enormous personal commitment and sophisticated social knowledge teachers need to move through the boundaries of the system in their roles as professional advocates for children.

By the time of its last official meeting a substantial amount of discussion relating to the group's impending termination had already occurred. Indeed, the last six meetings had included many personal as well as theoretical references to
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the concepts of attachment and separation. The conference group seemed ready, then, when as their advisor, I asked them a teacher's summary question: "I would like you to reflect a bit on having been in the group here, what it meant to you, to say what it means for a teacher education program...what might be translatable from this experience into your future work?" Then, group members diligently devoted the entire last meeting to a thoughtful evaluation of the graduate school as a context for teacher education and to the personal meanings of their own participation in the conference group. Now, as each person told about what participation in the group had meant to him or her, the practical knowledge of all the members combined, as it had in many prior round-table discussions, finally culminating in a whole story the conference group told to itself—a story appropriately titled *Pretty Much an Amalgam*.

*Lorraine:* I'm having a hard time separating it all. I tend to think of the whole year.

*Carlos:* You're talking about separating different facets of a gestalt.

*Lorraine:* Many programs don't require twelve credits of supervised field work, of advisement. In most places you get away with one semester. It's not so intense.

*Peter:* Is that true? No full year of advisement?

*Gail:* Was it an intense experience?

*Lorraine:* Yes, but a very valuable intense experience. I'm sorry I'm not going to have it next year when I'm floundering my way in the field. Because it's so nice to come in here and be able to say, "Hey, guess what?" or "Oh God, what do I do now?"

*Carlos:* After this group there's going to be a feeling of isolation, I predict. I find I need something like this, colleagues to bounce things off of. It's that kind of thing you need. In most other places people get together and complain. They do at my school.

*Lorraine:* There's a big difference between complaining and discussing.

*Carlos:* I've certainly been bolstered here...in my feelings of frustration about battling the system out there.

*Lorraine:* What we do here is...have a chance to vent...but people are asking questions here so we understand better what it is we're thinking about. It becomes a growth experience rather than complaining.

*Carlos:* And that is a very important distinction. Here you get some perspective.

*Lorraine:* But in our group it doesn't have to be about education. Some other groups focus on just education.

*Peter:* I think they've missed a lot then.

*Lorraine:* Basically we've done what the whole Bank Street process is, how we are all whole people teaching...teachers working with the whole child.
Carlos: You're right Lorraine. Just before I go get some sugar (pouring tea for the group), I think the word is “gestalt,” because that's what we are here (standing up and pointing to the whole group, himself and each member). I think I'm a gestalt of many different parts, and so are you, and so are you, and you can't separate the parts very easily because one affects the other...and so do we here. I'll be right back with the sugar.

Lorraine: And that's the Carlos Morales theory of conference groups (laughter)!

Maura: I look at the group more as a support system which has been a central experience for me here at the college from the start. Later, maybe without an advisor. It's the support here that all teachers need. Here you learn how to support each other out in the schools. It's the kind of maintenance you want in schools.

Elizabeth: I found it an invaluable experience, particularly in terms of the tremendous variation in skills, background, philosophy, personality—to have worked with these, discussed, disagreed. This was an experience that money couldn't have bought—a ground-level experience for learning what's important—how do I listen, how do I get you to listen. The constant input here of very different age levels and backgrounds has been good for me this year. The sort of batting around the bilingual issue with Carlos and really listening to him and his feelings and sort of integrating them with what I felt, and then coming up with some ideas of my own. Also, this group has not been homogeneous in its emphasis—the early childhood, the bilingual school, the treatment center kids, the hospital clinic, the resource room. I'm working with children who are very very young, and here, in the group, it's a whole mixed bag that you really have to sit and think hard about.

Carlos: I think people here are challenging to a great extent. I certainly come in here, and I have to think. Not that I have to be on my guard, but I have to think, to be sharp.

Peter: There is intensity here because we're committed.

Elizabeth: Part of it is that there is a connection to people, relationships—because as personal as this college tries to get, it doesn't always happen in classes, and conference group supplies that. For me it was a real need.

Peter: I don't think there were any limitations on us in this group. Anyway, when this group started, there was some confusion in my mind as to exactly what we were doing here. Was this a discussion group closely related to school and my work—getting feedback and all—or was this some kind of notion of ongoing counseling and support, or were we going to be given reading assignments? I wondered if I was supposed to actively integrate, aggressively integrate all these. And I think the final result was pretty much an amalgam of all those things.

It is hoped that the excerpts from this last story, Pretty Much An Amalgam, told by the group in its last meeting may not only serve to illustrate the
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development of teachers’ practical knowledge, but also may be seen to have provided some practical contextual knowledge of the possible role of a conference group as an important part of an integrated advisement curriculum within teacher education.

Conclusions and Implications

In a concrete way the conference group case study directly links a theoretical conception of practical knowledge with a specific instance of teacher education practice. Thus, it provides longitudinal and integrated documentation of a conference group as a pedagogical process, together with a detailed description of teachers’ practical knowing in evolution. As a sample, drawn from one professional practice for learning to teach, the case study functions to further ground our understanding of the practical knowledge strands, as it simultaneously shows us how the personal, social, situational, experiential, and theoretical strands of knowing progressively become ever more embedded in the tacit knowing of the becoming teacher’s very being. And although the strands of the conference group teachers’ knowing are presented as conceptually separable, the study as a whole emphasizes how, in fact, they are tightly interwoven in the contextual medium of the teachers’ field experiences; in their conscious reflections on those experiences; and, significantly, in the group’s own collective experiences in thinking, talking, and feeling together.

By following the progress of the conference group’s process and its conversations over a considerable period of time, the study enables us not only to appreciate the tremendous complexity and variety of the practical knowing being constructed, but may also serve to underscore the idea that teachers need a considerable period of time—within the teacher education curriculum—in order to learn how to reflect on practice; to learn how, in community, to value their own knowledge, to value equally the knowledge of each other, and to value the professional project of continuous elaboration of one’s practical knowledge.

A related benefit of the conference group study is that such a candid and personal portrait of practice—six “wide awake” (Schutz, 1967, p. 213) teachers actively engaged in learning and knowing together—may serve to assist us in reconceptualizing the often taken-for-granted role of the small-group seminar, and in reviewing it as an essential informal occasion for learning. Because the case study offers a fine-grained and contextualized view of the experiential world of the conference group, we may be moved to revalue and to appreciate more fully the relevance and the potential of the small-group seminar, or conference group, as a pedagogical process uniquely suited to both the mediated and the tacit learning involved in the construction, transmission, and development of teachers’ practical knowledge (Sternberg & Caruso, 1985).

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In formulating the study, it was the posing of the question about how teachers’ practical knowledge might be learned during the teacher education experience that resulted in the discovery and development of the storytelling metaphor as an appropriate means for conceptually structuring our understanding of the conversational exchanges taking place in the conference group. Therefore, an important result of the study is the provision of a perspective that enables us to think of the stories teachers share with each other as “fundamental particles” out of which, in group interaction, the significant “matter” of the teacher’s practical knowledge is constructed and by means of which it is conveyed. In this perspective the dynamic small-group process becomes a powerful opportunity for the spontaneous telling and responding to the told that, in turn, functions to further catalyze the integration of the thinking, feeling, and knowing.

By means of the storytelling framework, individual teachers’ contributions to the group discussion were highlighted and shown to be equally valuable and equally insightful, although distinctively different, parts of a whole construction. Thus, by viewing various conversational events in the group as stories, the study also serves to emphasize the “multiple realities” (Schutz, 1964, p. 97) brought to bear in the group’s collective reflections and, thereby, to reveal an important potential of the conference group for the socially mediated construction and development of teachers’ practical knowledge.

Furthermore, I would suggest that the study, in contributing the conceptual tool of stories and storytelling to the investigation of developing practical knowledge in the conference group, reminds us that given the luxury of time, the professional task of weekly conference group meetings, and the safety of a respectful community of peers, becoming teachers themselves quite capably fashion an essential portion of their own teacher education curriculum. In a significant sense, the stories told and retold in the group become the spontaneously generated descriptive case studies—full of contextual knowledge—that teachers need to study in order to “ground and illustrate abstract principles of learning and instruction” (Clark & Lampert, 1986, p. 31; see also Brophy, 1988; Carter & Richardson, 1988; Erikson, 1986).

Since completion of the study, certain practically useful personal-professional implications have become apparent in my continuing work as an advisor and conference group leader. In an important way, I seem to understand the conference group activity more profoundly now as an intensely complicated and productive occasion for learning and teaching—as a powerful pedagogical process of meaning construction (Bruner, 1990). In thinking about the group’s thinking, as I have always done, about members’ questions, conceptions, misconceptions, and about why members haven’t yet asked certain questions of
questioned certain situations, I now think more in terms of framing questions to
myself. For example, I may ask myself directly about how, specifically, students
make use of theory, when they do, and when the theoretical strand of knowing
does not seem to come into play in discussions. I ask myself why, and then how,
at some appropriate point for a particular student, I might approach bringing
theory as a resource into consciousness. I think about the other strands of
knowing in similar ways, and I listen for them. Indeed, the quality of my listening
is somewhat different now—as caring as before, but perhaps, more focused. All
of the talk exchanged is significant. This does not mean that everything said is
equally important in a conversation; it means only that I listen with heightened
awareness to certain details of talk that I now understand as essential parts of
important expanded perspectives a student may be in the midst of trying to
articulate, in the midst of coming to understand. The act of knowing—of making
meaning in the company of others—is, I now appreciate in a new way, more than
the "knowledge is power" we so frequently remark about. For teachers learning
to teach, it is also an intensely powerful activity leading to the possibility of
taking multiple perspectives—perspectives essential for the teacher’s develop-
ment of a critical consciousness.

There is much ferment in the field of teacher education just now; many
ambitious proposals for fundamental reconception, restructuring, and reform.
Recent research on the several areas of teachers’ knowledge (Carter, 1990;
Shulman, 1986, 1987), especially teachers’ practical knowledge (Clandinin &
Connelly, 1986; Elbaz, 1983) and on professional education in general (Schön,
1983, 1987) has almost universally confirmed the view that “the ideal teacher is
reflective, deliberate, and collaborative” (Woolfolk, 1989, p. 5). The questions
to be answered next are: “What exactly do reflective teachers know that allows
them to critically analyze teaching; in other words, what do thoughtful teachers
think about?” and “How do teachers learn to be reflective?” (Woolfolk, 1989, p.
5). Undoubtedly, many more studies of the different local cultures and processes
in which teachers learn to teach are needed (Carter, 1990; Zeichner, 1986, 1987).

Perhaps the case study described in this report can be seen to offer a brief
glimpse of one such process in action. For it may be read to suggest how a
conference group process that takes seriously into account the “interweaving of
cognitive, affective, and group dynamic effects” (Schön, 1983, p. 322) can, in
fact, be recognized to promote honest and critical reflection on practice.

Notes
1. Ten broad content themes surfaced in the early meetings (meetings one through
six), recurred, and continued to become elaborated and reflected on by the conference
group throughout its life. The themes were identified as the following: (1) individual
children, their special learning needs, and building curriculum; (2) establishing positive
interpersonal relationships for learning and teaching; (3) special teaching methods, the
field of special education as a changing educational domain, and the multiple roles of the
special teacher; (4) becoming a special teacher, one’s personal background, present self-
image, and developing professional commitment; (5) learning to become a responsible
authority figure for children, and developing knowledge and confidence in exercising
effective and fair management of students; (6) the problem of establishing positive adult
relationships across multiple lines of responsibility; (7) conflicting educational values
and the problem of defining one’s philosophy of education; (8) theoretical ideas as
resources for understanding, and the relationships between theory and practice; (9) the
problem of teaching and social inequality: (a) social class differences, (b) bilingual
education, and (c) social responsibility; and (10) The college as a context for teacher
education, and group members’ evaluations of participation in the conference group.

2. In this report the names of conference group members are pseudonyms in order
to protect privacy. The names and locations of schools have also been changed. Excerpts
of dialogue are largely verbatim quotations. Some minor editorial liberties were taken in
condensing very long passages or for the preservation of clarity and continuity.

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