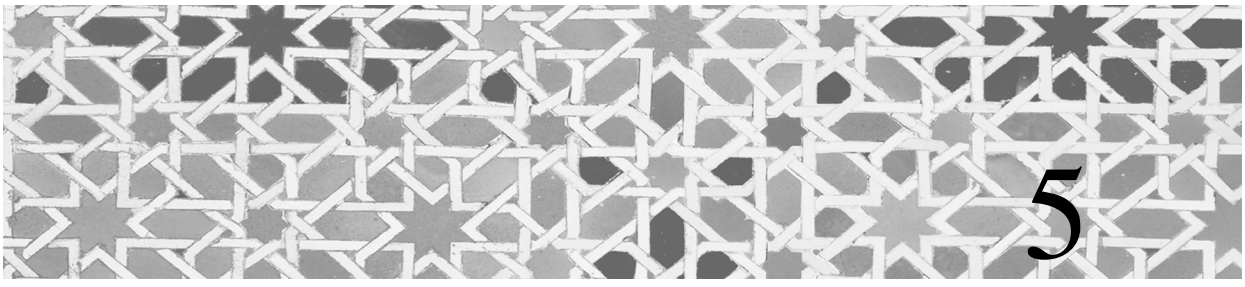

5

Action Research and the Personal Turn

Sandra Hollingsworth, Anthony Cody, Mary Dybdahl, Leslie Turner Minarik, Jennifer Davis-Smallwood and Karen Manheim Teel

The authors of this chapter are six members of a 20-year action research collaborative – self-named 'The Learning to Teach Collaborative' or the 'Berkeley Group' because of our initial formation as beginning teachers/researchers at UC Berkeley. We were invited to join our friends in this Handbook because of the personal 'results' we've had while engaging in two decades of collaborative research. In reflective conversations and emails preparing for this chapter, we posed some questions to help surface the major themes that braided our work.

1 What drew us together in the beginning – and kept us meeting for 20 years?
2 Which guiding principles, if any, did we follow?
3 What counted as evidence when we engaged in everyday action research – inside and outside of the collaborative?
4 How and what did we learn from each other?
5 What kinds of transformative turns have we experienced from the praxis of participating in our regular conversations, taking what we've learned into our lives and work, and bringing our revisited experiences back to the group for reflective analyses?

Characteristic of our group's processes, we won't address the questions in sequential order, but weave them through the narratives we're co-creating. We'll begin with a historical and theoretical reflection on our group's beginning, and Sam's (or Sandra Hollingsworth's) reflections on the ways our collaborative conversations compelled her (like the others) to re-examine long-held conceptions

of both teaching and research. Then Leslie, Mary, Karen, Jennifer and Anthony will speak to how our conversational analyses played out in both formal and informal action research projects in their classrooms. Along the way, we'll integrate the personal, political and professional turns in our lives that this conversational journey encouraged. We'll close by highlighting the major themes that recurred through the years.

TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTION RESEARCH

Sam: My first academic job was at UC Berkeley. My first course was called 'Action Research' (AR). I hadn't heard of the concept in grad school, so I read everything I could starting with Lawrence Stenhouse (1975). Stenhouse's traditional research approach in a collaborative setting made good sense to me, given my cognitive psychology background.

That first AR class in 1986 had four international students. They developed rather formulaic action research proposals to take back to their countries and study education. They didn't learn much in that course and neither did I.

The last AR course I taught at Berkeley in 1991 was much different. I had gone through a sea change in the way I viewed research, learning, and living.[1] Here's how it happened. Along with the AR class, I also taught literacy to a K-12 cohort of student teachers – including four co-authors of this chapter. With the help of doctoral student Marsha, I studied the impact of my teaching on students' learning. Marsha observed my literacy classes, and then met with the students during the year-long course to find out what they were learning. We didn't discuss what she found until she gave me a paper reporting her study at the end of the year. I wasn't worried. I was an accomplished scholar and public school teacher of literacy, even though I was a beginning teacher at Berkeley. I knew I'd taught well.

Marsha wrote that my students didn't learn much at all about literacy. Their attention was focused on the immediate needs of the classroom management, exploring the political landscape, and trying to have a life beyond school. I was shocked. I wondered why they had learned so little of what I taught them. So I invited 12 of them, along with doctoral research assistant Karen and some of her peers, to engage in a collaborative conversation with me after they graduated and began their first years of teaching. After a year or so, the group size settled at six.

A COMMON PASSION

We wondered why the others didn't stay with us. We thought perhaps they were uncomfortable with our topics. The 'core group' was dedicated to and focused on teaching for social justice. We were very clear about the role school played in the disenfranchisement of people who happened to be poor. We knew that we could

predict student achievement by zip code. We envisioned a different possibility and wanted to explore it through AR.

AND THEN THERE'S 'THE FOOD'

As we all know, great conversations and intellectual work need sustenance. As we talked we enjoyed Karen's salads, Leslie's soups, Anthony's pies and cookies, Mary's and Sam's entrées, Jennifer's ice cream, and California wine. Sitting over those pot-luck dinners once a month and free from the constraints of university course/evaluation systems, we began to do collaborative action research studies on topics we really wanted to learn: the inequities in urban school districts, the effects of poverty on learning, the false authority of high stakes testing. It was only at the end of their first year of teaching that these teachers felt the need to learn to teach reading.

THE POLITICAL JOURNEY

Sam continues: Politically, the move to the conversational format for support and research involved a shift in power from my previous role as these teachers' course instructor. I had to change my interactions so that I was no longer telling teachers what I knew (as the group's 'expert' on the topic of reading instruction) and checking to see if they learned it, to a process of working with them as a co-learner through non-evaluative conversation. To accomplish that shift, I had to get still and listen; I also had to struggle publicly with what I was learning. Our change in relationship now required that I look at changes in my own learning as a researcher and a teacher educator as equally important in determining the success of *teachers'* knowledge transformations (see Hollingsworth, 1992).

We found it was not only *knowing* about teaching and learning that led both to our transformational turns as teachers and individuals, but also our *enacted* and successful teaching of literacy to both children and adolescents. To accomplish such success, we had to go beyond traditional assessments of students' reading. We had to tackle underlying political issues even as we selected our curriculum and our evaluation modes. The action research stories we lived came from continuous questioning into the process of our actions as literacy instructors dedicated to educate for a more equitable society.

Mary told us about her action research project on fourth grade literacy comprehension in her poverty-laden classroom: I began to measure comprehension by looking to see if they were able to move from the topic of Rosa Parks into our own lives. Are they able to see the significance of political activity? Are they able to see the power of the individual in the bigger picture? Are they able to see how important cooperation is in something like the Montgomery bus boycott, so that

children can see that's a skill, that's not just a school skill, but it's a life skill? Those are all ways that I would measure whether or not we were successful. (For more on this story, see Hollingsworth, et al., 1994.)

CONVERSATIONS IN A FEMINIST KEY

From Sam's perspective, the approach we developed to both facilitate and learn from collaborative conversation is but *one example* of feminist research – in which the impact of the method affects everyone involved. As summarized from a classic piece by Sandra Harding (1987), feminist inquiries ask questions that lead to changes in oppressive situations – usually those of women, but also applicable to men and children in underpowered life roles. The context of this research site, beginning teachers' worlds, encompassed the feature of 'women's experiences' in the broader sense.

Although we never all agreed that feminist theory could explain our interactions, Anthony summed up what we all did agree on. 'We shared a sense of dedication to social justice and the well-being of our students – and ourselves' (emailed comment on an earlier draft of this chapter, July 15, 2007). Leslie explained how our continuous conversation played out in her life as an educator: I have often said that I found my voice as a result of participating in this group. I was committed to teaching in the inner city. I was committed to being an advocate for students. But I see now that the system, in my experience, was and is set up to silence teachers. They are referred to as professionals, responsible for outcomes, but rarely listened to when they share their knowledge of ways to create better student learning and school environments. For many years I was able to be the advocate I wanted to be, to be the critical voice for school improvement. That happened because everyone in our AR group had the same commitment and supported me as I voiced concerns loudly to my school and my district.

Jennifer reported to us that the validation after validation that she felt from this group made her self-perceptions of her strengths as a teacher and person real: Our group reminds me of my son Asher's play group. I could see that the kids in the group developed at different rates – and Asher was more developed in some tasks and less in others. I knew my kid was great without the playgroup input, but seeing him in the playgroup and knowing that the other moms thought he was great too helped me have a more realistic perspective of his greatness. In a similar way, this group has had an incredible impact on each of us because we've all been validated in our different stages. It's OK that we're different in the tasks we can do. Like, I don't write – but I teach! and it's OK. What we each bring to the conversations and the respect that we have for each other makes us safe to express ourselves and make mistakes. Those kinds of conversations have scaffolded our thinking and given us permission to become the risk-taking practitioners that we have become (phone conversation on this chapter, Nov. 15, 2007).

RELATIONAL KNOWING

As we hope we're making clear, our sustained and deepening relationships with each other, our students and their families was the bedrock for our inquiries. We were fearless in tackling any injustice that came between the school and our students. However, in contrast with our teacher education experiences, we did not respond to issues raised by giving each other concrete solutions or 'answers', but by telling related stories (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). In that way we both validated the importance of an issue, and heard varying practice-based analyses to incorporate into our own experiential understanding of the issues.

One of the most powerful examples came from an analysis of the inequitable power of high stakes testing. When reporting Parnessa's low standardized literacy test scores to her grandmother, Mary learned that 'success' inside and outside of school were viewed differently: The African-American grandmother brought the point home to me. She took righteous exception to the failing marks I reported for her granddaughter. She said, 'What does this say about my child – that she's a moron, she's stupid and slow? Does it say that I read to her every night? Does it say that her mother's in jail and her daddy died just last year? Does it tell you that she's getting her life together, slowly? Does it say that she's learning songs for Sunday school? Does it say she wants to be a doctor? What does this piece of paper say about my baby? I don't want it near her. She needs good things. She's had enough in her life telling her that she's no good. She doesn't need this and I won't have it. I refuse to sign a piece of paper that says my child is no good (see Hollingsworth et al., 1994: 29).

Sam: By listening to open-ended and complex verbalized analyses of the pressing problems of beginning teachers it seemed that such conversational processes could provide the scaffolding to support all of our goals – the researcher's need to study learning to teach and the beginning teachers' need for support to learn about complex classroom issues. I learned what teaching issues were raised, why they surfaced, how the teachers worked through and made sense of them – and the results of their sense-making. Consequently, I changed both my beliefs about the content and process of supporting teachers' learning, and my own pedagogical approach to teacher education courses (see Hollingsworth, et al., 1993).

To investigate the complex social processes that contributed to learning, we learned in a dynamic understanding of self in relationship to both self and others across multiple contexts. Good classical theoretical work has been done in this area, including that of Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (2000), Maxine Greene (1979), Arthur Jersild (1955), and Nell Noddings (1984). The heart of this work is that knowing through relationship to self and others is central to teaching the child. Maxine Greene (1979) wrote that teachers who are alienated to themselves are also alienated from their students. Good teaching requires relational knowing of self and others in changing dynamics. Relational knowing thus retains an element of selves and knowledge becoming, not 'learned and fixed'.

Mary reminded Sam of Maxine Greene's 'Shudders of identity' (1996) when she spoke at our November 15, 2007 meeting about the group support that accompanied her changes from teacher to union leader to principal.

Similar to Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) notion of personal practical knowledge – or narrative knowing, embodied in persons, embracing moral, emotional and aesthetic senses, and enacted in situations – the concept of knowing through relationship, or relational knowing, involves both the instantiation (or generation of thought) and the reflection on what is currently known in social and political settings. The narrative discourse that displays relational knowing is not the simple recall of mentally-indexed information, rather it suggests the characters' slippery representations of the world, which, kaleidoscope-like, change form as the scenes and settings change (see Nespor and Barylske, 1991). Selves who come to know in relationship enter a hermeneutic circle as conversational participants or persons whose paths through life have fallen together (Rorty, 1967). Relational knowing does not rest in contemplation but becomes clarified in action (see Hollingsworth et al., 1994).

Jennifer translated the theory of relational knowing into everyday language: Somebody in the group would be more articulate about it, but overall I'd say this group works because of how we all come together from different areas of life and education – the parts just fit. There's a word to describe it, like dynamics (that's not it) or something else, but I can't think of it (e-mailed communication, November 16, 2007).

Mary gave us an example of relational knowing from her classroom action on literacy in the Rosa Parks project: When children did not achieve the intended literacy goals, I didn't just question specific behaviors or understandings; I also investigated students' emotional relationship to the topic – and to me as teacher. Let me talk about the Rosa Parks project. Celeste had real resistance to the whole project and I speculated about that with her. I asked her whether it made her uncomfortable. She said no, she thought that Rosa Parks was boring; she was more interested in Dr. Martin Luther King. I … suggested to her perhaps that I was the one that chose the topic and that she was much more interested in choosing her own topic. She said yeah, that was it but … I doubt that because she really didn't have a replacement. And I wonder if the issues of the racial tension were such that it was hard for her. She was one of the kids who persisted in coming back to the issue of Martin Luther King's relationship with white people. It was of interest to her, it was a challenge to her, and I think she saw [resisting the study of Rosa Parks] as a challenge to me. 'Classroom resister' is an important function she plays in the classroom. I think that may have been part of it. Very complicated (Hollingsworth et al., 1994).

As it turns out, the importance of relationships in action research follows long-established traditions. Peter Reason (2005) quotes Stephen Kemmis:

> The first step in action research turns out to be central: the formation of a communicative space… and to do so in a way that will permit people to achieve mutual understanding and consensus about what to do, in the knowledge that the legitimacy of any conclusions and

> decisions reached by participants will be proportional to the degree of authentic engagement of those concerned (p. 272).

Other contemporary work putting relationships at the center of action research comes from Rogers et al., (2006), Comber et al., (2001), and Moore (2005). In establishing the criteria for evaluating college students' learning about education, Mary Moore points to these outcomes:

- Relationships with self: Does education enhance critical self-awareness and character-development while it raises students' awareness of their deepest passions, values, and concerns and their relationship with a wider world?
- Relations with difference: Does education enhance knowledge, appreciation, understanding, negotiation, and even reconciliation across communities of difference? (p. 45)

It seems our attention to relational knowing puts us in good company.

INTIMACY

Sam: As our conversations continued and our trust grew, we began to interrogate even more personal and difficult issues for us: identities, loves, biases, power relations, and fears. We were developing a 'deep politic' (Gitlin, 2005) that went back into our lives and work. We were a varied group: female and male, heterosexuals, lesbians, mixed-race and Caucasian, parents or not, with varying levels of risk tolerance (depending on the day and the issue). Across three meetings in 2001, we fought each other about the racial characterization of Karen in her powerful book with Jennifer Obidah: *Because of the Kids: Facing Racial and Cultural Differences in Schools* (2001).[3] We frequently turned to Jennifer when we wanted a check-in on our own racist stances. We argued about power relations in our conversations: who speaks, who's silenced? Because we cared so intrinsically for each other, we wouldn't change a topic until the issues were articulated and received – even if it took several meetings.

Jennifer spoke to the differences in our group: The make-up of the group – how we are alike and different: our backgrounds – socioeconomic, racial, gender, family commitments, where we were raised, how we were raised, life experiences that brought us to teaching, the environments we teach/taught in (not the same as each other), probably other stuff – is key to why the group works for me. Then there's the respect for how those differences and alikenesses (like that word?) affect our teaching and our reasoning about teaching that develops over the years. Can't forget honesty in communication either (Phone conversation, Nov. 15, 2007).

Leslie summarized her thoughts: Although our goals have changed somewhat over 20 years, there have been several guiding principles that are foundational to the group. I personally think that these principles are responsible for keeping us together when our group goals and personal goals have changed, our educational

roles have changed, our lives have changed, we have moved to other cities and schools, and our views about education itself have changed. As a group we have always been committed to being honest, capable of solving our own classroom problems together, and able to listen well and support each other as we've traveled through difficult personal and professional situations. Most importantly we have cared about each other, indicating a high level of trust that was critical to sustaining our 20-year relationship. Therefore, we could correct, question and push each other on uncomfortable issues while always feeling cared-for. The results of our learning were cast as powerful narratives that we lived together and differently. (Emailed communication, July 15, 2007).

Jennifer: This group has become an integral part of who each of us is – it's hard to articulate, but we have internalized the convictions and hopes and dreams of the group. (Phone conference discussing the chapter, Nov. 15, 2007).

THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Many others have found that conversational inquiries such as ours produce narrative text (e.g. Florio-Ruane, 1997; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). MaryBeth Gasman and her colleagues (2004) conducted a narrative inquiry to understand how race and class impact learning in the academy. They cite Ellis and Bochner (2000) explaining that this kind of research 'breaches the conventional separation of researcher and subjects, highlights emotional experience, and thus challenges the absence of subjectivity in traditional forms of research. … [The] narrative text refuses the impulse to abstract and explain, stressing the journey over the destination' (p. 744 in Gasman et al., p. 692).

Most of the time, our action research narratives came from conversational analyses of our current questions about our work in education: Anthony's puzzles as he moved from the classroom to the District Office in Oakland, where he was now in charge of other teachers' professional development; Mary's politically and emotionally challenging first year as a Principal in Vallejo; Karen's evolving understanding of issues of race in her Richmond middle school classroom; Sam's struggle to survive as a first year Department Chair at San José State University; Leslie's recurring political issues of a primary teacher remaining in the same district for 20 years; and Jennifer's educational questions as she moved from construction work to teaching, to promoting farming in learning, and now as an infiltrator of a home school collaborative in Northern California. We didn't usually speak about, write or finalize the 'results' of our collaborative action research inquiries – we lived them. And in living those experiences, then bringing them back to the group, we all gained new insights into educational issues and actions.

Leslie reflected on her personal changes: This way of operating has become, over the years, the natural way I look at my classroom and my teaching practice. For example, the way in which I set my classroom up to encourage personal responsibility was a direct outgrowth of an action research project I did when the

group was thinking of doing a new book. My understanding of the timing required for second grade students during creative writing was a result of having learned how to take field notes. A research project on gender discrimination in a classroom had most amazing and unexpected outcomes which caused me to make a huge change in my understanding of how my students think about their environments outside of the classroom and how I could better teach them to work with each other free of gender bias. Our action research conversations also had a profound impact on my understanding of how students learn. And the key to this process was that the issues we took on were so personal (being of real importance in my classroom at the time I was doing the research) that the lessons I learned have stayed with me for all these years (emailed communication on an earlier draft of this chapter, July 15, 2008).

PUBLIC READINGS OF OUR COLLABORATION

As we clarified and articulated our sense of power as teachers and researchers, our group decided to take professional action and reach out beyond the classroom to share our developing expertise with other audiences. Then our collaboration took the form of formal action research projects: Leslie's understanding of the role of gender on primary children's learning; Anthony's literacy-based efforts to get immigrant adolescents engaged in science; Karen's and my (Sam) learning to teach adolescents how to read their way out of poverty; Mary's quest to understand the nature of relationships in learning. None of us will ever forget Jennifer's debate with John Elliot on the language of action research at a conference in 1995.

Leslie reflected on our going public with our research: Over our years together we have done 'formal' action research that resulted in publications and presentations at conferences. In all of those cases we collected data in a variety of ways and spent many hours discussing what we did, how the research went and how we felt it changed our practice. I learned the 'tools' of action research: how to set a goal or define a problem, to take frequent and informative field notes, to set up assessments and collect data, to use taped conversations with students and be able to summarize my findings. I learned such skills from our collaborative as they were modeled by different members and as they were practiced and supported by our collaborative projects (emailed communication, July 15, 2007).

We've described our learning in many different venues (e.g., Hollingsworth, 1992; Hollingsworth et al., 1994; Hollingsworth and Dybdahl, 1995; Hollingsworth and Dybdahl, 2006; Hollingsworth et al., 1993; Hollingsworth, et al., 1992; Lock and Minarik, 1995). Sam reflected on our 'going public': For me, the presentations and publications were *essential* for my career. They weren't for most of the others (except Karen, who is now a university professor). The teachers had to take 'sick leave' to present their research at national conferences. I often worried about that – I was gaining professionally from our conversations, and they weren't – was that OK? Of course I knew (as others did), that it was the

coming together to unpack and validate our changing selves that was the real reward of doing this kind of intensive work. Yet – I remained first author.

On the other hand, I now saw my role as a professor and scholar in many different ways. I stopped evaluating my students' learning (I turned that responsibility over to them.) I moved far away from psychologically based research. My new form of 'research' where I reflected on my own personal learnings along with others in the study – earned me the critique of 'navel gazing' at one professional conference. Yes, it hurt, but I had a conversational action research space where I could work it out and decide what action needed taking. In this case it was anticipating such reactions and learning how to express myself more powerfully.

SO WHAT?

So, we've come to the end of our allotted page length and our story. What was the 'outcome' of our 20 years together? Well, you've probably already determined that we didn't change public education in the direction of social justice. Topics raised at our meeting to discuss this chapter on Nov. 15, 2007 revealed our disappointment and anger at the educational system, but validation in our personal turns during our work together.

Leslie: The current oppressive accountability movement stands as a solid barrier to creating more equitable schools. When it's time, I'll leave the classroom being the teacher I wanted to be, not the way the system wanted me to become.

Anthony: We changed our classrooms and our roles, but that was not enough.

Mary: It's exhausting and aggravating work, but personally transforming because of this group.

Karen: There's something amazing about how deeply this group can go.

In fact, our 20-year collaboration did help all of us and many other teachers and students see schooling, learning and themselves in different perspectives. We have citations, letters and verbal feedback that strongly support that point. In summary, our collective action research was based on principles of education for social justice, and involved learning to teach through the support of on-going conversations, a passionate belief in ourselves and our students as knowledge creators and inquirers, a willingness to create eclectic approaches to teaching and action research characterized by relational integrity, and a propensity to look critically at both our students and ourselves in relationship to evaluate the results. We also hope, in some ephemeral way, that we've shaped the way others think about the importance of the personal turn in action research.

NOTES

1 This play on words refers to Rorty (1967) writing on the linguistic turn.

2 Karen was a member of that final class. In response to this chapter, she explained she'd rather refer to our work as Teacher Research rather than Action Research. 'Teacher Research is, of course,

specifically about educators investigating their own practice and then acting on their findings in an ongoing, cyclical way. That is the process you taught us in graduate school which empowered me so much and transformed my thinking about teaching'.

3 That was only one of Karen's many books. Her new one is forthcoming from Teacher's College Press: *Building Racial and Cultural Competence in the Classroom: Strategies From Urban Educators.*

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