(RE)ACTION AND MANAGING DILEMMAS: WORKING TOWARD A CLEARER PICTURE OF NEW TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE

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Each time I sit down to write about teaching, I am awed by the complexity of the task. For despite all of the scholarship, the stories, the personal and vicarious experiences in schools, the images in television and films, what exactly constitutes the work of teaching is still contested, debated, researched, and somewhat mysterious. Imagine, then, how difficult it is to ascertain what professional knowledge is necessary for teaching, never mind *good* teaching. In fact, describing and defining this relationship between the practice of teaching and the knowledge needed for practice has been described as "the conundrum of teacher education"1 and is at the core of current debates about what new teachers need to know and teacher quality. As I tackle this problem, I find myself returning often to a vantage point I know and understand fairly well – my own personal experiences as a new elementary teacher, and a novice teacher researcher. One quote in particular got me to thinking that approaching the problem of professional knowledge from a personal standpoint might be a productive way to begin. Magdalene Lampert (1985) said:

> Our understanding of the work of teaching might be enhanced if we explored what teachers do when they choose to endure and make use of conflict. Such understanding will be difficult to acquire if we approach all of the problems in teaching as if they are solvable, and if we assume that what is needed to solve them is knowledge that can be produced outside the classroom. In order to pursue the questions I have listed here, we shall need to adopt an image of teaching that takes account of the possibility that the teacher herself is a resource in managing the problems of educational practice. (p. 194)

Making use of conflict was a concept that resonated for me in terms of my early classroom experiences. How to make use of conflict and dilemmas in my first year of teaching was not the sort of thing I could readily look up in professional journals and books. The answers weren't "out there" but inside myself, and I became more aware of them both as I talked with others about these situations, and as I gained experience with students. My purpose in this article is to explore one such teaching episode in depth, in order to better understand the nature of the professional knowledge needed to make use of conflict and to manage a particular teaching dilemma. My intent is to show that such a personal inquiry can reveal ways in which my story is a telling case (Mitchell, 1983) that may enable others to respond and make meaning out of their own experiences. Unraveling what constitutes professional knowledge in the practice of teaching is messy work, but perhaps when seen through the lens of one teacher's balancing act of managing dilemmas, blending the practical and theoretical, improvising, and reflecting on these processes, some clarity will be revealed.

Defining Teaching

I believe the following quote from William Ayers is a succinct attempt to define the task of teaching:

> Teaching is intellectual and ethnical work. It requires the full attention – wide awake, inquiring, critical – of thoughtful and caring people if it is to be done well. Although there is always more to learn and more to know as a teacher, the heart of teaching is a passionate regard for students. (1995, p. 60)

I like to think about teaching in this way because to me it suggests a process of intellectual and moral interactions between the teacher and the students, and the changes that occur as a result of those interactions. Deborah Loewenberg Ball and Suzanne Wilson have also explored how "in teaching, concerns for the intellectual and the moral are ultimately inseparable" (1996, p. 155). Helping students develop into contributing citizens in a democracy, and helping them understand the complexities of decision-making and problem solving is as much a goal of mine as helping them to learn new concepts or skills. Such a view of teaching rejects the notion that following a guide, monotonously going through the motions of imparting knowledge to rows of passive, seated students is sufficient for educating the young.

When I taught sixth grade in a suburb of Seattle in my first year of teaching, it was in a K-6 school, so I had the same group of students for the full school day. I was also given complete freedom to teach what I wanted in the way that I thought would best serve the needs of my students. No one handed me a mandated textbook, or obligated me to "cover" certain topics. This enabled me to see curriculum, teaching, and learning as active processes in which my thinking and doing was intertwined with

that of my students, and to inquire into ways in which these processes would lead to meaningful learning experiences for all of us. I knew that I was not alone in my beliefs, but that this way of thinking about teaching was unusual.

The Importance of a Mentor

I was fortunate in that I had good mentors and role models. One such person was Barbara McKean, who had been the teaching assistant in my social studies methods course at the University of Washington. In this course, we were learning approaches to biography writing in the classroom. Working in small groups, we wrote biographies of Sojourner Truth based on our reading of Jeri Ferris' *Walking the Road to Freedom* (1988). Barbara created a drama experience for one session about the life and times of Sojourner Truth that preceded the writing process. She began with the premise that we can never fully understand the experiences of enslaved African Americans struggling for freedom in the United States in the 1800s. Through the "what if" of drama, however, we tried to replicate, physically and mentally, the experience of what it might have been for those in the past and thus approached a way of constructing our own meanings concerning human oppression and the fight for freedom. I was deeply moved by this experience, and felt that the biography writing and the play we created and enacted that day provided me with a sense of curriculum “experienced in situations” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), subject matter knowledge about the life and times of Sojourner Truth, as well as what Suzanne Wilson, Lee Shulman, and Anna Richert define as pedagogical content knowledge (1987). I had a “specialized understanding” (p. 104) of the social studies and language arts subjects I was going to be teaching. As Ball and Wilson conceive of this knowledge, it “includes both substance and syntax…this domain of knowledge includes particular ideas, representations, and understandings fashioned from knowledge of students, subject matter, and pedagogy” (1996, p. 156). Presumably such knowledge would enable me to foster understanding in my students, just as I had come to understand. I was reminded in the doing and thinking of the biography and play that Sojourner Truth was a real person who spoke and wrote eloquently about important things to particular people in specific instances of time and place. I had a powerful and useful representation that I was anxious to try out with my students.

What developed out of this experience was much more that I could have ever imagined at that point in time. Barbara not only came into my classroom my first year of teaching to try out the Sojourner Truth play experience with my sixth graders, we developed a close friendship and began to work as co-researchers, developing questions, trying out ideas, searching for evidence and answers to our questions in an iterative “teacher-research cycle” that is clearly articulated by Donald Freeman (1998), even though his model was not the one we were specifically using at the time. United by an appreciation for the role of the arts and of informed aesthetic experiences in promoting active engagement with significant ideas and perennial issues, we were inspired by the writing of Maxine Greene (1995a). We agreed that encounters with the arts were an important and too often neglected contribution to the intellectual and social education of children. She reminds us, for example, of the enabling qualities of artistic experiences:

> Participatory involvement with the many forms of art does enable us, at the very least, to *see* more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines, habits, and conventions have obscured. …By such experiences we are not only lurched out of the familiar and the taken-for-granted, but we may also discover new avenues for action. We may experience a sudden sense of new possibilities and thus new beginnings. (1995b, p. 37)

We especially wanted to understand how to approach the problems of children who, through prolonged exposure to multiple images of intolerance, injustice and violence both within the pages of history and contemporary popular media, had become increasingly desensitized and complacent. At times I felt bombarded with evidence that this was the case, although it was not true all the time with all students. However, the ever-growing and powerful fascination with the violence in films, television, and video games was an issue of deep concern that Barbara and I set out to explore, understand, and use to create learning opportunities.

A Memorable Event

Which brings me to one particular episode (out of many I could choose from) that I think is a useful example because it involved managing a dilemma, dealing with conflict, improvisation, and, to a great extent, how my personal stance and philosophy were brought to bear on the instructional decisions I made. Our study of Sojourner Truth led us into the Civil War period, and I read aloud several books of historical fiction. The third book, *Nightjohn* by Gary Paulsen, was chosen by the students in part, I felt, because the summary warned of graphic violence. I read the book in two days. On the second day, in a terrible climax, Nightjohn is punished publicly by having a toe cut off each of his feet. As I read this passage I thought I couldn't get through it. But somehow I did, and the final two pages of the book were so poetic, so hopeful and rewarding, that I was speechless. I closed the book and looked at the faces around me. "Well," I said, "what did you think of that?" What happened next was completely unexpected. Without missing a beat, a boy in the class said in an almost casual voice of approval of the violence, "I thought it

was cool." Everyone was stunned, and as he looked up he caught the dumbfounded expressions of his friends and classmates looking both at him and each other. Suddenly embarrassed, he bent his head back down and mumbled apologetically, "I don't know why I said that."

There were many courses of action I could have taken when this student made this comment. I remember feeling a mixture of shock, annoyance, and dismay, but I also saw this as a wonderful opportunity to get the students to talk about their fascination with violence, even the society's fascination, and to grapple with the same issues that had been plaguing me as their teacher. I also wanted to understand what was going on in the classroom community that made his comment no longer acceptable, and what the reading of *Nightjohn* might have to do with that. I don't remember exactly what I said next, but it was along the lines of, "No, wait, let's talk about that." What followed was what I considered one of our best discussions. We talked primarily about Paulsen's use of violence, what his purposes might have been, and what they felt the consequences were. I remember describing to them that at certain points in the story I felt so nauseated I thought I couldn't continue to read, because I wanted to share with them my personal response to the text, and some students agreed they had similar physical reactions. In retrospect, it's hard for me to say I was consciously modeling a way of making personal connections to literature. I do know that I openly shared my emotional reactions to literature with students, and I believed that students benefit from sharing their own meaning making responses to the books that they read and hear during read alouds. We also talked about why it might be important to understand the horrors of slavery, and what they learned about slavery from *Nightjohn*.

As a follow up to our discussion, I asked students to write a letter to Gary Paulsen. I was especially curious to see whether topics brought up in our class discussion might resurface in "talking" directly to the author. Most students told Paulsen they really liked *Nightjohn* . Some wrote about how the book helped them to visualize the experience of slavery. "This book planted vivid pictures in our minds about what slavery was like" (Melanie)2. "You told how slaves weren't just slapped a couple of times, they were whipped almost so you could see the bone and then put salt in it to make it hurt more" (Julia). Others described their own responses to the book. "It was very emotional and terrifying with a lot of action in it" (Jaylena). "I thought it was really, really sad when Nightjohn got his toes cut off and it was sad about people getting beaten and eaten by dogs" (Sarah). Joe wrote to Paulsen about the class discussion: "We read *Nightjohn* in class and we had a discussion about it, and the question that came up the most was, "Why did he put violence in the book?" and my teacher had a good question. 'What if a young reader read *Nightjohn* ?' I think you put violence in your book to make people understand what slaves went through at that time."

Unraveling Professional Knowledge

What sort of professional knowledge was involved in this scenario? Was the knowledge "practical," "personal," "situated," or "craftlike," (Richardson, 1994, p. 6) to name just a few of the terms placed by educational scholars in front of the word knowledge? Did theories play a role? What about subject matter knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge? And wasn't there knowledge of my students that was important for me to take into consideration? What I would like to suggest is that all of these aspects of knowledge played a role in this scenario. The professional knowledge that a teacher brings to the task of teaching is held in readiness for moments like these when interactions with or between students call for (re)action. As a manager of classroom dilemmas, I had to chose between different options: letting my student's comment hang in the air without a teacher reaction, believing his, "I don't know why I said that" was sufficient evidence that he had reconsidered his statement, "I thought it was cool" or asking him to answer his own question by saying, "Why *did* you say you thought it was cool?" and putting the issue on the floor for discussion as I chose to do. I chose the latter option because I felt it was the best way to deal with the conflict between his remark and the reaction of his classmates, in that a class discussion would make the most productive use of that tension. Lampert describes this process:

> In order to do her job, the dilemma-managing teacher calls upon this conflicted "self" as a tool of her trade, building a working identity that is constructively ambiguous. While she works at solving society's problems and scholars' problems, she also works at coping with her own internal conflicts. She debates with herself about what to do, and instead of screening out responsibilities that contradict one another, she acknowledges them, embraces the conflict, and finds a way to manage. (1985, p. 190)

But this was not just about working out a practical or pedagogical problem. Theoretical knowledge was at work as well. I knew that a class discussion was a powerful way to draw out students' ideas, help them to articulate their opinions aloud so they could learn from each other, and I knew that high quality literature could play a role in developing what Greene calls wide-awakeness (1995a). I wanted them to attend to the author's use of violence, to give it meaning and understand its purposes and consequences, and I knew that it would be insufficient for me to merely tell them what *I* thought. I had to know what *they* thought, and so did the students.

This brings me to the point that my philosophical stance regarding understanding my students' thinking was key to my instructional decision-making. In this sense, knowledge of my students and their fascination with violence helped inform my

decision making, both in the reading and discussion of *Nightjohn*, and in my decision to assess their understanding of both by having them write to Paulsen. As Ayers says, "The strongest source of knowledge about the student remains the student herself, and tapping into that knowledge is not so difficult. Kids love to tell us about themselves, and we can structure multiple opportunities for them to do so" (1993, p. 42). Wilson puts it another way:

> One of the most important lessons that I have learned as a teacher is the significance of thinking about what my students know. Connecting their knowledge and beliefs to new ideas is an important part of my pedagogical thinking, and I am constantly trying to bridge between their world – the familiar – and the new ones – less familiar. I want to know what students are thinking and use what they know to help them learn new things. (Ball & Wilson, 1996, p. 160)

This idea is tied to the concept of pedagogical content knowledge (Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987; Ball & Wilson, 1996), which in this case involved a blend of understanding pedagogical uses of literature and the role of discussion in uncovering meanings and responses to the literature, and subject matter knowledge of the history of slavery in this country and its depiction in the work of historical fiction we had just read as compared to others we had explored. In addition, knowledge of my students, authentic assessment of their learning, and the ways in which I might continue to push forward their thinking about these issues were other aspects of pedagogical content knowledge at work in my decision making processes.

In addition to practical knowledge, theoretical knowledge, subject matter and pedagogical content knowledge, and knowledge of my students, there was something I would characterize as moral knowledge that is not really a separate kind of knowledge, but is a distinct part of all the others. My desire to make students more aware and sensitive to issues of violence, to deepen their understandings of slavery and its role in the history of our country, to listen and learn from each other, to help them construct their knowledge through discussion and dialogue, to even at times model for them by making explicit my feelings and reactions to *Nightjohn* -- all of these things carry moral weight and are imbued with moral meaning. These meanings were not imported from outside; they were imbedded in the context and were inherently a part of my teaching and the students' learning.

While it is possible to identify and distinguish among different aspects of professional knowledge at work in this teaching episode, figuring out where all this professional knowledge came from is a different matter. It seems to me that everything played a part: my own schooling experiences, my mother, who was an elementary teacher and is now a professor of education, my teacher education courses and professors, my students, books I read, conferences I attended, conversations with colleagues and mentors like Barbara, and the list could probably go on and on. Perhaps the task that lies ahead is to help new teachers become more aware of the roles people, books, experiences, and so on play in developing their professional knowledge, and helping them move beyond the notion that the only kind of knowledge they need to be successful in teaching is that which can be found in the theories of experts, or in teacher guides, or in experienced colleagues' advice such as "don't smile until December."

Certainly reflecting on my teaching and writing up and presenting to others those reflections together with Barbara McKean (1997) played a significant role in making *me* more aware of these different aspects of professional knowledge. Dialogue with others has contributed significantly to the construction of my own professional knowledge. Engaging with Barbara as a partner in the inquiry process meant I had someone to share my ideas with, to ask questions of, to learn from, and to teach what I was learning from my students. I also think that the process of going public with our findings proved to be more than an exercise in mere introspection. Some worry that the teacher research movement has an unhealthy "inward-turning influence – what the French felicitously call *nombrilisme* (navel gazing)" (Huberman, 1996, p. 127). But I believe local knowledge about the practice of teaching can inform general knowledge, just as general knowledge informs the local. Virginia Richardson compares "practical inquiry" with "formal research" and suggests that they are "fundamentally different, that practical inquiry may be foundational to formal research, and that both forms of research are useful to practice, but in different ways" (1994, p.5). Michael Huberman puts it slightly differently:

> "Knowing how" or 'knowing when/where" is empowered significantly by "knowing about." I am claiming that the converse is also true. Further still, I am claiming that authentic expertise in a specific domain has to contain both components. (1996, p. 135)

What I believe can be accomplished through public dissemination of telling cases, particularly for teachers, is an appreciation for teaching as an hermeneutic act, for the multiple paths a teacher can take in any given dilemma, and the consequences of the choices that are made, so that they might begin to develop a more nuanced sense of better and worse ways of managing their own dilemmas.

I hope my exploration of professional knowledge has at least shown that in my case there were complex relationships between local and general knowledge. Theoretical, pedagogical, and practical knowledge as well as subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge all played a role, and it would be nearly impossible to determine if the source of these kinds of

knowledge was local or general, derived from my “practical inquiry” or from “formal research” (Richardson, 1994). Managing the dilemmas that arise from student interactions that call for (re)action involves improvising, experimenting, reflecting, and using a mixture of the practical and the theoretical knowledge that teachers bring to the difficult task of teaching. Rather than seeing a dichotomy between local and general knowledge, new teachers might benefit most by embracing both in their practice, and in an ideal world, each could inform the other.

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1 Lampert, M. Personal communication, Dec. 1, 1999.
2 Permission was granted to use students’ first names.

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