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Classroom Interviews: A World of Learning

Reviewed by Catherine Compton-Lilly

Catherine Compton-Lilly is a Grade 1 Teacher in the Rochester City School District. She is a member of the Editorial Board of *Networks*.

Garth Boomer once wrote, "To deliberately learn is to research." To Boomer, teachers and students are researchers when they purposely seek to understand aspects of their world. As a first grade teacher, it would be difficult for me to find a day of teaching that did not involve deliberate learning. Each day brings novel inquiries, new questions, and constant reflection on the events that transpire. Hopefully my students share this sense of wonder and interest as they learn to read, write, and research.

Often the most exciting and inspiring examples of teacher research involve inquiry by both teachers and their students. This form of teacher research assumes a powerful presence in classrooms. When I read a particularly interesting example of teacher research, that research cannot help but enter into my classroom. Research can confirm my current practices or call them into question. It reminds me of where I should be investing my efforts and helps me to revise my teaching practices for next week, the remainder of the school year, and next September. However, teacher research can also transcend the classroom. Teacher research is written down, presented at conferences, and posted on the internet. Teacher research is out there waiting to be discussed, analyzed, critiqued, refuted, replicated, and celebrated. It is the thinking around teacher research that is often as powerful as the research findings. Finally, the most exciting teacher research introduces me to other teachers' students. There are some students that I am certain I know and others with novel voices, personalities, interests, and perspectives. Sometimes these students become researchers and their questions assume center stage. Students demonstrate to us the value of collaboration, inquiry, and the passion that comes with delving into a topic that is inspiring and consuming.

Paula Rogovin's book, *Classroom Interviews: A World of Learning* is all this and more. Just as Rogovin welcomes her children, the parents of her children, and members of the community into her classroom, she welcomes us. She allows us to listen-in as her first grade students interview a myriad parents, community members and even celebrities. She begins the school year by inviting the parent of one student to her classroom. As students listen to this parent speak, they take notes with pictures and words. Students discover unique and interesting information about each of the parents they interview. They learn about different countries and different customs. They discover the challenges faced by others and the ways the families of their classmates have struggled to overcome challenges. Following each interview the students collaboratively write a book, create artistic depictions, and use material from the interview as a basis for social studies, writing, reading, science, and math.

But more has been achieved than simply learning about the families of children. Ms. Rogovin understands that celebrating the lives and contributions of the families of students has powerful consequences for students. When parents are invited to classrooms as experts on their own experiences, when children record parents' words so that they can write about parents, when student written books are used instructionally in the classroom and brought home by each child to read with their own family; children come to recognize the unique contributions their parents make in the world.

Throughout the school year the children continue to talk with parents while simultaneously extending the range of individuals invited to occupy the interview chair. People from the community and school are invited to share information about their lives. Previously unrecognized heroes are discovered. Rogovin and her students discovered that the security guard at their school had participated in the famous sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. She had met Dr. Martin Luther King and been arrested along with other demonstrators. Learning about the contributions of people students know makes history come alive.

Perhaps the most helpful aspect of Rogovin's work are the guidelines that she shares with teachers. Rogovin explains that adult visitors are often not accustomed to speaking to groups of children; Rogovin makes suggestions for helping parents to feel comfortable. She explains that she monitors interviews, seeking topics that are interesting and engaging to her students. Rogovin invites the speaker to elaborate on these topics. She explains that a successful interview often entails slowing down the interview, providing clarification as needed, helping children to make links with their prior knowledge, and having children act out events or situations described by the speaker. She writes about locating speakers, preparing students for the interview, teaching students to ask questions and take notes, daily planning, and building on interviews across the curriculum.

Rogovin does not forge ahead with an idealistic vision of what education can be without giving due recognition to the very real constraints and pressures most teachers face. She does not neglect to reference the ways in which the most mundane aspects of the first grade curriculum are integrated into the students' research projects. She describes the burdens of "pull-out programs, basal readers, pacing calendars, workbooks, and tests" and acknowledges that these can limit teachers' abilities to develop in-depth thematic units. Rogovin currently teaches at the Manhattan New School, an alternative public school where Shelley Harwayne is the principal. However, she has not forgotten her twenty years of teaching in the New York City Public Schools and the restrictions that accompany teaching in a traditional school.

Rogovin is a teacher researcher, but even more exciting her students are researchers. Together they engage in purposeful and personally relevant learning. Rogovin and her students provide us with a place to start and a means for actualizing classroom interviews in our own classrooms.

Paula Rogovin. *Classroom Interviews: A World of Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Publishers, 1998. 153 pages.

